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Joint Chiefs Chairman to Meet With Russian Counterpart in Azerbaijan

Голова Об'єднаного комітету начальників штабів США зустрінеться з російським колегою в Азербайджані

Вищий військовий чиновник США спробує відновити військовий діалог зі своїм російським колегою, на тлі напруженості через докучливі дії Росії щодо американських бойових кораблів, наростання бойових дій на сході України і звинувачень в тому, що Москва порушила ключову угоду про контроль озброєнь.

Зустріч генерала Джозефа Ф. Данфорда-мл., Голови Об'єднаного комітету начальників штабів США, з генералом Валерієм В. Герасимовим, начальником російського Генерального штабу, відбудеться в столиці Азербайджану Баку. Це буде перша особиста зустріч командувачів з Вашингтона і Москви з 2014 року. На організацію зустрічі воєначальників пішло багато місяців, і її значення – предмет спору багатьох військових експертів. Деякі відставні цивільні чиновники Держдепартаменту вказували, що зустріч двох генералів дасть небагато, поки політика Трампа щодо Москви залишається неясною. Організувати цю зустріч було нелегко, адже російська сторона наполягала на приїзд Данфорду в Москву або Білорусію, а Пентагон надавав перевагу зустрітися в Західній Європі. Однак Герасимов не міг прибути в Західну Європу, так як знаходиться під санкціями за керівництво російським військовим втручанням в Україні. В результаті Баку був обраний як нейтральна територія.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/15/world/europe/russia-azerbaijan-general-dunford.html>

The nation's top military officer will try to reopen a military dialogue with his Russian counterpart on Thursday amid tensions over Russia's harassment of American warships, stepped-up fighting in eastern Ukraine and accusations that Moscow has violated a landmark arms control accord.

The meeting between Gen. Joseph F. Dunford Jr., the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Gen. Valery V. Gerasimov, chief of the Russian general staff, will take place in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan.

It will be the first face-to-face meeting between military chiefs from Washington and Moscow since 2014. A Pentagon statement said that discussions would center on "the current state of U.S.-Russian military relations and the importance of consistent and clear military-to-military communication to prevent miscalculation and potential crisis."

The state of military relations between the two sides certainly has not been good. Last week, Russian warplanes flew at an usually low altitude over an American guided missile destroyer in the Black Sea, according to a spokesman for the United States European Command. It was a pattern of harassment that Western officials say has been increasingly common as NATO works to strengthen its defenses against a resurgent Russian military.

Relations also have been strained by the Russian deployment of a ground-launched cruise missile in what American officials say is a violation of the 1987 treaty banning intermediate-range American and Russian missiles based on land. The Russians have denied the complaint.

The meeting between the military chiefs took many months to arrange, and its utility is a matter of debate among military experts. Some former civilian Defense Department officials have argued there is little that a meeting between the two generals can accomplish while the Trump administration's policy toward Moscow remains unclear.

"I think the American people need to understand what this administration's strategy is vis-à-vis Russia before we go intensifying the relationship," said Elissa Slotkin, who was an acting assistant secretary of defense in the Obama administration. "Engagement just for engagement's sake, without clear goals, simply plays into Russian hands."

But other experts say it is important to strengthen communication between the American and Russian militaries, given the proximity with which they operate in Syria, the Black Sea and the Baltic region, among other potential flash points.

Celeste Wallander, the top Russian expert on the staff of the National Security Council during the Obama administration, said that the White House in 2016 had directed the opening of a high-level military channel "to avoid incidents, if possible, and prevent escalation."

"I am fully supportive that it is finally happening," she added.

The meeting follows years in which the Obama administration initially sought to isolate President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia because of Moscow's annexation of Crimea — only to try later to cooperate with the Kremlin to bring an end to the fighting in Syria. That diplomacy collapsed when Russia backed the assault by the government of Bashar al-Assad on Aleppo and arranged a meeting in Moscow that included Iran and Turkey but not the United States.

General Dunford has spoken with General Gerasimov by phone, but this will be his first meeting.

Arranging that meeting has not been easy. The Russians suggested that General Dunford come to Moscow or to Belarus for the meeting, American officials said. The Pentagon preferred a location in Western Europe. That, however, was complicated by the fact that the European Union imposed a travel ban on General Gerasimov for his role in orchestrating the Russian military intervention in Ukraine.

Eventually Baku was selected as a neutral location.

General Gerasimov is a controversial figure. In 2013, he published an article that detailed the conceptual basis for Russia's cyberattacks and other forms of what has become known as "hybrid" warfare.

Called the Gerasimov Doctrine, it held that the boundary between war and peace was increasingly hard to discern and that the use of proxies and covert tactics would increase in "nonlinear war."

Military officials would not provide details of what General Dunford planned to discuss. The meeting will take place against the backdrop of Mr. Trump's repeated suggestions that Moscow might be a useful ally in the campaign against the Islamic State, even as other tensions remain, or are increasing, in the bilateral relationship.

During his confirmation hearings to become chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in July 2015, General Dunford described Russia in far more worrisome terms than has Mr. Trump. "My assessment today is that Russia poses the greatest threat to our national security," he said. "If you look at their behavior, it's nothing short of alarming."

But he also appears to be calculating that his meeting can prove useful in reducing the risks of confrontation and perhaps in laying the groundwork to eventually overcome some policy differences. The results may also determine how influential a voice General Dunford becomes as the White House tries to sort out its Russia strategy.