

NATO Says Russian Army Could 'Accomplish Its Objectives' in Ukraine in 3-5 Days

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BRUSSELS — Russia has massed all the forces it needs on Ukraine's border if it were to decide to carry out an "incursion" into the country and it could achieve its objective in three to five days, NATO's top military commander said Wednesday.

Calling the situation "incredibly concerning," NATO's supreme allied commander in Europe, U.S. Air Force General Philip Breedlove, said NATO had spotted signs of movement by a very small part of the Russian force overnight but had no indication that it was returning to barracks.

Russia's seizure and annexation of Ukraine's Crimea region has caused the deepest crisis in East-West relations since the Cold War, leading the U.S. and Europe to impose sanctions on Moscow. They have said they will strengthen those sanctions if Russia moves beyond Crimea

into east Ukraine.

NATO military chiefs are concerned that the Russian force on the Ukrainian border, which they estimate stands at 40,000 soldiers, could pose a threat to eastern and southern Ukraine.

"This is a very large and very capable and very ready force," Breedlove said in an interview with Reuters and The Wall Street Journal.

The Russian force has aircraft and helicopter support as well as field hospitals and electronic warfare capabilities.

"The entire suite that would be required to successfully have an incursion into Ukraine should the decision be made," Breedlove said. "We think it is ready to go and we think it could accomplish its objectives in between three and five days if directed to make the actions."

He said Russia could have several potential objectives, including an incursion into southern Ukraine to establish a land corridor to Crimea, pushing beyond Crimea to Ukraine's Black Sea port of Odessa or even threatening to connect to Transdnestr, the mainly Russian-speaking, separatist region of Moldova that lies to the west of Ukraine.

Russia also has forces to the north and northeast of Ukraine that could enter eastern Ukraine if Moscow ordered them to do so, Breedlove said. Any such actions would have far-reaching implications for NATO, a military alliance of 28 nations that has been the core of European defense for more than 60 years.

"We are going to have to look at how our alliance now is prepared for a different paradigm, a different rule set. ... We will need to rethink our force posture, our force positioning, our force provisioning, readiness, etc.," Breedlove said.

NATO foreign ministers meeting in Brussels this week suspended all practical cooperation with Russia in protest at its actions in Crimea and asked military commanders to draw up plans to reinforce NATO members in eastern Europe that are fearful about a threat from Russia.

Breedlove said the ministers had asked him to draw up by April 15 a package of measures that would include reinforcements by land, air and sea.

"We will work on air, land and sea 'reassurances' and we will look to position those 'reassurances' across the breadth of our exposure: north, center, and south," he said.

Meanwhile, the Russian Foreign Ministry accused NATO on Wednesday of reverting to the

language of the Cold War by suspending cooperation with Moscow, and said neither side would gain from the move.

It said the decision by NATO foreign ministers on Tuesday created a sense of "deja vu".

"The language of the statements rather resembles the verbal jousting of the 'Cold War' era," Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich said in a statement.

He said the last time NATO took such a decision, over Russia's five-day war with Georgia in 2008, the defense alliance had later resumed cooperation of its own accord.

"It is not hard to imagine who will gain from the suspension of cooperation between Russia and NATO on countering modern threats and challenges to international and European security, in particular in areas such as the fight against terrorism, piracy and natural and man-made disasters," Lukashevich said. "In any case, it will certainly not be Russia or NATO member states."

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