

Military force “on the table” in relation to Russia, US commander says

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Ratcheting up already high tensions between the US and Russia, the Obama administration’s nominee as the next NATO supreme allied commander and chief of the US European Command told a Senate panel that the Pentagon “should keep everything on the table,” including the use of military force, to counter any challenge from Russia to the relentless buildup of US and NATO forces on its borders.

Army Gen. Curtis Scaparrotti, who is to succeed Gen. Philip Breedlove as the Pentagon’s senior commander in Europe, made his provocative comments in a nomination hearing held by the Senate Armed Services Committee Thursday, signaling plans for a further escalation in the increasingly dangerous US-NATO confrontation with the Russian Federation.

Pushed by both Republican and Democratic senators to make increasingly bellicose statements regarding a recent incident in which Russian fighter jets flew in close proximity to the USS Donald Cook, a Navy destroyer operating near Russian waters in the Baltic Sea, Scaparrotti said that the US should warn Russia that future similar encounters may be met with armed force.

“We should engage them and make clear what’s acceptable,” the general said. “Once we make that known, we have to enforce it.” He added that one of his first actions as NATO/European Command commander would be to review the rules of engagement for US and NATO forces in the region.

The incoming NATO commander went on to argue that the US should permanently deploy an armored brigade (approximately 4,500 troops) near Russia’s borders, rather than rotating brigades in and out of the Eastern European countries of Poland, Romania and Bulgaria and the former Soviet Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

The current plan to begin continuous nine-month rotations of such units in and out of these countries beginning in February 2017 is aimed at maintaining the fiction that Washington is not violating a 1997 agreement in which NATO pledged to Moscow that it would not engage in any “additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces” near Russia’s borders.

Scaparrotti proposes to dispense with this pretense on the grounds that a permanent deployment of a single brigade would lend “a little more substance, a little more strength in relationship building” in Eastern Europe and would represent a more efficient use of American troop strength.

The general went on to say he believed that Washington should supply Ukraine with whatever weapons it needs, including Javelin antitank missiles, to defend itself against what it alleges are Russian-backed separatists—Moscow has denied direct involvement—in the eastern Donbas region.

In response to questions from the senators, Scaparrotti said that Russia posed the single greatest military threat to the US and that the American military should “keep everything on the table,” including military force, in dealing with the nuclear-armed country.

He also stressed the need for more funding for the US submarine fleet in order to counter what the Pentagon claims has been a 50 percent increase in the number of Russian submarine patrols in the North Atlantic and Mediterranean Sea.

“We presently have dominance undersea,” he said. “And... we should maintain that dominance.”

The *New York Times* Thursday published a front-page article on the supposed Russian submarine challenge that had all the earmarks of a Pentagon propaganda

piece. It quoted Chief of Naval Operations Adm. John Richardson as saying: “We’re back to the great powers competition. I don’t think many people understand the visceral way Russia views NATO and the European Union as an existential threat.”

As the actual figures cited in the article make clear, however, the US submarine fleet far outstrips Russia’s in both quantity and quality, with Washington pouring more than ten times as much funding into its military than Moscow has allotted to its own forces.

The testimony on Capitol Hill followed a tense meeting Wednesday of the NATO-Russian Council, the first such session since February 2014, when a US- and NATO-backed coup in Ukraine led to Russia’s annexation of Crimea, the strategic base of its Black Sea fleet, raising tensions in the region.

After the session, the Russian ambassador to NATO, Alexander Grushko, returned to the controversy over the Russian planes that flew close to the US destroyer, pointing out that the warship was operating in waters near Kaliningrad, the Russian exclave that is the base of the Russian Navy’s Baltic fleet.

Grushko described the operations of the destroyer as a provocation and insisted that the actions of the Russian aircraft were in keeping with international law.

He insisted that “the key issue is what the Donald Cook was doing so close to Kaliningrad.” He asked what the reaction would be if a Russian warship armed with cruise missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads were found sailing in the waters off New York City.

The Russian ambassador said that that there could be no real improvement in relations outside of a reversal of NATO’s steadily escalating encirclement of Russia, which has seen a quadrupling of US funding for military operations on Russia’s borders along with plans for continuous military exercises and deployments, the forward deployment of tanks, artillery and munitions, and the mobilization of a rapid response force involving some 40,000 air, naval, ground and Special Operations personnel.

The threat of military force against Russia by the newly named US commander in Europe echoed a similar statement made earlier this week by US Secretary of State John Kerry, who said that the US destroyer would have been justified in shooting down the Russian planes, an action that could have triggered

a military confrontation between two nuclear-armed powers with incalculable consequences.



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