

US armored convoy: A military provocation in Eastern Europe

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US military forces are staging a deliberate provocation in Eastern Europe as part of NATO preparations for possible war with Russia.

Last Saturday a long convoy of US armored Stryker vehicles set off from Estonia on a 1,100-mile trip transversing Eastern Europe via Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the Czech Republic and Germany. Additional groups of US soldiers left from bases in Lithuania and Poland. The three groups of troops are due to converge on the Rose military barracks in Vilseck, Germany on April 1.

US troops have been conducting months of exercises in the Baltic together with other East European forces as part of the NATO Atlantic Resolve manoeuvre. Normally US troops and hardware involved in exercises in Europe are shipped back to their bases by train. This time the troops are demonstrably travelling on main roads in order to assess military reaction times for a confrontation with Russia and accustom the populations of Eastern Europe to the presence of US soldiers and tanks on their streets.

In an interview with *Defense News and Army Times*, Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges, the commanding general of US Army Europe, linked the convoy named “Dragoon Ride” with military operations against Russia. “It’s helped us further develop our understanding of freedom of movement in Eastern Europe... This is what the US Army does, we can move a lot of capability a long distance,” Hodges said. “I’ve been watching the Russian exercises ... what I cared about is they can get 30,000 people and 1,000 tanks in a place really fast.”

Hodges described the US convoy as a “tremendous opportunity” to practice its capabilities. Along the way the US army is assessing the infrastructure of its Eastern European allies.

The convoy is one element of a massive build-up of US and NATO forces inside Eastern Europe and the Baltic states. Last month Washington announced its so-called European Reassurance Initiative, which involves an increase in troop rotations and multilateral exercises, a build-up of military stocks of equipment in selected Eastern European countries and increased military aid to NATO and non-NATO allies.

Planned for transfer and installation in Europe by January 2016 are around 220 Abrams and Bradley tanks, and 18 Howitzers.

Hodges has proposed to NATO commander Gen. Philip Breedlove that the equipment be either stationed in Germany or distributed around the region in “clusters.” One such cluster would be shared across the Baltics, another by Poland and Hungary, a third by Romania and Bulgaria, and the last, Germany.

In addition, the current US Army Europe-led training mission, Operation Atlantic Resolve, is to be expanded at the end of April from Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, to Romania, Bulgaria and Georgia.

For the Georgian exercises, Hodges said, the US is mobilising Bradleys that will travel across the Black Sea and into Georgia.

The massive show of force in Eastern Europe coincides with increased US pressure for the direct arming of the Ukrainian army in its confrontation with Russia. On Monday, the US House of Representatives overwhelmingly voted in favour of a resolution urging the administration in Washington to send weapons to Ukraine.

The Obama administration has already approved the dispatch of drones, Humvees and other military equipment to Kiev, plus US military personnel. Troops from the US 173rd Airborne Brigade are due to commence training three battalions of Ukrainian

national guard troops to support front-line Ukrainian soldiers currently confronting pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine. The battalions are due to undergo training in or near the city of Lviv in Western Ukraine. In the Western-led coup that ousted former president Viktor Yanukovich last year, Lviv was a stronghold for anti-Russian fascist militias.

The US is also sending counter-mortar radar to enable the Ukrainian artillery to detect Russian-backed forces. One military source praised the move, noting that the US could learn from Ukraine's experience, "as US troops had not been shelled by Russian-made artillery since the Vietnam War."

The US convoy through Eastern Europe has been welcomed by the adviser to the Polish defense minister, General Boguslaw Pacek, who declared that the convoy was a signal to "those in the East," i.e., Russia, that NATO is strong and united.

On Monday, Canadian and Polish troops held joint exercises in Drawsko Pomorskie, in the northeast of Poland, and the country is stepping up its own defenses by mobilising around 12,000 reservists for military training. Poland, one of America's closest allies in Europe, will also host major NATO and international exercises this year.

The political and military establishment in most Eastern European states have largely greeted the show of aggression by US forces. At the same time they have undertaken measures to repress any opposition. According to a statement aired on Czech TV, Czech civilians have been warned against throwing tomatoes and eggs at the US military convoy. Anyone disobeying the legislation is liable to imprisonment for up to 3 years.



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