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Changing of the Guard: NATO Brings In Army General to Deter Russia

By Matthew Bodner

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Curtis M. Scaparrotti, commander of NATO's Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe

Curtis Scaparrotti, a U.S. Army General, is no stranger to tension. For the past three years, he has been the Pentagon's senior officer on the Korean Peninsula. There, Scaparrotti was responsible for commanding U.S. forces deployed along the world's most notorious flashpoint, the demilitarized zone separating a flourishing South Korea from its unpredictable and potentially hostile neighbor to the north.

Now the head of NATO forces in Europe, he will face a growing military divide between east and west. Attempts by Russia and NATO to reestablish dialogue have failed, close encounters between military forces occur on an almost weekly basis, and distrust is driving military buildup along borders.

Scaparrotti replaces U.S. Air Force General Philip Breedlove, who, over the past two years, has worked to reinvigorate the alliance in the face of what is seen as a resurgent Russian threat

to NATO's eastern members. A career infantryman, he will be tasked with completing his predecessor's efforts to restore NATO to war-capable footing.

"A resurgent Russia [is] striving to project itself as a world power," Scaparrotti said after being sworn in on May 4. NATO also faces threats from the migrant crisis and international terrorism. "To address these challenges, we must continue to maintain and enhance our levels of readiness and our agility in the spirit of being able to fight tonight if deterrence fails."

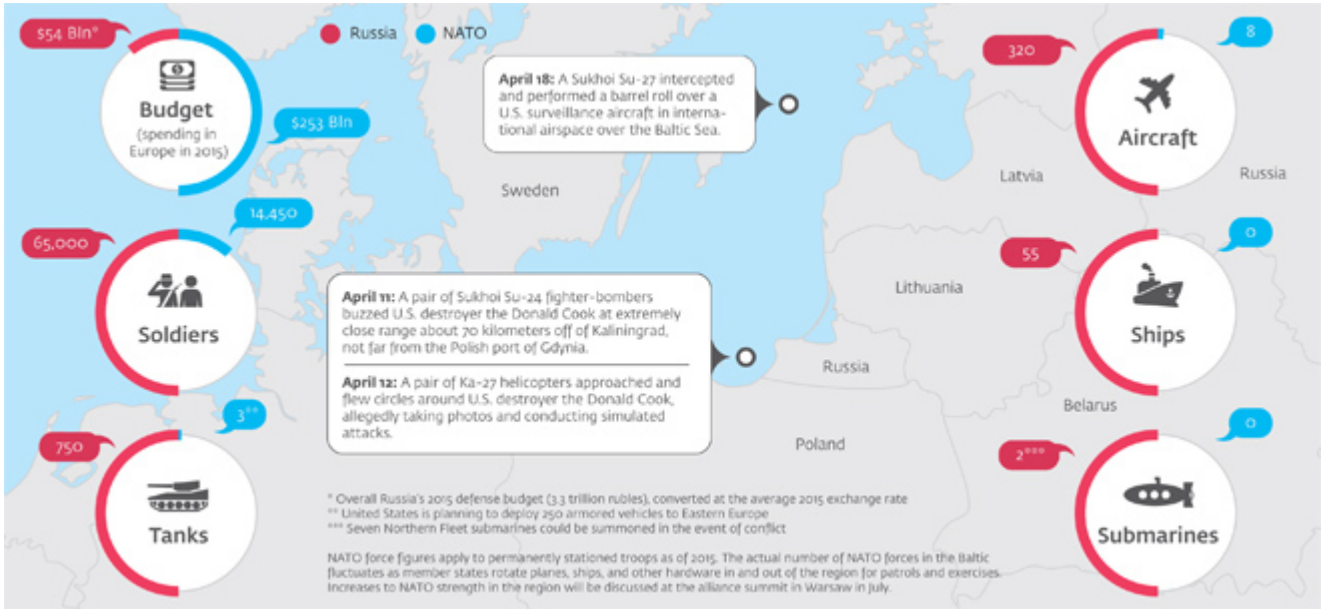
The message rang loud in Moscow, where officials have spent the past two years bickering in the media with Breedlove, a proponent of greater military deterrence against Russia. Russian media outlets frequently held the bombastic Breedlove responsible for tensions between Russia and the West.

Russian officials began immediately painting Scaparrotti in the same light. State Duma foreign affairs chairman Alexei Pushkov said the new NATO commander had already surpassed Breedlove in warmongering, and other officials said he is simply upset that Russia has the audacity to stand up for its interests.

While this rhetoric has been rehashed ad nauseum over the past two years, Scaparrotti's arrival coincides with the final stages of NATO's efforts to reinvigorate itself, with an eye on protecting its members to the east from potential attack by Russia. This has been a common theme on the NATO side since March 2014, and efforts are expected to crescendo at the NATO summit in Warsaw this summer.

The Ukraine crisis has already seen the command authority of the NATO supreme commander increase, giving the official greater room to maneuver during the early moments of any conceivable conflict with Russia. This was an initiative pushed by Breedlove as part of the alliance's efforts to present a stronger deterrence to any potential Russian moves on a NATO member.

The Baltic Balance of Power



Sources: International Institute of Strategic Studies, NATO

View the map in higher resolution here.

"Scaparrotti's biggest challenge will be how to respond to Russia, and Russian subversion, short of military force," says Ilan Berman, vice president of the American Foreign Policy Council, a Washington think tank. "Its not something that NATO has a clear strategy to address, and as a result there is a fragmentation of political opinion within the alliance."

Meanwhile, the alliance has bolstered the size of forces available to its supreme commander if fighting breaks out. Already, the United States has deployed around 4,000 troops and an armored brigade to eastern Europe, and proposals to double that force — at the insistence of nations like Poland — will be on the agenda in Warsaw in July. The Pentagon is also planning to add an additional permanent battalion in Europe to augment Washington's forces in Germany and Italy.

In the weeks leading up to Scaparrotti's arrival in Europe, the U.S. military has been debating sending an additional 4,000 troops to Eastern Europe to deter Russia. "But the underlying weaknesses have not really changed," Berman said. "No one is throwing more money at NATO, and there are a lot of uncertainties — like the Brexit threat."

In recent weeks, Russian warplanes have flown what the United States has characterized as highly provocative maneuvers near U.S. ships and aircraft patrolling the Black Sea. Scaparrotti said at his induction ceremony that he wants to reopen lines of communication with Russia to prevent these incidents from sparking unintended conflict, but efforts last month to reinvigorate communication between Russia and NATO failed.

Russia has instead responded to NATO's troop movements in Eastern Europe with promises to deploy 30,000 men to its western flank. Moscow's acts of resolve will likely only intensify if Scaparrotti makes good on his proposals to arm Ukraine with heavier weapons to defend itself from Russian aggression. Such moves would be seen by the Kremlin as yet another instance of the West meddling in its historic backyard.

While he is not expected to begin launching a series of new initiatives right off the bat, he is ensuring continuity in NATO's reform efforts in the wake of Breedlove's departure. As both sides continue to dig in and the rhetoric continues to sizzle, Scaparrotti's experience in Korea may become increasingly relevant.

Contact the author at m.bodner@imedia.ru. Follow the author on Twitter at @mattb0401.

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