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NATO Steps Up Hostilities over Ukraine (I)

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5/11/2014

With the tensions running high over Ukraine there is a glimmer of hope the situation may improve. The results of the May 7 meeting between Russian President Putin and the head of OSCE Chairperson-in-Office Didier Burkhalter provide an opportunity that should not be missed against the background of NATO's war rhetoric and sabre rattling policy. The hope is there, no matter the alliance appears to step on the warpath.

NATO goes on war footing

On May 1, NATO's Deputy Secretary General, US diplomat Alexander Vershbow said to a group of reporters that «we have to begin to view Russia no longer as a partner but as more of an adversary than a partner». He stated that the alliance is considering new measures to «deter» Russia, including deploying more forces to Eastern Europe. NATO Secretary General, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, said ditto stressing that Russia is now more of an adversary than a partner in an interview to BBC Newswire.

The transatlantic alliance must bolster military spending in the face of Moscow's challenge, US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel warned on May 2. Hagel issued an appeal for NATO allies to spend more on their armies but stopped short of calling for more dramatic steps.

In his speech, Hagel told an audience at the Wilson Center think tank in Washington that the

alliance faced a crucial choice in light of Russia's stance on Ukraine. To break what the «fiscal impasse,» Hagel urged finance ministers and senior budget officials to attend a future NATO meeting of defense ministers on military spending. Along with raising expenditure, Hagel said the United States and its European allies needed to invest in «energy security» to «blunt Russia's coercive energy policies».

Aside from boosting military budgets, NATO is to consider permanently stationing troops in parts of Eastern Europe as a result of the increased tension with Russia. The alliance has arranged a number of short-term army, air force and naval rotations in Eastern Europe, including the Baltic republics, Poland and Romania due to last at least till the end of this year.

General Philip Breedlove, NATO's Supreme Allied Commander, Europe is raising the prospect of stepping up Western military exercises as a response to the events in Ukraine. He broached the idea during his May 5 visit to Canada. According to him, the situation in Ukraine has created **a «new paradigm» that is forcing NATO to consider permanently stationing military assets in Eastern Europe.** The General said he was tasked to set up «reassurance measures» for air, land and sea that will continue until Dec. 31. **A mission extending beyond that would be possible.** The issue is to be at the discretion of NATO leaders and defence chiefs. As he put it, *«I think this is something that we have to consider, and we will tee this up for discussion through the leaderships of our nations and see where that lands».*

Latvian Prime Minister Laimdota Straujuma, speaking in Washington at a Bloomberg Government breakfast on May 1 said she'd like to see U.S. forces permanently based in her Baltic nation. Such a move, she noted, would be justified in light of Russia's recent actions. Leaders in Estonia, Romania and Poland, also NATO members, have voiced similar sentiments.

It's important to note the NATO military preparations are not limited by Eastern Europe or the Baltics only. On May 2, NATO Deputy Secretary General's Special Representative for the Caucasus and Central Asia region James Appathurai said on a one-day working visit in Tbilisi' According to him, the Alliance would discuss whether NATO allies should deploy «defensive assets» in Georgia. «I would like to focus that NATO does not have its own defensive assets, in particular the Alliance allies have such assets. NATO can always support organizing this as it was in the case of Turkey during the crisis in Syria». Appathurai said at the joint conference with Georgia's Foreign Minister Maia Panjikidze.

NATO leaders are due to hold a summit in Wales in early September. In the run-up to the event, NATO commanders, defense and foreign ministers would look at «tougher questions» about whether the alliance had the right footprint in Europe, as Mr.Breedlove told a news conference in Ottawa.

Estonia – forward edge area to display NATO mettle

According to NATO plans, Amari Air Base in Estonia will be used for NATO's air policing mission in the Baltic States. NATO Air Command General Frank Gorenc of the U.S. Air Force said in Estonia on Wednesday (April 30) that, *«we want to make sure our Baltic partners, who may feel uneasy about what happened in Ukraine, are reassured that the alliance that they have*

entered will respond ... in accordance with the tenants of NATO». A total of 12 NATO planes will participate in air policing missions in the Baltics, according to military officials. This week, four Polish fighter jets will arrive at the military aviation base in Siauliai in Lithuania. They will be supported by four Eurofighter Typhoon jets of the British Royal Air Force which arrived in Lithuania on Monday (April 28). Amid rising tensions in Ukraine, the UK and France deployed eight fighter jets to Lithuania and Poland to strengthen NATO air defense over the Baltic regions.

NATO's three-week «Spring Storm» drills, involving a record-breaking number of 6,000 troops, will be held in 5 out of 15 Estonian counties, including southern and southeastern regions close to the border with Russia. Launched on May 5 the exercises are scheduled to finish on May 23. *«This year's Spring Storm brings together a record number of allied troops – infantry from the Duke of Lancaster's Regiment, soldiers from Latvia, soldiers from the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team of the US army, as well as soldiers from Lithuania».* the Estonian Defense Ministry said in a statement. For the first time, a cyber security team from France is participating in the military exercises. In addition, Poland has sent three of its Sukhoi Su-22 (Fitter) attack aircraft and a division of missile defense system unit SA-8 Gecko (Russia - the 9K33 Osa) which will be tasked with protecting an air base near Tallinn and the surrounding airspace. Britain, France and the US have been deploying forces to the Baltic region since April 29, a week ahead of the drills in Estonia. A day earlier, around 150 personnel of the US airborne division arrived in a military transport aircraft to Amari airbase. **Upon completion of the maneuvers, the US Marines will remain in Estonia at least until the end of 2014. America has already sent around 600 soldiers to the Baltic and to Poland on exercises and they are expected to stay in the region for the rest of the year.**

On May 2, a group of NATO ships arrived in the Lithuanian port of Klaipeda to *«ensure regional security».*

Russia considers the increase of NATO forces so close to its border a provocation, and believes it is counter-productive in the struggle to de-escalate tensions in Ukraine. On May 5, Russian Minister of Defense Sergey Shoigu called on his American counterpart Chuck Hagel to cool down the rhetoric over Ukraine and work together to defuse the situation. Russia believes that NATO drills held in Estonia encourage Kyiv to commit forceful actions. *«NATO drills being held in Estonia, the largest ones since 1991, are accompanied by bellicose rhetoric and only encourage Kyiv to continue the punitive operation against its own people»*, Russia's Permanent Representative to NATO Alexander Grushko told Interfax information agency on May 7. According to him, *«NATO prefers to not recall the February appeals to the Ukrainian armed forces to maintain their neutral status and not to interfere in the domestic conflict»*. Grushko said that Kyiv is being provided with enhanced support in the framework of the cooperation program of NATO-Ukraine committee. He added that *«NATO should realize that they are responsible for the criminal actions of its 'partner for peace'».*