The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

NATO Meeting Dominated by Russia

By Matthew Bodner

October 08, 2015



“In Syria, we have seen a troubling escalation of Russian military activities,” NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said at a morning press conference at NATO headquarters in Brussels on Thursday.

BRUSSELS — A week after Russia's surprise intervention in the ongoing Syrian civil war, the NATO military alliance finds itself in an awkward position, struggling to make sense of Moscow's moves and generate appropriate responses.

The core of NATO's problem in Syria is that, while the majority of its major members are engaged in air strikes on targets in the shattered Arab republic, the operation is being coordinated under the umbrella of a separate international coalition.

Meanwhile, Russia appears to be testing the alliance through a series of alleged incursions into the airspace of Turkey, which borders an area of Syria under heavy Russian bombardment.

"In Syria, we have seen a troubling escalation of Russian military activities," NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said at a morning press conference at NATO headquarters in Brussels

on Thursday. "This is particularly relevant in view of the recent violations of NATO's airspace by Russian aircraft."

Stoltenberg asserted that NATO "is able and ready to defend all allies, including Turkey, against any threat," responding to a reporter's question about the extent to which NATO will back Turkey in its spat with Russia over Syria.

Russia says its intervention, which it is coordinating with Iraq, Iran and the Syrian government, is aimed at helping the latter defeat the Islamic State terrorist organization, but U.S. officials and people on the ground say the strikes have also targeted Western-backed rebels.

In an afternoon press conference following a series of meetings between NATO's 28 defense ministers, Stoltenberg said the alliance had given the green light to complete a previously announced plan to increase NATO's new rapid response force to 40,000 men — nearly doubling its size.

The force will conclude a massive exercise early next month in southwest Europe known as Trident Juncture 2015. The exercise, NATO's largest in over a decade, featuring over 30,000 troops, will be the final step in certifying the response forces for action.

Responding to questions about how NATO plans to deter a possible Russian incident in Turkish airspace, Stoltenberg said simply that the new response force serves as a credible deterrent against all possible foes from all possible directions.

"All of this sends a clear message to all NATO citizens: NATO will defend you. NATO is on the ground. NATO is ready ... We stand in strong solidarity with Turkey," he said.

U.S. Lead

U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter arrived in Brussels on Thursday and came out swinging against Russia's actions in Syria, painting them as part of a broader policy of Moscow's self-isolation by refusing to work responsibly with the international community.

"Instead of engaging in political transition in Syria, which is needed in this long-suffering country, Russia has chosen to double down on its long-standing relationship with [Syrian President Bashar] Assad, committing additional capabilities and personnel," Carter said.

"I have said repeatedly over the past several days that we believe this is a fundamental strategic mistake. ... We have not and will not agree to cooperate with Russia so long as they continue to pursue this strategy," he added.

Carter said the U.S. was seeking to establish ground rules for safe mutual military operations in Syria after Russia launched guided cruise missiles at targets in Syria over Iranian airspace from the Caspian Sea without warning.

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said Wednesday that Russia was ready to coordinate its strikes against the Islamic State with the U.S.

Carter also said that the U.S. would keep the door open for cooperation with Russia if Moscow

chose to change course in Syria, and warned that if a policy change is not forthcoming that "this will have consequences for Russia itself, and I suspect in the coming days Russia will suffer casualties in Syria."

The U.S. defense secretary said the U.S. would continue its operations unchanged, continuing support for the moderate Syrian opposition and air strikes against Islamic State targets.

Staying on the Sidelines

NATO officials in Brussels were careful to speak directly on Russia's growing involvement in the Syrian civil war, limiting their comments only to criticisms that Moscow's actions are of concern for the alliance, and not helpful in the search for a political settlement to the conflict.

"We see an escalation of Russian military activity in Syria. And the ministers agreed that Russia's military escalation in Syria raises serious concerns. I call on Russia to play a constructive role in the fight against [the Islamic State], but Russia's actions and the support to the [Assad] regime are not helpful," Stoltenberg said.

In a briefing at NATO headquarters Thursday, the U.S. Ambassador to NATO Douglas Lute expressed concern that Russia's role in the Syrian conflict might intensify — a claim that officials in Moscow have continuously downplayed.

Lute said that Russia had deployed its most advanced weapons platforms to the Syrian airbase in Latakia, a move the ambassador remarked was "quite impressive" given the speed with which the force was deployed.

NATO is currently in the final stages of perfecting and certifying its own 40,000-man rapid response force, which has been in the works since before the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis last year, but efforts intensified following Moscow's annexation of Crimea from Kiev.

Lute hesitated to speculate on Russia's ultimate intentions, but said that while Russia may simply be using tanks, ground troops and air defenses to protect its position in Syria, "the capabilities deployed suggest more than simply base protection."

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Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/10/08/nato-meeting-dominated-by-russia-a50171