

Opening Statement on EUCOM Posture
Chairman John McCain
March 1, 2016

The Senate Armed Services Committee meets this morning to receive testimony on the security situation in Europe and the posture of United States European Command. We are pleased to welcome back General Philip Breedlove, the commander of the United States European Command and Supreme Allied Commander, Europe.

General, this may be your last appearance before this Committee. So I want to take this opportunity to thank for your decades of distinguished service to our country. In particular, I am grateful for your candor in alerting Americans and Europeans alike to the threat posed by Russia, which is growing significantly worse. Unfortunately, you have sometimes been a lonely voice, but you have always been an impactful voice. This Committee relies upon the candor of our nation's senior military commanders. I believe your colleagues as well as your successor should profit from the example of your leadership. We certainly have.

I also would like to welcome to your wife Cindy, a proud graduate of Arizona State University. She has been a strong advocate for Air Force and military families, especially concerning education. We are grateful to her and your three children for the sacrifices they have made over your many years of service.

To the surprise of no one on this Committee, it only took until the second day of the so-called ceasefire in Syria before Vladimir Putin resumed his airstrikes in support of the murderous Assad regime. I am sure Russia will say it has only targeted "terrorists". And while the Administration and many others will likely express their "concerns," I am sure they will preserve the agreement, regardless of the price to U.S. credibility and the cost to our partners on the ground.

All of this comes as no surprise. We know why Mr. Putin agreed to a cessation of hostilities when he did. And it is no accident that he violated that agreement when he did. This is the same movie we have been watching in Ukraine for two years: Russia presses its advantage militarily, creates new facts on the ground, uses the denial and delivery of humanitarian aid as a bargaining chip, negotiates an agreement to lock in the spoils of war, and then chooses when and where to resume fighting. This is diplomacy in the service of military aggression. And it is working because we are letting it.

In Ukraine and now in Syria, Putin has been learning that military adventurism pays. The only deterrence that we seem to be establishing is over ourselves. Indeed, two years after Russia invaded Ukraine and annexed Crimea, the Administration has still not provided Ukrainian forces with the lethal assistance they need to defend themselves, and which the Congress has authorized.

And now, we may be starting the cycle once again. In recent weeks, fighting in eastern Ukraine has intensified. Russian shelling and small-scale skirmishes have increased. Russian tanks have been moving to support the separatists, and Russian forces conducted a snap military exercise near Ukraine and the Caucasus in February. The ceasefire in Ukraine, which was coordinated to begin precisely as Russia readied its intervention in Syria, now appears increasingly tenuous. And, of course, Russia still has not lived up to its obligations under the so-called “Minsk II” agreement. But with the fighting in Syria capturing the headlines, Putin has succeeded in diverting international attention from his invasion of Ukraine.

It is not that the United States and NATO have done nothing to respond to the challenge posed by Russia. It is that none of the actions we have taken thus far are adequate to the scope, scale, and seriousness of the challenges Russia presents to our national security and to the international order.

Ultimately, the reason for maintaining a strong U.S. military presence in Europe is the same as it ever was: to deter conflict and prevent aggression. But we must revisit the question of what it will take to achieve this goal when confronting a revisionist Russia that is undergoing 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.

In short, the United States and NATO need to prepare ourselves to deter, and, if necessary, defeat Russian aggression whether it is in the nuclear, conventional or hybrid domain.

Vladimir Putin views nuclear weapons as an integral part of his strategy to reestablish Russian dominance in the former Soviet Union. To increase the credibility NATO’s nuclear deterrent, we must continue the ongoing modernization of U.S. nuclear forces and ensure that NATO’s nuclear deterrent forces are survivable, well-exercised, and increasingly ready to counter Russian nuclear doctrine, which calls for the first use of nuclear weapons.

As General Breedlove has pointed out, the current U.S. force structure in Europe and its underlying resourcing is predicated on the mistaken policy of what he terms “hugging the bear.” But while some may try to argue otherwise, Putin is not a security partner. General Breedlove, we look forward to hearing what steps you think are required to rectify our force posture and resource deficiencies in light of Russia’s modernized conventional capabilities, especially its anti-access, area denial network from Kaliningrad to Crimea to the Eastern Mediterranean Sea.

In the realm of hybrid warfare, we are unfortunately playing catch up. In areas such as information operations and cyber warfare, we have been bested by Putin’s propaganda machine and his army of trolls and hackers. Again, under the misguided premise that Russia is a partner, we have let our intelligence on Russia’s tactical and operational capabilities languish. This has made countering “hybrid” tactics through effective attribution all the more difficult.

Finally, as we consider all of these important issues, it is important that we never forget the nature of the regime that threatens our security and the peace of Europe.

This weekend marks the one year anniversary of the murder of Boris Nemtsov on a bridge in the shadow of the Kremlin. Boris was a friend to many of us. He was a Russian patriot who had the courage to tell the truth about the authoritarianism, rampant corruption, and imperial ambitions that are endemic to Putin’s regime. Boris gave his life to tell these truths. We must honor his memory by resisting Vladimir Putin’s dark and dangerous view of the world and by speaking up for the aspirations of so many Russians who still long for a future of opportunity, rule of law, and good relations with Europe and the United States.

That is what 30,000 Russians did this Saturday, marching across Moscow in tribute to Boris chanting “Russia will be free!” That is our hope as well.