
EUROPEAN LEADERS DEFEND NATO'S 'HARD' LINE AGAINST RUSSIA

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European leaders have defended the decision by NATO to station thousands of troops in Baltic nations and Eastern Europe amid a perceived heightened threat from Russia, calling the decision "realistic" rather than punitive.

At a NATO summit in Warsaw, Poland last Friday, the military alliance formally agreed to deploy four battalions with a total of 3,000 to 4,000 troops to the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) and Poland on a rotational basis.

The move is designed to reassure those countries -- all of which are former Soviet states or satellite states with sizeable pro-Russian minorities -- that are concerned that Russia could be looking to increase its influence and territorial reach abroad. Russia hit back at the deployments, calling them the result of "anti-Russian hysteria."

European leaders, and particularly those in countries worrying about Russia's seemingly intentional provocations - such as reported brief incursions into their territorial airspace or waters by the Russian military - told CNBC on the sidelines of the NATO summit that the alliance's action was necessary.

The President of Lithuania, Dalia Grybauskaite, said the move was not about taking "a harder line against Russia, it's a realistic line securing the eastern flank of NATO, including our region." Meanwhile Finland's Foreign Minister Timo Soini reiterated that his country's border was vulnerable.

"Finland's border with Russia is 1340 kilometers - it is more than all the EU and NATO countries have together, so that is very important. Russia is a big issue," Soini told CNBC over the weekend at the NATO summit.

Countries that are not geographically close to Russia are equally concerned by what they see as Russian President Vladimir Putin's increasingly nationalist leadership. EU sanctions on Russia for its annexation of Crimea (a part of modern Ukraine) and the pro-Russian insurgency in east Ukraine were extended in June for another six months. The sanctions have certainly isolated Russia's economy which entered a recession last year.

Bert Koenders, foreign minister for the Netherlands, told CNBC that European sanctions on Russia were meant to encourage it to respect the territorial sovereignty of other countries.

"Our sanctions policy is one that nobody likes because it hurts others but I think it works. I think it is important to show (the) rules of the game, after (World War II), on territorial integrity * we had to do it and I think it might hopefully also lead to some productive reactions from the Russian side," he said.

NATO's Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg chided Russia last week, saying the country was violating its cease-fire in Ukraine "again and again."

"The ceasefire is violated again and again, and this is of great concern," Stoltenberg told a news conference following a meeting about Ukraine with NATO defence ministers, Reuters reported. "Russia supports the separatists ... with equipment, with weapons. They also mass troops along the Ukrainian border," he said.

Both Estonia's Prime Minister Taavi Roivas and Norway's Prime Minister Erna Solberg told CNBC that as long as fighting in eastern Ukraine was still taking place, sanctions should remain.

"Even this year we have had more than 200 casualties (of) Ukrainian servicemen, more than 600 people wounded, Crimea is still annexed. So I hope to see dialogue and I hope to see real actions by Russia to show that they are willing to come back to the international scene," Roivas said while Norway's Solberg said that the line of communication with Russia remained open.

"To involve Russia in discussions and an exchange of views is important. Russia is a major player in other areas of conflict in the world, but we cannot back up and I don't think there will be momentum for backing up on the sanctions, even if Britain are leaving the EU, until we see movement on the Minsk (agreement)," Solberg told CNBC during the NATO summit.

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