

## Jens Stoltenberg urges 'de-stabilising' Russia to return Ukrainian sailors and vessels

Written by Martin Banks on 7 December 2018 in News  
News

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has called on Russia to return the Ukrainian sailors and naval vessels it captured in the Sea of Azov.



*Photo credit: Press Association*

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Jens Stoltenberg has said that NATO is “closely monitoring” the current impasse between Russia and Ukraine to prevent it from “spiralling” out of control.

Stoltenberg said there was “no justification for this use of force” but also called for “calm and restraint.”

His comments come amid an escalation in tensions between Russian and Ukraine after Russia opened

fire on and seized three Ukrainian navy ships and their crews on November 25 in an incident which Moscow and Kiev have blamed on each other. The incident has triggered a crisis that has raised fears of a wider conflict.

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Stoltenberg said "Ukrainian ships have the right to navigate through the Sea of Azov", adding that Ukraine currently faced a "serious threat" from Russia which "must" release the seized Ukrainian sailors and ships and allow "unhindered access" to Ukrainian ports in the Black Sea and Sea of Azov.

The official once again condemned Russia's "non-compliance" with the international Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces treaty (INF), saying Moscow "must fully comply with its international commitments."

For his part, Russian President Vladimir Putin said at the weekend that it was "too early" to return Ukrainian sailors and naval vessels, and accused the Ukrainian government of provoking an incident as a distraction from domestic problems.

Putin was speaking the G20 summit in Buenos Aires, where US President Trump cancelled a meeting with the Russian leader because of Moscow's refusal to release the 24 Ukrainians. Putin said it was necessary to detain the captives while a legal case was put together to demonstrate that the three Ukrainian naval vessels violated Russia's territorial waters.

Speaking on Saturday, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko repeated allegations that Russia had amassed a large military force in eastern Ukraine, which is controlled by pro-Russian separatists, and in Crimea, which Russia annexed from Ukraine in 2014.

"We have seen Russia illegally annex Crimea and build a bridge between Russia and Crimea to impede the movement of Ukrainian ships. It is a bit early to say what ministers will decide this week but allies are very concerned"

He said Moscow had deployed land forces of around 80,000 Russian troops, about 1,400 artillery and missile systems, 900 tanks, 2,300 armoured vehicles, about 500 planes and 300 helicopters. Moscow had also built up a powerful naval force in the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov, which Russia and Ukraine share, he said.

## DE-STABILISING BEHAVIOUR

Speaking at a news conference at NATO's Brussels headquarters, Stoltenberg said this week's ministerial meeting would deal with a "wide range of security challenges" including "Russia's de-stabilising behaviour."

He condemned the deployment of new Russian missiles in Europe and non-compliance with the INF Treaty which, he said, had “eliminated an entire range of weapons” but which had been put in jeopardy by Russia. The new missiles, he told reporters, were “mobile and hard to detect. They have a nuclear capability and could reach European cities within minutes and with little or no warning.”

He said, “The US is in full compliance with this treaty and has deployed no new missiles in Europe. I am calling on Russia to take immediate steps to ensure full compliance with the treaty in a transparent and verifiable way.”

“Europe is a strong advocate of arms control in order to make us all safer but to make this possible Russia must fully comply with its international commitments.”

He said the agreement cannot be effective if it is only respected by one side: It must be “balanced, viable and respected by all sides.”

“We must ensure we are able to continue to keep all allies safe and secure and will take necessary decision to ensure this happens in the future.”

NATO, he said, had increased its military presence in the Black Sea region. This includes increasing the number of ships from 80 to 120 and also the presence of “air policing.”

“We are monitoring Russia’s military posture and this is one of the reasons for what is the biggest Nato reinforcements that we have seen since end of the cold war. We have seen Russia illegally annex Crimea and build a bridge between Russia and Crimea to impede the movement of Ukrainian ships. It is a bit early to say what ministers will decide this week but allies are very concerned,” Stoltenberg said.

“NATO will not mirror what Russia does but we must ensure we have the necessary readiness and resolve to provide adequate deterrence,” he added.

### **About the author**

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[Defence and Security](#) [9]

[International Relations](#) [10]



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