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Putin and West Spar Over NATO's Military Ties to Ukraine

Путін та Захід сперечаються з приводу військових зв'язків НАТО з Україною

Напруженість навколо України загострилася, оскільки лідер Росії зажадав «юридичних гарантій» того, що західний військовий альянс не розширюватиметься на схід, що НАТО вважає за неспроможне. В. Путін, який дедалі більше зображує військове партнерство України зі Сполученими Штатами та іншими країнами НАТО, що поглиблюється, як реальну загрозу, сказав, що Москва хотіла б розпочати переговори із Заходом, щоб досягти угоди, яка заблокувала б розширення альянсу. В. Путін, схоже, дедалі більше стурбований не лише офіційним членством України в НАТО, а й розміщенням в Україні нової західної військової техніки.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/01/world/europe/putin-nato-russia-ukraine.html?searchResultPosition=1>

Putin and West Spar Over NATO's Military Ties to Ukraine

Tensions over Ukraine escalated as Russia's leader demanded "legal guarantees" that the Western military alliance would not expand to the east, a position NATO regards as untenable.

Anton Troianovski

MOSCOW — President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia demanded "legal guarantees" on Wednesday that the NATO alliance would never expand eastward, ratcheting up the stakes as the West scrambled to respond to Russia's military buildup near Ukraine.

Mr. Putin, who has increasingly portrayed Ukraine's deepening military partnership with the United States and other NATO countries as an existential threat, said that Moscow wanted to start talks with the West to reach an agreement that would block the alliance's expansion. He spoke in the midst of what Western officials describe as a growing threat of military action by tens of thousands of Russian troops massing close to the border with Ukraine — a former Soviet nation that seeks to join the Western alliance.

"The threat on our western borders is, indeed, rising, as we have said multiple times," Mr. Putin said at a ceremony for ambassadors at the Kremlin on Wednesday. "In our dialogue with the United States and its allies, we will insist on developing concrete agreements prohibiting any further eastward expansion of NATO and the placement there of weapons systems in the immediate vicinity of Russian territory."

Mr. Putin's demand is a nonstarter for NATO, whose officials say they are committed to allowing every country to pick its alliances for itself. Foreign ministers from NATO member countries gathered Wednesday in Latvia, a former Soviet republic bordering Russia, in a signal of the alliance's cohesion and its support for its ex-Soviet member states.

"It's only Ukraine and 30 NATO allies that decide when Ukraine is ready to join NATO," Jens Stoltenberg, the secretary general of the alliance, told reporters in Riga, the Latvian capital. "Russia has

no veto, Russia has no say, and Russia has no right to establish a sphere of influence trying to control their neighbors.”

But Mr. Putin appears to be pushing for direct talks with President Biden, who has sought dialogue with the Kremlin and a “stable and predictable” relationship with Russia, seeking out agreement on issues of mutual interest. Russian officials have said they are preparing for a call or videoconference between the two presidents as early as this month, and Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken is set to meet with his Russian counterpart, Sergey V. Lavrov, in Stockholm on Thursday.

“We don’t know whether President Putin has made the decision to invade,” Mr. Blinken said in Riga. “We do know that he is putting in place the capacity to do so on short order.”

In his speech on Wednesday, Mr. Putin denied that Russia was threatening Ukraine. Rather, he said, Russia was simply taking “adequate military and technical measures” to respond to growing NATO activity in and around Ukraine, near Russian borders. A day earlier, he warned that if missiles were deployed in Ukraine that could reach Moscow within minutes, Russia would respond in kind.

“Just look at how close to Russian borders the military infrastructure of the North Atlantic alliance has come,” Mr. Putin said Wednesday. “For us, this is more than serious.”

The United States provides Ukrainian forces with training and antitank weaponry in Ukraine’s fight against Russian-backed separatists in the country’s east. Six thousand Ukrainian and NATO troops held joint exercises in September. Mr. Putin has expressed particular irritation at NATO activity in the Black Sea region, including what he said were approaches as close as 12 miles to Russian borders by Western nuclear-capable bombers.

“NATO is not a threat to anyone,” Mr. Stoltenberg, the alliance’s secretary general, said, rejecting the idea that Russia had reason to worry about those activities. “This idea that NATO support to a sovereign nation is a provocation is just wrong.”

NATO’s eastward expansion, — including to the three ex-Soviet Baltic countries, Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania, in 2004 — has long infuriated Mr. Putin and other Russian leaders, who describe it as having flouted Russia’s security interests, at a time when it was too weak to fight back.

“We need legal guarantees,” Mr. Putin said on Wednesday. “Russia’s legal concerns in the security sphere were ignored, and they now continue to be ignored.”

NATO allies declared in 2008 that “Ukraine will become a member of the Alliance,” a stance they reaffirmed this year. And ever since Russia annexed Crimea and backed separatists in the country’s east in 2014, popular support in Ukraine for NATO membership has risen.

But Western officials privately acknowledge that in practice, there is little chance that Ukraine will join NATO in the foreseeable future, because there is no consensus in the alliance about the degree of confrontation with Russia that its members are prepared to risk.

Mr. Putin appears to be increasingly concerned not just about Ukraine’s official NATO membership, but also about the deployment of new Western military hardware in Ukraine, including drones provided by Turkey, a NATO member. On Tuesday, he said that such deployments could cross a “red line.”

American officials say that Russia has been moving the estimated 90,000 troops it has near its border with Ukraine in ways that might presage an invasion, and it has been sharing intelligence with its allies. Western officials have said that they do not believe that Mr. Putin has made a decision about whether to invade Ukraine, and that there is a window to try to enhance deterrence and influence his judgment.

It is not yet clear what such deterrence would look like, since Ukraine is not a NATO member. But Western officials said Wednesday that they were prepared to impose economic sanctions that would be more painful than those that came after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. William J. Burns, the C.I.A. director, relayed that message to the Kremlin when he visited Moscow last month, Mr. Blinken said.

"We've made it clear to the Kremlin that we will respond resolutely, including with a range of high-impact economic measures that we've refrained from using in the past," Mr. Blinken said.

In Riga, Ukraine's foreign minister, Dmytro Kuleba, took part in the meeting of his NATO counterparts and said his country was in need of additional military equipment, including missile defense systems, according to the Ukrainian news agency Ukrinform.

"Russia cannot stop Ukraine from getting closer with NATO," Mr. Kuleba said, according to Reuters. "Any Russian proposals to discuss with NATO or the United States or any other country any so-called guarantees that the alliance would not expand to the east are illegitimate."

Steven Erlanger contributed reporting from Vienna, and Julian E. Barnes contributed from Washington, D.C.