



HELSINKI COMMISSION REPORT

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IN BRIEF

Russian Military Aggression in Europe: A Resurgent Threat to Stability

A Helsinki Commission Perspective on Recent SASC Hearings

On March 21 and March 23, 2017, expert witnesses—including Gen. Curtis M. Scaparrotti, NATO’s Supreme Allied Commander-Europe—testified in front of the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) about ongoing Russian activities in the European region.

The impact of Russia’s military aggression and its failure to uphold fundamental international agreements were of paramount importance to Helsinki Commission Chairman Senator Roger Wicker (MS), a senior member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, and Senator Jeanne Shaheen (NH), also a Helsinki Commissioner and a senior member of the Senate Armed Services and Foreign Relations Committees.

Three key themes emerged in the Commissioners’ questioning: the challenges Russian military activities, including exercises, pose to the stability of the European security environment; Moscow’s flaunting of its security-related commitments; and the role of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in addressing these violations.

Russian Challenges to OSCE Security Commitments

The expert witnesses agreed that Russian military aggression remains a key threat to the European security order. General Scaparrotti

described “the most dynamic European strategic environment in recent history” as being characterized by “a resurgent Russia [that] has turned from partner to antagonist as it seeks to reemerge as a global power. Countries along Russia’s periphery, including Ukraine and Georgia, struggle against Moscow’s malign activities and military actions.”

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Russia’s actions violate commitments enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act and other agreements relating to, among others, refraining from the threat or use of force against other states; refraining from violating their sovereignty, territorial integrity or political independence; and respecting their right to choose their own security alliances.

Moscow has also made it a priority to undermine the effective functioning of multilateral institutions like the OSCE, which

serves as the hub for several conventional arms control agreements and confidence and security building measures to which Russia is a party. These measures include the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE Treaty), which limits heavy ground and air weapons in Europe and provides information on current arms holdings, including their location; the Open Skies Treaty, which provides for mutual unarmed aerial reconnaissance of member states; and the Vienna Document on Confidence- and Security-Building Measures, which provides for information exchanges, on-site inspections, and notifications of the military activities, arms, and force levels of OSCE participating States.

These agreements together form an interlocking web of arms control agreements and confidence building measures that has proved fundamental to the stability of the post-Cold War European security architecture. They are designed to enhance military transparency and predictability, thereby increasing confidence among the OSCE participating States (57 countries from Europe, Central Asia and North America). However, rather than fully implementing its commitments under these agreements, Russia has sought to diminish them.

Among its most egregious violations, Russia continues to station large numbers of military forces in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine (nearly 30,000 Russian personnel in Crimea alone, according to Ukrainian authorities), without the consent of the governments of these states. In 2007, Moscow announced it was “suspending” its implementation of the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty altogether. (For additional information on Russian “suspension” of its implementation of the CFE Treaty and the stationing of Russian forces without the consent of the host state, see the Department of State’s [2016 Compliance With the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Condition \(5\) \(C\) Report](#).)

Russia has also in recent years only selectively

implemented both the Open Skies Treaty and the Vienna Document, for instance refusing Ukrainian requests for consultations on Russian military activities or imposing restrictions on observation flights over Kaliningrad and other locations. These actions strongly suggest an intent to undermine other states’ understanding of Russian military activities. (For additional information on Russia’s selective implementation of the Vienna Document and the Open Skies Treaty, see the Department of State’s [2016 Report on Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Non-proliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments](#).)

Senator Shaheen pressed the panelists on the related issue of Russian violation of the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. While not a part of the multilateral, OSCE-linked set of agreements detailed above, the INF Treaty remains a part of an even broader web of agreements underpinning European security.

Former NATO SACEUR General Philip M. Breedlove, USAF (Ret.) replied, “We cannot let that go unchallenged... This was not done by accident and we need to respond.”

Ambassador Alexander “Sandy” Vershbow, a former Deputy Secretary General of NATO who also served as U.S. Ambassador to Russia, suggested, “It doesn’t bode well for long-term stability if they are prepared to cheat [on the INF Treaty].”

The OSCE’s Continued Value

Citing the fundamental “Helsinki principles” on which the OSCE is based, Senator Wicker pressed witnesses for their views on the continued value of the OSCE.

Ambassador Vershbow underlined his appreciation for the value of the OSCE, despite the challenges inherent in Russian actions,

“...because of the norms and values that it

upholds—even though the Russians are violating a lot of those right now—it gives us a basis on which to challenge their misbehavior.”

Ambassador William J. Burns, former U.S. Deputy Secretary of State who also served as U.S. Ambassador to Russia, stated that despite the OSCE’s limitations, the organization “embodies some of the core values that we share with our European allies and partners in terms of sovereignty of states and the inviolability of borders — so that the big states don’t just get to grab parts of smaller states, just because they can,” he said. Burns further called for continued U.S. investment in the OSCE.

While Russia’s actions diminish the effectiveness of the OSCE and undermine other multilateral agreements, Chairman Wicker suggested that the organization continues to provide specific value through its highest profile engagement: the fielding of an unarmed, civilian Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) to Ukraine, which he praised for providing the “international community’s eyes and ears in the conflict zone.”

This point was echoed by General Breedlove, who told the Committee that the SMM in Ukraine was a particularly valuable expression of the OSCE’s work. “...With some of the fake news that was created in the Donbass and other places as Russia invaded, even though OSCE was challenged ... often, [the monitoring mission] was the source of the real news of what was actually going on on the ground,” Breedlove stated.

Ambassador Vershbow praised the SMM in Ukraine as “very courageous;” Vershbow emphasized that while the OSCE faces serious

limitations, “I don’t see any alternative right now in trying to manage a conflict like in Eastern Ukraine.”

Destabilizing Russian Military Exercises

Underscoring the concerns expressed by the Commissioners, the hearings convened on the same week that Russia launched a major military exercise in Crimea involving thousands

of soldiers and hundreds of pieces of equipment. The exercise, coming on the third anniversary of the illegal annexation of Crimea, was yet another illegal act given its location on what the international community continues to regard as Ukrainian territory. The maneuvers, described by General Breedlove as

being “aimed at de-stabilizing Kiev,” were also of concern to SACEUR Scaparrotti, who suggested that such activities create “a lot of angst along the Eastern border” of NATO.

The exercise in Crimea also underscored the existence of the broader problem of the growing scale and frequency of Russian military exercises, coupled with Moscow’s disregard of commitments it has undertaken on transparency in such activities. Particularly concerning has been Moscow’s conducting large-scale exercises on a “no-notice” or “snap” basis. The organization of the exercises—some of the largest exercises in Europe in over 20 years—under such conditions implies an effort by Moscow to avoid fulfilling pledges it has made to provide information to alleviate the concern of justifiably nervous neighboring countries about its activities.

Commission Chairman Wicker asked SACEUR about these Russian “snap” military exercises and whether or not those actions are in line



OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (Yasynuvata, Donetsk region). Credit: OSCE / Evgeniy Maloletka

with agreements currently in place. While General Scaparrotti indicated some legitimate military utility to periodically conducting “snap” exercises to improve capabilities and responsiveness, he also suggested that Moscow’s extensive use of such exercises was intended to intimidate. The Russian exercises are sometimes much larger than announced, or sometimes not announced at all, he suggested, in contravention of the Vienna Document and other commitments under the Helsinki Final Act. Describing this situation as “very disturbing,” SACEUR recalled that Russia had strategically used exercises to mask the invasion of Crimea.

Looking Forward

There is little doubt that Russian military aggression and intimidation will continue to be a concern. Among the key signposts in the coming months is Russia’s planned “Zapad 2017” exercise, reportedly scheduled for September, which has already generated significant concern among the Baltic States and others, given the apparently large number of railcars requisitioned for the purposes of transporting Russian troops and equipment into Belarus.

Helsinki Commissioners have made clear their intent to continue to engage on these and related issues—to include maximizing the utility

of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe in the service of the principles enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act, especially those relating to military transparency and interstate relations. Helsinki Commission Chairman Senator Roger Wicker’s statement on Ukraine’s future at the March 21 hearing—“the more Ukraine succeeds, the better off it is for us in the United States and the West, and I think it is one of the most profoundly important issues that we face in the next year or two”—underlines the focus the Commission will continue to place on political-military issues in the OSCE space.

The Commission intends to continue to play a key role on these questions, by:

- Highlighting non-implementation of Helsinki Final Act commitments and violations of related arms control and confidence-building measures.
- Promoting strategies to move Russia back towards implementation of its commitments.
- Ensuring the political-military aspects of the OSCE, including exchanges of information intended to foster transparency and trust, provide the greatest possible added value to security and stability in the OSCE area.

About the Helsinki Commission

The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, also known as the U.S. Helsinki Commission, is an independent agency of the Federal Government charged with monitoring compliance with the Helsinki Accords and advancing comprehensive security through promotion of human rights, democracy, and economic, environmental and military cooperation in 57 countries. The Commission consists of nine members from the U.S. Senate, nine from the House of Representatives, and one member each from the Departments of State, Defense, and Commerce.

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Report Contributors

- Alex Tiersky, Policy Advisor, U.S. Helsinki Commission

Editor

- Stacy Hope, Communications Director, U.S. Helsinki Commission