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NATO Weighs Rapid Response Force for Eastern Europe

By JULIE HIRSCHFELD DAVIS and STEVEN ERLANGER SEPT. 1, 2014

WASHINGTON — As Ukrainian leaders warned on Monday of “a great war” with Russia, NATO leaders meeting in Wales this week were expected to endorse their most concrete response yet to increased Russian military intervention in Ukraine: establishing a rapid-reaction force capable of deploying quickly to Eastern Europe, officials of the alliance said.

The new force of some 4,000 troops, capable of moving on 48 hours’ notice, will be supported with logistics and equipment pre-positioned in Eastern European countries closer to Russia, with an upgraded schedule of military exercises and deployments that are intended to make NATO’s commitment of collective defense more credible and enhance its deterrence.

The agreement is planned as the substantive centerpiece of the NATO meeting, which will take place Thursday and Friday and will be attended by President Obama, who will also stop in Estonia before the summit meeting. His aides said the trip was intended to highlight the United States’ commitment to NATO, and the alliance’s determination to protect all 28 members from aggression — from Moscow or elsewhere.

“The summit is very important because Russia thought it can change the borders of a sovereign European country by force, and this is happening not very far from NATO’s borders,” said one of Mr. Obama’s proud Estonian hosts, Prime Minister Taavi Roivas. “The security situation has changed, and we need to rethink our plans and reinforce our allies, so we can be 101 percent sure that all member states are equally and strongly protected.”

The sense of urgency was highlighted by events in Ukraine on Monday, as President Petro O. Poroshenko accused Russia of military aggression to alter the battlefield. “Direct, unconcealed aggression has been launched

against Ukraine from a neighboring country,” he said, according to the presidential website. “It radically changes the situation in the conflict area.”

Ukraine’s defense minister, Valeriy Heletey, was more emphatic. “A great war has arrived at our doorstep, the likes of which Europe has not seen since World War II,” he said in a Facebook post. And Col. Andriy Lysenko, spokesman for the National Security and Defense Council, said Monday that Ukrainian forces had withdrawn from the airport near Luhansk in the face of a Russian Army tank battalion, and that seven Ukrainian soldiers had been killed in the last 24 hours. Russia regularly denies sending troops into eastern Ukraine.

For Mr. Obama, the trip is a chance to show Europeans that he is dedicated to NATO at a time when Russia is challenging the postwar European order, built on the principle of no border changes by force.

“The tension you’re seeing between Russia and the West is going to be put on display in Wales, and the president is going to be leading that effort,” said Ivo H. Daalder, the previous American ambassador to NATO and now head of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. Mr. Obama, he said, “wants to reaffirm the unity and strength of the alliance.”

NATO leaders are trying this week to reassure allies that the commitment to collective defense, in NATO’s Article 5, is solid. The alliance wants to show that it means what it says and will have the capability to defend its most vulnerable members against Russian aggression, whether overt or more covert, or a hybrid, of the two, as in Ukraine.

“The really ironic aspect here is that a re-energized, restrengthened NATO is Vladimir Putin’s worst nightmare, and yet it’s his tactical actions that have done just that,” said James G. Stavridis, who was NATO’s commander from 2009 to 2013 and is dean of the Fletcher School at Tufts University, referring to Russia’s president.

It is also an opportunity for Mr. Obama, buffeted by a cascade of international crises, to rally Europeans into what Secretary of State John Kerry has called a “global coalition” to confront an increased terrorist threat from the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and other radical Islamist groups in Africa.

Though ISIS is not on the formal agenda for the summit meeting, Mr. Kerry and Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel will meet European counterparts

to develop a strategy to counter ISIS.

But the emphasis will be on Russia. As both American and European leaders weigh additional sanctions against Moscow, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the NATO secretary general, said Monday in Brussels that the new rapid reaction force “will ensure that we have the right forces and the right equipment in the right place, at the right time.”

Numerous leaders of NATO countries have said that any hope of achieving the “strategic partnership” with Russia envisioned as long ago as the 1990 NATO summit was finished because of Russia’s annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine. Nevertheless, NATO is being careful not to violate the NATO-Russia Founding Act, the 1997 agreement with Moscow under which NATO pledged not to permanently base substantial forces in Eastern Europe.

The compromise will come from a regular rotation of troops and the positioning of equipment and supplies, including weapons, ammunition and fuel, in Eastern Europe. Mr. Rasmussen said it would also require command and control and logistics experts, “so this force can travel light but strike hard if needed.”

Russia’s “aggressive behavior,” he said, will mean “a more visible NATO presence in the East for as long as required.” NATO for now appears unwilling to formally abandon the NATO-Russia Council established in 2002, though the alliance suspended “cooperation” with Russia in May.

The moves, combined with more military exercises and enhanced air patrols over the Baltic States, Poland and Romania are intended to deter Russia and reassure newer members.

“This is a credibility summit,” said Robin Niblett, director of Chatham House, a policy research institute based in London. “When we say we’re able to do something, we must have the political will and ability to do it.” The summit meeting will also be measured, he said, on how “governments use it to wake up and sensitize their populations to the fact that we live in an increasingly dangerous world with real threats to our prosperity and security, and that more money must be spent.”

Mr. Poroshenko will attend the summit meeting to discuss ways that NATO can help Ukraine. NATO is expected to set up new trust funds to help Ukraine better defend itself. The assistance is expected to come in the form of

logistics, from fuel to spare parts; defense against cyberwarfare; improving intelligence, command and control; and importantly, help for veterans' payments.

Mr. Obama's message to NATO will be, "We stand with you, Article 5 constitutes an ironclad guarantee of your security," said Charles Kupchan, senior director for Europe at the National Security Council. Mr. Obama's message to Russia, he said, is simple: "Don't even think about messing around in Estonia or in any of the Baltic areas in the same way that you've been messing around in Ukraine."

Mr. Obama will use the Wales meeting to urge Europeans to spend more on defense, and more effectively.

It is a far more crowded agenda than Mr. Obama anticipated last spring, when the summit meeting was to be focused on winding down NATO's combat mission in Afghanistan. By 2015, it is scheduled to become a training and assistance force of 8,000 to 12,000 troops, two-thirds of them American.

Julie Hirschfeld Davis reported from Washington, and Steven Erlanger from London. Stephen Castle contributed reporting from Brussels; Carlotta Gall from Kiev, Ukraine; and Neil MacFarquhar from Moscow.

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