

Bellicose NATO, Berlin “stunned”

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While Russia's envoy to NATO notes that statements by the deputy head of NATO testify to the fact that the leaders of the bloc want to intervene in Russia's internal politics, and are "*dreaming of Russian Maidan*," Washington has a bigger problem... Germany. As Der Spiegel reports, while US President Obama 'supports' Chancellor Merkel's efforts at finding a diplomatic solution to the Ukraine crisis, hawks in Washington seem determined to torpedo Berlin's approach. And NATO's top commander in Europe hasn't been helping either with sources in the Chancellery have referred to Breedlove's comments as "dangerous propaganda."

This is the view of Russia's permanent envoy to NATO:

‘This dream is a Maidan in Russia’

“The speech in Riga demonstrates the concern about Russia's democracy and internal policy. At last, now we know that NATO has a dream, and this dream is a Maidan in Russia,” Aleksandr Grushko said in comment that was tweeted through the Russian representation office in the alliance.

Grushko referred to the words of NATO's deputy secretary general, Alexander Vershbow, who had told a conference in the Latvian capital Riga that President Vladimir Putin's "aim seems to be to turn Ukraine into a failed state and to suppress and discredit alternative voices in Russia, so as to prevent a Russian 'Maidan.'" Both officials used the Ukrainian word 'Maidan' to describe a string of protest actions that eventually turned into mass unrest and the ousting of the legally elected president and parliament.

Breedlove's Bellicosity

And as Der Spiegel reports, The Germans are not happy. Breedlove's Bellicosity: Berlin Alarmed by Aggressive NATO Stance on Ukraine

US President Obama supports Chancellor Merkel's efforts at finding a diplomatic solution to the Ukraine crisis. But hawks in Washington seem determined to torpedo Berlin's approach. And NATO's top commander in Europe hasn't been helping either.

It was quiet in eastern Ukraine last Wednesday. Indeed, it was another quiet day in an extended stretch of relative calm. The battles between the Ukrainian army and the pro-Russian separatists had largely stopped and heavy weaponry was being withdrawn. The Minsk cease-fire wasn't holding perfectly, but it was holding.

On that same day, General Philip Breedlove, the top NATO commander in Europe, stepped before the press in Washington. Putin, the 59-year-old said, had once again "upped the ante" in eastern Ukraine -- with "well over a thousand combat vehicles, Russian combat forces, some of their most sophisticated air defense, battalions of artillery" having been sent to the Donbass.

"What is clear," Breedlove said, "is that right now, it is not getting better. It is getting worse every day."

German leaders in Berlin were stunned

German leaders in Berlin were stunned. They didn't understand what Breedlove was talking about. And it wasn't the first time. Once again, the German government, supported by intelligence gathered by the Bundesnachrichtendienst (BND), Germany's foreign intelligence agency, did not share the view of NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR).

The pattern has become a familiar one. For months, Breedlove has been commenting on Russian activities in eastern Ukraine, speaking of troop advances on the border, the amassing of munitions and alleged columns of Russian tanks. Over and over again, Breedlove's numbers have been significantly higher than those in the possession of America's NATO allies in Europe. As such, he is playing directly into the hands of the hardliners in the US Congress and in NATO.

The German government is alarmed. Are the Americans trying to thwart European efforts at mediation led by Chancellor Angela Merkel? Sources in the Chancellery have referred to Breedlove's comments as "dangerous propaganda." Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier even found it necessary recently to bring up Breedlove's comments with NATO General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg.

But Breedlove hasn't been the only source of friction. Europeans have also begun to see others as hindrances in their search for a diplomatic solution to the Ukraine conflict. First and foremost among them is Victoria Nuland, head of European affairs at the US State Department. She and others would like to see Washington deliver arms to Ukraine and are supported by Congressional Republicans as well as many powerful Democrats.

Barack Obama seems almost isolated

Indeed, US President Barack Obama seems almost isolated. He has thrown his support behind Merkel's diplomatic efforts for the time being, but he has also done little to quiet those who would seek to increase tensions with Russia and deliver weapons to Ukraine. Sources in Washington say that Breedlove's bellicose comments are first cleared with the White House and the Pentagon. The general, they say, has the role of the "super hawk," whose role is that of increasing the pressure on America's more reserved trans-Atlantic partners.

A mixture of political argumentation and military propaganda is necessary. But for months now, many in the Chancellery simply shake their heads each time NATO, under Breedlove's leadership, goes public with striking announcements about Russian troop or tank movements. To be sure, neither Berlin's Russia experts nor BND intelligence analysts doubt that Moscow is supporting the pro-Russian separatists. The BND even has proof of such support.

But it is the tone of Breedlove's announcements that makes Berlin uneasy. False claims and exaggerated accounts, warned a top German official during a recent meeting on Ukraine, have put NATO -- and by extension, the entire West -- in danger of losing its credibility.

There are plenty of examples. Just over three weeks ago, during the cease-fire talks in Minsk, the Ukrainian military warned that the Russians -- even as the diplomatic marathon was ongoing -- had moved 50 tanks and dozens of rockets across the border into Luhansk. Just one day earlier, US Lieutenant General Ben Hodges had announced "direct Russian military intervention."

Senior officials in Berlin immediately asked the BND for an assessment, but the intelligence agency's satellite images showed just a few armored vehicles. Even those American intelligence officials who supply the BND with daily situation reports were much more reserved about the incident than Hodges was in his public statements. One intelligence agent says it "remains a riddle until today" how the general reached his conclusions.

"The German intelligence services generally appraise the threat level much more cautiously than the Americans do," an international military expert in Kiev confirmed.

Already excluded the possibility of a Russian invasion

At the beginning of the crisis, General Breedlove announced that the Russians had assembled 40,000 troops on the Ukrainian border and warned that an invasion could take place at any moment. The situation, he said, was "incredibly concerning." But intelligence officials from NATO member states had already excluded the possibility of a Russian invasion. They believed that neither the composition nor the equipment of the troops was consistent with an imminent invasion.

The experts contradicted Breedlove's view in almost every respect. There weren't 40,000 soldiers on the border, they believed, rather there were much less than 30,000 and perhaps even fewer than 20,000. Furthermore, most of the military equipment had not been brought to the border for a possible invasion, but had already been there prior to the beginning of the conflict. Furthermore, there was no evidence of logistical preparation for an invasion, such as a field headquarters.

Breedlove, though, repeatedly made inexact, contradictory or even flat-out inaccurate statements. On Nov. 18, 2014, he told the German newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung that there were "regular Russian army units in eastern Ukraine." One day later, he told the website of the German newsmagazine Stern that they weren't fighting units, but "mostly trainers and advisors."

He initially said there were "between 250 and 300" of them, and then "between 300 and 500." For a time, NATO was even saying there were 1,000 of them.

The fact that NATO has no intelligence agency of its own plays into Breedlove's hands. The alliance relies on intelligence gathered by agents from the US, Britain, Germany and other member states. As such, SACEUR has a wide range of information to choose from.

"We have seen columns of Russian equipment..."???

On Nov. 12, during a visit to Sofia, Bulgaria, Breedlove reported that "we have seen columns of Russian equipment -- primarily Russian tanks, Russian artillery, Russian air defense systems

and Russian combat troops -- entering into Ukraine." It was, he noted, "the same thing that OSCE is reporting." But the OSCE had only observed military convoys within eastern Ukraine. OSCE observers had said nothing about troops marching in from Russia.

Breedlove sees no reason to revise his approach. "I stand by all the public statements I have made during the Ukraine crisis," he wrote to SPIEGEL in response to a request for a statement accompanied by a list of his controversial claims. He wrote that it was to be expected that assessments of NATO's intelligence center, which receives information from all 33 alliance members in addition to partner states, doesn't always match assessments made by individual nations. "It is normal that not everyone agrees with the assessments that I provide," he wrote.

He says that NATO's strategy is to "release clear, accurate and timely information regarding ongoing events." He also wrote that: "As an alliance based on the fundamental values of freedom and democracy, our response to propaganda cannot be more propaganda. It can only be the truth."

The German government, meanwhile, is doing what it can to influence Breedlove. Sources in Berlin say that conversations to this end have taken place in recent weeks. But there are many at NATO headquarters in Brussels who are likewise concerned about Breedlove's statements. On Tuesday of last week, Breedlove's public appearances were an official item on the agenda of the North Atlantic Council's weekly lunch meeting. Several ambassadors present criticized Breedlove and expressed their incredulity at some of the commander's statements.

The government in Berlin is concerned that Breedlove's statements could harm the West's credibility. The West can't counter Russian propaganda with its own propaganda, "rather it must use arguments that are worthy of a constitutional state." Berlin sources also say that it has become conspicuous that Breedlove's controversial statements are often made just as a step forward has been made in the difficult negotiations aimed at a political resolution. Berlin sources say that Germany should be able to depend on its allies to support its efforts at peace.

Pressure on Obama

German foreign policy experts are united in their view of Breedlove as a hawk. "I would prefer that Breedlove's comments on political questions be intelligent and reserved," says Social Democrat parliamentarian Niels Annen, for example. "Instead, NATO in the past has always announced a new Russian offensive just as, from our point of view, the time had come for cautious optimism." Annen, who has long specialized in foreign policy, has also been frequently dissatisfied with the information provided by NATO headquarters. "We parliamentarians were often confused by information regarding alleged troop movements that were inconsistent with the information we had," he says.

The pressure on Obama from the Republicans, but also from his own political camp, is intense. Should the ceasefire in eastern Ukraine not hold, it will likely be difficult to continue refusing Kiev's requests for shipments of so-called "defensive weapons." And that would represent a dramatic escalation of the crisis. Moscow has already begun issuing threats in anticipation of such deliveries. "Any weapons deliveries to Kiev will escalate the tensions and would unhinge

European security," Nikolai Patrushev, secretary of Russia's national security council, told the Russian newspaper Komsomolskaya Pravda on Wednesday.

Although President Obama has decided for the time being to give European diplomacy a chance, hawks like Breedlove or Victoria Nuland are doing what they can to pave the way for weapons deliveries. "We can fight against the Europeans, fight against them rhetorically," Nuland said during a private meeting of American officials on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference at the beginning of February.

Power brokers in Washington are working against the Europeans

In reporting on the meeting later, the German tabloid Bild reported that Nuland referred to the chancellor's early February trip to Moscow for talks with Putin as "Merkel's Moscow stuff." No wonder, then, that people in Berlin have the impression that important power brokers in Washington are working against the Europeans. Berlin officials have noticed that, following the visit of American politicians or military leaders in Kiev, Ukrainian officials are much more bellicose and optimistic about the Ukrainian military's ability to win the conflict on the battlefield. "We then have to laboriously bring the Ukrainians back onto the course of negotiations," said one Berlin official.

Nuland, who is seen as a possible secretary of state should the Republicans win back the White House in next year's presidential election, is an important voice in US policy concerning Ukraine and Russia. She has never sought to hide her emotional bond to Russia, even saying "I love Russia." Her grandparents immigrated to the US from Bessarabia, which belonged to the Russian empire at the time. Nuland speaks Russian fluently.

She is also very direct. She can be very keen and entertaining, but has been known to take on an undiplomatic tone -- and has not always been wrong to do so. Mykola Asarov, who was prime minister under toppled Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, recalls that Nuland basically blackmailed Yanukovich in order to prevent greater bloodshed in Kiev during the Maidan protests. "No violence against the protesters or you'll fall," Nuland told him according to Asarov. She also, he said, threatened tough economic and political sanctions against both Ukraine and the country's leaders. According to Asarov, Nuland said that, were violence used against the protesters on Maidan Square, information about the money he and his cronies had taken out of the country would be made public.

"Fuck the EU"

Nuland has also been open -- at least internally -- about her contempt for European weakness and is famous for having said "Fuck the EU" during the initial days of the Ukraine crisis in February of 2014. Her husband, the neo-conservative Robert Kagan, is, after all, the originator of the idea that Americans are from Mars and Europeans, unwilling as they are to realize that true security depends on military power, are from Venus.

When it comes to the goal of delivering weapons to Ukraine, Nuland and Breedlove work hand-in-hand. On the first day of the Munich Security Conference, the two gathered the US delegation behind closed doors to discuss their strategy for breaking Europe's resistance to arming Ukraine.

On the seventh floor of the Bayerischer Hof hotel in the heart of Munich, it was Nuland who began coaching. "While talking to the Europeans this weekend, you need to make the case that Russia is putting in more and more offensive stuff while we want to help the Ukrainians defend against these systems," Nuland said. "It is defensive in nature although some of it has lethality."

Training Troops?

Breedlove complemented that with the military details, saying that moderate weapons aid was inevitable -- otherwise neither sanctions nor diplomatic pressure would have any effect. "If we can increase the cost for Russia on the battlefield, the other tools will become more effective," he said. "That's what we should do here."

They want to destabilize Putin's power

In Berlin, top politicians have always considered a common position vis-a-vis Russia as a necessary prerequisite for success in peace efforts. For the time being, that common front is still holding, but the dispute is a fundamental one -- and hinges on the question of whether diplomacy can be successful without the threat of military action. Additionally, the trans-Atlantic partners also have differing goals. Whereas the aim of the Franco-German initiative is to stabilize the situation in Ukraine, it is Russia that concerns hawks within the US administration. They want to drive back Moscow's influence in the region and destabilize Putin's power. For them, the dream outcome would be regime change in Moscow.

A massive troop training range is located in Yavoriv in western Ukraine near the Polish border. During Soviet times, it served as the westernmost military district in the Soviet Union. Since 1998, though, it has been used for joint exercises by Ukrainian forces together with the United States and NATO. Yavoriv is also the site where US soldiers want to train members of the Ukrainian National Guard for their future battle against the separatists. According to the Pentagon's plans, American officers would train the Ukrainians on how to use American artillery-locating radar devices. At least that's what US Army in Europe commander Lt. Gen. Hodges announced in January.

The training was actually supposed to start at the beginning of March. Before it began, however, President Obama temporarily put it on hold in order to give the ceasefire agreement reached in Minsk a chance. Still, the hawks remain confident that they will soon come a step closer to their goal. On Tuesday, Hodges said during an appearance in Berlin that he expects the training will still begin at some point this month.