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—Lukas I. Alpert contributed to this article.

NATO Military Chief Says Russia Could Take Parts of Ukraine in Three to Five Days

Russia Calls Alliance's Decision to Suspend Cooperation a Throwback to Cold War

*Військовий керівник НАТО заявляє, що Росія може захопити частину України за три-п'ять днів
Росія назвала рішення Альянсу призупинити співробітництво поверненням до холодної війни*

Лідери країн НАТО сподіваються що їх реакція на відновлення агресивного позиціонування Росії принесе позитивні плоди в довгостроковій перспективі, повідомляє Нафталі Бендавід зі штаб-квартири організації в Брюсселі.

Генерал ВПС США Філіп Брідлав, Верховний головнокомандувач ОЗС НАТО в Європі попередив про загрозу з боку 40,000 російських військових сконцентрованих поблизу кордону України. Ці сили включають в себе підтримку літаків і вертольотів, а також військові шпиталі і електронне військово обладнання. Генерал Брідлав сказав що російські сили знаходяться у високому ступені готовності і можуть почати вторгнення в східній або південній Україні в будь-який момент.

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Gen. Philip Breedlove attends a news conference at the end of the 170th NATO Chiefs of Defense meeting at NATO's headquarters in Brussels on Jan. 23. European Pressphoto Agency

NATO leaders are hoping their moves to enhance their response to Russia's newly aggressive positioning will reap rewards in the longer term, reports Naftali Bendavid from the organization's headquarters in Brussels.

BRUSSELS—The top military commander of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization said Wednesday that Russian forces could take large swaths of Ukraine in three to five days.

U.S. Air Force Gen. Philip Breedlove, the supreme allied commander in Europe, also said in an interview that he will recommend a "reassurance package" to NATO representatives by April 15. The measures will be aimed at enhancing the alliance's response to Russia's newly aggressive approach.

NATO officials also provided more details of a break in cooperation with Russia, saying they would suspend a joint program to train counternarcotics workers from Afghanistan. They will also halt a project providing spare parts and training for Afghan helicopter technicians, an initiative Russian President Vladimir Putin had called for continuing just last month.

Gen. Breedlove, who has warned of the threat from some 40,000 Russian troops massed near Ukraine's border, said that the force includes support for planes and helicopters as well as military hospitals and electronic warfare equipment.

Gen. Breedlove said the Russian force is in a high state of readiness and could move at any time. It could accomplish a major incursion into eastern or southern Ukraine, he said.

"We think that it is ready to go, and we think it could accomplish its objectives in between three and five days, if it was directed to make the actions," he said.

The Kremlin has said in recent days that it is pulling back troops from the border, but Gen. Breedlove said only a small force has shown movement. "We have zero indication that it is moving to the rear or returning to barracks," he added. "We cannot confirm in any way, shape or form that it is moving off the battlefield area."

NATO foreign ministers this week directed Gen. Breedlove to craft a response plan, which could include moving NATO equipment and troops into Eastern Europe, beefing up exercises, surveillance and patrols, and speeding up NATO's rapid-response force.

The plan, Gen. Breedlove said, will aim to counter the Russian practice of holding "snap exercises," in which large forces quickly prepare for action. Russia's Crimea incursion shows that such exercises can be transformed into military operations, the commander said.

The strategy will build on actions NATO and its members have already taken, from increasing air policing over the Baltics to beefing up surveillance flights in Romania and Poland to dispatching U.S. warships to the Black Sea.

The trickiest question may be whether NATO should move troops into Eastern Europe, where the alliance currently has few installations. Countries like Poland are pushing hard for such a shift, but it would almost certainly be seen as highly provocative by Moscow.

While NATO's air and sea options are fairly clear, Gen. Breedlove said, "Frankly...we have work to do on what the ground options would be."

Alliance officials gave more specifics on the consequences of their decision to suspend cooperation with Russia. Beyond the helicopter and counternarcotics programs, an initiative to link radars to provide a fuller picture of airspace in case of hijacking will now exclude Russia. NATO officials said they are looking for alternatives to all the suspended programs.

The Kremlin responded angrily, saying the moves would hurt the West as much as Russia, while helping terrorists and other lawbreakers.

"It isn't hard to imagine who will win from the rolling back of joint Russia-NATO collaboration...particularly the fight against terrorism, piracy, and natural and man-made disasters," Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich said. "That would definitely not be Russia or NATO member countries."

Alexander Grushko, Russia's envoy to NATO, told the Interfax news agency that such moves would drive the relationship toward deadlock. "Allegations that Moscow has aggressive designs that pose a threat to NATO countries are absolutely groundless and far-fetched," he was quoted as saying.

NATO officials didn't deny some self-inflicted harm. "It's unfortunate that these projects will be damaged, because they were doing important things," said a senior NATO official. "But we have to be able to take a little damage to stand up for our principles."

European nations also focused on tightening relations with Ukraine. The European Union now hopes to sign the trade portion of an association agreement with Ukraine in June, an EU official said, having recently signed the political section.

And the EU is moving toward a more relaxed travel policy that could allow up to 90 days of visa-free movement between Ukraine and the bloc's 28 countries, officials said.

At NATO headquarters, officials spoke of the need to radically rethink their approach.

"Over the past several decades it was unthinkable that the geography of European nations would be changed by force," Gen. Breedlove said. "Yet that's exactly what we've seen."

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