

US change of command in Europe signals escalation of anti-Russia threats

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Washington used this week's change of command of its European military forces as an opportunity to further escalate US military threats against Russia.

Speaking at the ceremony at the US European Command (EUCOM) headquarters in Germany Tuesday in which outgoing commander Gen. Philip Breedlove handed the reins to his successor, Gen. Curtis Scaparrotti, US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter declared that the Pentagon had to "prioritize deterrence" against Russia and accused Moscow of "nuclear saber-rattling."

Carter reiterated the Pentagon's plans to deploy an American armored brigade combat team near the Russian border "on a rotational but persistently present basis." He also pointed to the Obama administration's quadrupling of funding for the European Reassurance Initiative to \$3.4 billion, which he said would "increase the amount of war fighting equipment, as well as the number of US forces" deployed in Eastern Europe.

In his own remarks at the ceremony, General Scaparrotti placed "a resurgent Russia, striving to project itself as a world power," at the top of his list of threats confronting US interests in Europe, ahead of "terrorism."

The new commander stressed that his troops—some 60,000 deployed in Europe—must be prepared "to fight tonight if the deterrence fails."

The day before the change of command ceremony, Carter confirmed to reporters flying with him from Washington to Stuttgart, Germany, where EUCOM is headquartered, that the NATO alliance is considering rotating its own force consisting of four combat brigades in and out of the Baltic and Eastern European countries on Russia's border. This would be in addition to Washington's unilateral decision to carry out the permanent rotating presence of a similar force of US

troops.

The pre-positioning of combat gear near the Russian border would enable the rapid deployment of still another US armored brigade combat team.

Russia Wednesday responded to the escalating threats from Washington and NATO, with Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu announcing, "The Defense Ministry is taking a series of measures to counter the expansion of NATO forces in direct proximity to the Russian border. By the end of the year, two new divisions will be formed in the Western District and one in the Southern Military District."

Each of these divisions reportedly will include at least 10,000 soldiers. The Southern Military District includes Crimea, which was annexed by Russia following a popular referendum called after the 2014 Western-orchestrated coup that ousted the Ukrainian government of President Viktor Yanukovich, installing a virulently anti-Russian regime.

The US and NATO have used the annexation, a defensive measure by Moscow to maintain control over the historic base of Russia's Black Sea fleet, as the pretext for justifying NATO expansion in the name of combating Russian aggression.

In his remarks Tuesday, Defense Secretary Carter leveled a litany of charges against Russia: "Russia continues to violate the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, and actively seeks to intimidate its Baltic neighbors. At sea, in the air and space and cyberspace, Russian actors have engaged in challenging international norms. And most disturbing, Moscow's nuclear saber-rattling raises troubling questions about Russia's leaders' commitments to strategic stability, their respect for norms against the use of nuclear weapons, and whether they respect the profound caution that nuclear-age

leaders showed with regard to the brandishing of nuclear weapons.”

Washington’s own “commitments to strategic stability” are far from manifest. In February, after unusual back-to-back test firings of Minuteman 3 nuclear missiles from an underground bunker on the California coast, US Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work told the media that the tests constituted “a signal ... that we are prepared to use nuclear weapons in defense of our country if necessary.” He specifically named Russia and China as intended recipients of this message.

At a Pentagon briefing on Monday, the senior commander of the US Navy charged Russia with provocative actions that have escalated tensions in the Baltics.

“I don’t think the Russians are trying to provoke an incident,” said Adm. John Richardson, chief of naval operations. “I think they’re trying to send a signal. I think it’s pretty clear that they are wanting to let us know that they see that we are up there in the Baltic.”

The Pentagon charged that a Russian SU-27 fighter jet carried out a “barrel roll” last Friday over a US Air Force RC-135 spy plane over the Baltic Sea. The charge followed reports last month of a Russian jet flying within 50 feet of a US warplane and of two Russian jets flying close to the USS Donald Cook in the Baltic sea.

Moscow has charged that the real provocation is the US deploying such naval and air force assets in close proximity to the base of the Russian navy’s Baltic fleet in Kaliningrad.

Following the April incident involving the US warship, US Secretary of State John Kerry said it would have been justified in shooting down the Russian planes.

Similarly, the new EUCOM commander, General Scaparrotti, told a Senate committee last month that Russia should be warned that future such incidents will be met with armed force and, if they occur, the US military should act on this threat.

The European Leadership Network, a European think tank chaired by UK Defense Secretary Des Browne, issued a recent report titled “Managing dangerous incidents: the need for a NATO-Russia Memorandum of Understanding,” which documented 60 such “dangerous incidents in the Euro-Atlantic area”

between March 2015 and March 2016. Each of them, it warned, had “the potential to trigger a major crisis between a nuclear armed state and a nuclear armed alliance.”



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