

Russia Threat Tops NATO Defense Ministers Meeting

June 03, 2014



Ukraine Defense Minister Mykhailo Koval talking with NATO's Rasmussen.

With the Kremlin watching carefully, NATO defense ministers gathered Tuesday for the first time since the Ukraine crisis, and top of the agenda is how to react long-term to Russia's new military capabilities and its willingness to use them.

The two-day meeting in Brussels is supposed to help set the stage for the U.S.-led alliance's summit meeting in Wales. NATO has already taken some immediate steps to react to Moscow's military occupation and annexation of Crimea.

"We need to make NATO fitter, faster and more flexible," the alliance's secretary-general, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, told reporters as the meeting opened.

Alliance officials said the ministers would consider longer-term responses, including an action readiness plan, a stepped-up schedule for military exercises and the possibility of additional deployments. In pre-meeting briefings, officials from NATO countries said a whole array of possibilities are on the table, including stocking military equipment in alliance

member countries close to Russia and shuttling NATO troops in and out to take part in exercises.

On Monday, Russia's envoy to NATO met with Rasmussen and ambassadors from the alliance's 28 member countries, and according to news reports, later said Moscow may take military countermeasures if NATO decides on major deployments in Eastern or Central Europe.

"All this could cast Europe back to the days of the Cold War and launch an arms race," Russian Ambassador Alexander Grushko said, Interfax reported.

"We shall wait and see what the ministers decide," he was quoted as saying.

NATO officials said actual decisions will likely have to wait for the alliance heads of state and government meeting in September. To prepare for the summit, the ministers are also scheduled to discuss defense spending and the future of Afghanistan following the end of NATO-led military operations this December. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel is attending the meeting for the U.S.

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