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NATO to Firm Up Its Presence in Eastern Europe as It Halts Cooperation With Russia



Anders Fogh Rasmussen, front left, secretary general of NATO, and Secretary of State John Kerry in Brussels on Tuesday. Credit Pool photo by Jacquelyn Martin

NATO's foreign ministers vowed on Tuesday to strengthen the alliance's military presence on the territory of its Eastern European members because of Russia's military intervention in Ukraine.

The move came as the alliance ordered an end to "all practical and military cooperation" with Russia because of the Kremlin's annexation of Crimea and its threatening military posture near eastern Ukraine.

"Through its actions, Russia has chosen to undermine the very foundations upon which our cooperation is built," NATO's secretary general, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, said at a news conference here. "In light of this there can be no business as usual."

NATO's move codifies and expands on steps it had already taken to protest Russia's intervention in Crimea. Mr. Rasmussen said during a recent visit to Washington, for example, that the alliance had suspended plans to escort Russian ships that are ferrying chemicals for making poison gas out of Syria and had canceled staff-level meetings between NATO and Russian officials.

In his remarks on Tuesday, Mr. Rasmussen emphasized that the alliance would keep the door open for diplomatic discussions that might lead to an easing of the crisis and would continue to work with Russia on counternarcotics and other projects in Afghanistan.

Regarding NATO's efforts to reassure its Eastern European members, a major agenda item here, Secretary of State John Kerry and foreign ministers from other countries directed the

alliance's military command to develop a package of measures involving its air, sea and land forces.

So far, however, the steps the alliance envisions are modest. They are expected to include expanding the air patrols that NATO nations conduct over Baltic nations. The air patrols are being carried out from a base in Lithuania, and Estonia has offered to provide a second base to sustain expanded operations.

Another step would increase NATO's naval presence in the Baltic Sea.

NATO is also expected to improve the capability of its response force — which has air, land and sea units — to quickly deploy in a crisis, diplomats said. Elements of that response force, for example, could be rotated through Baltic nations and other Eastern European members as part of an exercise.

The alliance has not, however, committed to the continuous deployment of ground forces on the territory of Eastern European members, a form of assurance Eastern European officials would welcome.

“What the Baltic States want is an allied presence in the form of boots on the ground,” Lauri Lepik, Estonia's ambassador to NATO, said in an interview.

After meeting with his German and French counterparts in Weimar, Germany, on Tuesday, Radoslaw Sikorski, Poland's foreign minister, told reporters his country wanted the alliance to deploy two combat brigades with as many as 5,000 troops each in Poland.

Allied diplomats said that Mr. Sikorski did not propose such a sizable deployment in the closed-door meetings on Tuesday. Still, Poland's prime minister, Donald Tusk, indicated that the steps the alliance had taken so far fell short of what some Eastern European diplomats said they had wanted to demonstrate the alliance's commitment to their security.

“We are gaining something step by step, but the pace of NATO increasing its military presence for sure could be faster,” Mr. Tusk said in a news conference in Warsaw, adding that the result was unsatisfactory.

The meeting of NATO foreign ministers was being held at a time of intense concern about the deployment of 35,000 to 50,000 Russian troops near Ukraine, according to American estimates.

President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia told the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, on Monday that some Russian forces from the border area near Ukraine were being pulled back, the chancellor's office said.

But Gen. Philip M. Breedlove, NATO's top military commander, told diplomats in a closed-door session on Tuesday that the alliance's intelligence reports did not confirm that Russia was withdrawing a significant number of troops. Mr. Rasmussen repeated that point publicly.

“This massive military buildup can in no way contribute to a de-escalation of the situation,” Mr. Rasmussen said. “So I continue to urge Russia to pull back its troops, live up to its international obligation and engage in a constructive dialogue with Ukraine.”

NATO's efforts to help Ukraine's beleaguered military are also modest. A statement issued by the NATO-Ukraine Commission said the alliance would add experts to its liaison office in Kiev, the Ukrainian capital, and encourage defense overhauls in Ukraine.

Yet some experts have urged the alliance to do much more to help Ukraine's forces. Western officials said in recent weeks that Ukraine was seeking communications gear, mine-clearing equipment, vehicles, ammunition, fuel and medical gear, and possibly the sharing of intelligence, though this could be problematic because of the presence of Russian agents in the country.

Andriy Deshchytzia, Ukraine's acting foreign minister, said that a team of the alliance's experts would be visiting the country to assess what assistance the Ukrainian military needed. He said that Ukraine was not looking for weapons but had many other deficiencies that he hoped the alliance could help remedy.

