

# NATO: Russia Is Using Airspace Breaches to Say It's a 'Great Power'

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An undated handout photo provided by the Norwegian Army shows a Russian Tupolev Tu-22M aircraft over an unknown location during a military exercise.

NATO's top military commander said Monday that recent incursions into European airspace by Russian fighters and long-range bombers included larger, more complex formations of aircraft flying more "provocative" routes than usual.

U.S. Air Force General Philip Breedlove, the supreme allied commander in Europe, said NATO allies had not directly discussed the flights with Russian leaders because incursions are fairly common and are not generally talked about as long as they are professionally and safely handled.

"What is significant is that across history, most of these incursions have been very small groups of airplanes, sometimes singletons or at most two aircraft," Breedlove, who is also the head of U.S. European Command, told a Pentagon briefing.

"What you saw this past week was a larger, more complex formation of aircraft carrying out a

little deeper, and I would say a little bit more provocative flight path."

Most of the Russian flights have been in international airspace over the Baltic Sea, North Sea and Atlantic Ocean, a U.S. military official said. The flights have been unannounced with no flight plans filed, even though Russia has agreed to do so under civil aviation agreements, the official added.

NATO jets have usually intercepted the Russian aircraft between Kaliningrad, a Russian exclave on the Baltic Sea, and the Russian mainland, the official said.

Breedlove described the flights as "problematic" and a "concern," saying they did not "contribute to a secure and stable situation."

But he said the flights had been handled in a professional manner by the pilots involved, with NATO fliers intercepting the Russian fighter jets, long-range bombers and tanker aircraft and escorting them while they were in European airspace.

Breedlove said while he had not discussed the flights with his Russian counterparts, "my opinion is that they are messaging us," trying to underscore "that they are a great power."

The NATO commander also said the alliance and Russia had a mechanism for dealing with any incursions that involve reckless flying or other unprofessional behavior.

"If they're dangerously close, if the maneuvers are not correct, there are mechanisms by which we address those," Breedlove said. "But if the flight occurs in the airspace that these flights occurred in, and they are conducted professionally ... then we do not routinely talk about them."

The NATO commander expressed concern about a "revanchist Russia," and the "unwelcome return of nations using force to coerce neighboring states in Europe."

He said he was looking for an increase in the rotational presence of U.S. air and ground forces in Eastern Europe to train and interact with partners and allies.

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