

With An Eye On Russia, EU Opens ‘Military Mobility’ Project To NATO Allies



EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell at a meeting of the bloc's defense ministers in Brussels on May 6. John Thys (Reuters)

The European Union has approved the participation of NATO members the United States, Canada, and Norway in a project aimed at speeding up the movement of troops and military equipment around Europe.

The May 6 decision marks the first time the EU has opened up an initiative from its Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) pact, which aims to deepen defense ties, to outside partners.

The pact was agreed by EU leaders in December 2017 amid heightened tensions between the West and Moscow over Russia's aggression in Ukraine. Moscow annexed the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea in March 2014 and has been backing separatists in eastern Ukraine in a war that has killed more than 13,000 people

since April 2014.

The bloc has since earmarked 1.7 billion euros (\$2 billion) from its joint budget until 2028 to improve so-called military mobility, something NATO deems as crucial in the event of a conflict with Russia.

Beyond border red tape, the smooth deployment of forces whether by land, sea, or air is also often hindered by ill-adapted infrastructure.

At their first in-person meeting in more than a year in Brussels, the 27 EU defense ministers discussed Russia's recent military buildup in annexed Crimea and on the Ukrainian border.

"The debate reaffirmed the EU's position that Russia must de-escalate and reduce tensions," and that the full implementation of the Minsk agreements aimed at putting an end to the fighting in eastern Ukraine "is key to a lasting political solution," according to a statement.

The ministers also gave the greenlight for the United States, Canada, and Norway to join the bloc's military mobility project, led by the Netherlands.

The three countries' "expertise will contribute to the project and, with it, to improving military mobility within and beyond the EU," the bloc's foreign policy chief and meeting chairman, Josep Borrell, **said in a statement.**

"It will make EU defense more efficient and contribute to strengthen our security."

German Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer hailed the move as a "quantum leap in concrete cooperation when it comes to ensuring that troops can be deployed in Europe across national borders."

"Talking about military mobility, making sure that troops can be moved across borders within Europe is a very important issue not only for the European Union but also for NATO," she added.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, who met with the EU ministers, also **welcomed the move**, and noted that "non-EU allies play an essential role in protecting and defending Europe."

The United States and its NATO allies have enhanced their presence in the eastern part of the alliance, in part to help reassure Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland that they will be defended in case of any Russian aggression.

Canada is leading a NATO battlegroup stationed in Latvia, and non-EU member Norway is involved, too.

A reminder of the continued tensions in the region came on May 6 when Estonia filed a protest with Moscow a day after a Russian aircraft allegedly violated its airspace for the second time this year.

The military said an IL-96 plane belonging to Russia spent about one minute in Estonian airspace near the Baltic Sea island of Vaindloo in what the Foreign Ministry called “a serious incident.”

The crew did not present a flight plan and failed to maintain radio contact with Estonian Air Navigation Services, the military and officials said.

Moscow said it disputes Tallin’s characterization of the facts.

EU defense ministers also discussed on May 6 a project to set up a 5,000-strong military force that could be deployed quickly to a potential conflict zone. The plan has the backing of 14 member countries, including France, Germany, Italy, and Spain.

With reporting by Reuters, AFP, and AP

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