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NATO chief to move forces from U.S. to Europe to respond to Russia in Ukraine

By James Rosen

July 1, 2014

NATO's top military commander said Monday that American troops from the United States will be dispatched to Europe starting in October to help respond to Russian aggression in Ukraine.

Air Force Gen. Philip M. Breedlove, supreme allied commander of the Western military alliance, said the U.S.-based troops will buttress American forces that have already been moved in recent months from Germany, Italy and elsewhere in Europe for stepped-up ground and air patrols in the three Baltic countries of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, plus Poland and Romania.

"It's a very momentous time in Europe, probably the most since the end of the Cold War, especially because of the recent changes wrought by Russia," Breedlove told reporters at the Pentagon.

Breedlove said Moscow has supplied pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine with tanks, armored personnel carriers, anti-aircraft artillery and other heavy weapons.

The four-star general, who assumed NATO command last year, said there's "a very good likelihood" that the anti-aircraft artillery used to shoot down a Ukrainian transport plane June 14, killing all 42 people on board, came from Russia.

“We see in training on the (Russian) side of the border is big equipment, tanks, (armored personnel carriers), anti-aircraft capability, and now we see those capabilities being used on the (Ukrainian) side of the border,” Breedlove said.

Asked how many Russian troops have massed on the Ukraine border, Breedlove responded that there are “seven-plus battalion task groups on the east side of that border,” which would be on the order of 5,000 troops.

The Ukraine crisis started in mid-February when Russian paramilitary troops began seizing control of government buildings in the Crimean Peninsula.

That aggression was followed by a March 16 referendum that Moscow used to claim it had annexed the region, which has a large ethnic Russian population. Since then, ethnic Russians in other parts of Ukraine have staged violent protests and tried to take control of local governments.

Breedlove, 58, expressed skepticism about recent conciliatory statements by Russian President Vladimir Putin, among them engaging in ceasefire talks with his Ukrainian counterpart and asking his parliament to revoke his previously granted authorization to use force in Ukraine.

“There is good rhetoric,” Breedlove said. “There are some good words about a cease-fire and peace, but what we see is continued conflict, continued support of the conflict from the eastern side of the border, and until we see those things turn around, I think we need to watch with a wary eye.”

Breedlove urged Congress to reconsider previously planned reductions in the number of U.S. troops in Europe and to approve a \$1 billion funding infusion that President Barack Obama called for June 3 during a visit to Poland.

“We should now pause and determine -- should we continue with any of the program reductions that are in the plan for Europe,” Breedlove said.

He added that the United States “may need to add additional rotational troops to cover the sustained, persistent presence that we are now envisioning.”

Breedlove acknowledged that Russia’s aggression in Ukraine has caught U.S. military leaders by surprise.

“For the last 12 to 14 years, we’ve been looking at Russia as a partner,” he said. “We’ve been making decisions about force structure, basing investments, et cetera, et cetera, looking to Russia as a partner. Now what we see is a very different situation.”