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## **RUSSIA PUSHES BALTIC AIR-SAFETY PLAN IN NATO MEETING**

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Russia pushed a new air-safety initiative for the Baltic Sea in a meeting with North Atlantic Treaty Organization ambassadors Wednesday as it continued to criticize the Western alliance for a planned buildup in the region.

Moscows air-safety proposal would require all planes flying in the Baltic Sea region to operate with their transponders turned on, Russian officials said. Transponders help civil aviation authorities track and identify planes. U.S., NATO and European Union officials in the past have criticized the Russian practice of turning off transponders in the area, saying it has contributed to near misses and other dangerous situations.

While the Russian proposal had few details, allied officials welcomed it. They said it could open up the kind of military-to-military talks that NATO officials have been pressing Moscow to embrace. Planes under NATO command always fly with transponders on, but some allies may operate with them off occasionally when they fly under national command, alliance officials said.

Russia proposed a way forward on how we can address transponders and air safety, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said. We welcomed that Russia is willing to sit down and discuss air safety.

Still, both during and after the meeting, Alexander Grushko, the Russian Ambassador to NATO, continued his criticism of the alliances moves to build up its forces in the Baltic region, arguing that NATO risked destabilizing Europe.

There is no reason to develop such military activity, Mr. Grushko said at a news conference at NATO headquarters. It does not contribute to security. It is not about transparency. It is about the direction NATO is moving in military terms. This is worrisome, this is a worrisome development.

NATO has said the Baltic force would be defensive and limited. Mr. Grushko dismissed that claim Wednesday, saying the NATO force, combined with a separate U.S. deployment, would amount to two brigades in the region on a permanent basis, in violation of a 1997 agreement between Russia and the alliance. Allies say the deployments wouldnt violate that accord.

NATO has approved a force of up to 4,000 troops for the region. The U.S. plans to rotate an additional heavy brigade of about 3,500 troops to training areas.

The Baltic region has seen maneuvering by both Russia and the West.

Russia has promised a troop buildup in response to NATO's positioning of forces. But it has also, in recent weeks, ousted the military leadership in its Baltic Fleet, a move that has come under scrutiny by Western militaries.

The meeting is only the second gathering of the NATO-Russia council since the alliance suspended practical cooperation with Moscow following the 2014 annexation of Crimea.

The importance of the Baltic region has increased in recent years, amid the worst tensions between Russia and the West since the Cold War.

Russia has stepped up efforts to turn its Baltic Sea exclave of Kaliningrad into a bastion of defense, increasing its onshore anti-ship and air-defense and bolstering its ground forces, analysts said.

In recent months, there have been a number of encounters between Russian aircraft and U.S. Navy ships and Air Force planes, further raising fears that an accident could cause tensions to boil over into a conflict.

U.S. reconnaissance planes regularly fly through the Baltic region monitoring activity in Kaliningrad. The U.S. has occasionally complained about unsafe Russian intercepts of the

American planes.

At the end of June, Russias Defense Ministry announced that it had fired the commander of the Baltic Fleet, the fleets chief of staff, and several other officers after an inspection revealed serious shortcomings in their work, including what it said were deficiencies in combat training and distortions in reports. A lawmaker later said 36 officers in total had been fired.

It is unusual for senior officers to be dismissed in such large numbers and with such public criticism.

Russian media reports suggested the dismissals could be connected to the poor condition of officers housing at the fleets Kaliningrad base or collision damage sustained by a submarine in an unconfirmed incident in April.

The U.S. believes the ousters are due to disappointment by Moscow in the state of the Baltic Fleets combat readiness, said a U.S. official. Allied officials said they believe the Russian moves to remove the admirals were likely in response to the U.S. and NATO buildup of forces in the Baltic Sea.

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