

Opening Statement of U.S. Senator John McCain
Chairman, Senate Armed Services Committee
Thursday, April 30, 2015
“United States European Command Posture Hearing”

(As Prepared for Delivery)

Good morning. The Committee meets today to receive testimony on the posture of United States European Command. I want to welcome to General Philip Breedlove, the commander of the United States European Command and Supreme Allied Commander, Europe. I thank you and your family for your dedicated service to the Nation. This Committee relies upon the candor of those in positions such as yours to conduct the oversight work we were sent here to do. So I especially want to thank you on behalf of this Committee for your honest and forthright presentation of the ongoing crisis in Ukraine over the past year.

As Ian Brzezinski explained before this Committee earlier this week, Europe and the NATO alliance face “challenges on multiple fronts of unprecedented complexity and increasing urgency.” To its south, the alliance faces a treacherous combination of state sponsors of terrorism, failed states, and extremist organizations. Already this year, radical Islamists attacked Paris and Copenhagen. Last week in the Mediterranean, over 700 migrants perished tragically in a shipwreck fleeing the conflict and instability of North Africa. And then there’s Russia. To its north, the transatlantic community faces Russia’s militarization of the Arctic. And to the east, NATO confronts Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Since the end of the Cold War, U.S. policy toward Russia was based on a bipartisan assumption that the Russian government sought to integrate peacefully into the international order in Europe and to forge a constructive relationship with the United States. The events of the past year have overturned that assumption.

Russia became the first state in seven decades on the European continent to send its military forces across an internationally recognized border and forcibly annex the sovereign territory of another state. Today, Russia maintains sizable numbers of artillery pieces and multiple rocket launchers on the territory of Ukraine in violation of the February ceasefire agreement. The Russian military has recently deployed additional air defense systems near the front lines in eastern Ukraine – the highest amount since last August according to the State Department. It’s a disturbing sign that another offensive may be imminent.

In response, it is not that the United States and our European allies have done nothing. It is that nothing we have done has succeeded in deterring Putin’s aggression and halted his slow-motion annexation of eastern Ukraine.

Despite the advice of nearly every statesman and policy expert that has appeared before this Committee in recent months – Henry Kissinger, George Shultz, Madeleine Albright, Zbig Brzezinski, and others – and against the advice of both his Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense, the President has refused to provide defensive lethal assistance to Ukraine. The Ukrainian people aren’t asking for U.S. troops. They are simply asking for the right tools to defend themselves and their country. The President’s

continued inaction, for fear of provoking Russia, is seen by Putin as weakness and invites the very aggression we seek to avoid. And it only increases the likelihood this aggression could expand to places like Moldova, Georgia, the Baltic states, and Central Asia.

Of course, there is no military solution in Ukraine, but there is a clear military dimension to achieving a political solution. As three major think tanks wrote recently: “Assisting Ukraine to deter attack and defend itself is not inconsistent with the search for a peaceful, political solution—it is essential to achieving it. Only if the Kremlin knows that the risks and costs of further military action are high will it seek to find an acceptable political solution.”

Ultimately, we must recognize that we are confronting a challenge that many had assumed was resigned to the history books: a strong, militarily-capable state that is hostile to our interests and our values, and seeks to overturn the international order in Europe that American leaders of both parties have sought to maintain since World War II.

U.S. strategy and military posture in Europe should adjust to reflect this harsh reality.

Yet as Russia builds up, America draws down. The Obama Administration eliminated two heavy brigades stationed in Europe in 2012. Yesterday, the Army announced the departure of 24 Apache helicopters and 30 Black Hawk helicopters from Germany and we’ll want to hear more from General Breedlove on the plan for a rotational presence and other efforts to reassure our allies. As Admiral Stavridis, the former SACEUR and EUCOM commander, told this Committee on Tuesday: “...since the end of the cold war, we’re down 75 percent in personnel. We’re down 75 percent in the number of bases that we have. We have, in my view, come to a line that we should not continue to diminish that presence further.”

I am also concerned about the fact that too many of our NATO allies continue to fail to provide for their own defense. Despite promises at the Wales Summit to “reverse the trend of declining defense budgets,” soon Poland and Estonia may be the only other allies meeting our alliance’s commitment to spend two percent of GDP on defense.

In response to the broader challenge that Russia poses to security in Europe, it is not that the United States and NATO have done nothing: We have created a modest rapid reaction force; increased air policing and sea patrols; expanded training and exercises; and deployed small numbers of additional forces to Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. The problem is, the actions we have taken seem inadequate to the scope, scale, and seriousness of the challenges we face.

None of us want a return to the Cold War. But we need to face the reality that we are dealing with a Russian ruler who wants exactly that. The reason for maintaining a U.S. strong military presence in Europe is the same as ever: to deter conflict and aggression. But we must revisit the question of what it will take to achieve this goal when confronting a revisionist Russia that is undergoing a significant military modernization, and that is willing to use force not as a last resort, but as a primary tool to achieve its neo-imperial objectives.

I hope today’s hearing will help us to better understand the magnitude of the challenge we face in Europe, and what to do about it. I thank General Breedlove for joining us today and look forward to your testimony.