
'FUNDAMENTAL DIFFERENCES' REMAIN AFTER NATO-RUSSIA COUNCIL MEETING

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NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg says the Western military alliance and Russia "continue to have fundamental differences" regarding the conflict in eastern Ukraine.

Our dialogue is not easy, but that is exactly why our dialogue is so important, Stoltenberg said on October 26 after NATO ambassadors met with Russian envoy Aleksandr Grushko at the alliance's headquarters in Brussels.

The NATO chief described the latest session of the NATO-Russia Council as a "frank and open discussion" on Ukraine, Afghanistan, transparency, and risk reduction.

Relations between Moscow and the West have been severely strained over issues including Russia's seizure of Ukraine's Crimea region in March 2014 and its support for separatists who control parts of eastern Ukraine.

The war between Kyiv's forces and the Russia-backed separatists has killed more than 10,000 people since April 2014.

Amid strained ties, there has been a series of potentially dangerous close encounters between Russian and NATO warplanes and navy ships in recent months.

A series of potentially dangerous close encounters between Russian and NATO warplanes and navy ships in recent months has added to the tension, with the alliance accusing Moscow of aggressive maneuvers in the air and at sea.

The NATO-Russia Council -- a forum intended to prevent tensions from escalating -- had already

met twice this year.

Stoltenberg said on October 26 that the situation in eastern Ukraine remains fragile, citing cease-fire violations and the continued presence of heavy weapons close to the line separating Ukrainian government forces and the separatists.

He also said that the access of monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) is "still obstructed, including at the Russian-Ukrainian border."

'Frank Exchange'

The NATO and Russian ambassadors also exchanged information on recent military exercises, including the Zapad (West) drills that Russia held with Belarus in September.

The maneuvers brought thousands of troops close to NATO's eastern members and caused concerns about Moscow's intentions given its military interference in Ukraine.

NATO allies "made clear that the scale and geographical scope of exercise Zapad 2017 significantly exceeded what Russia had previously announced," Stoltenberg said.

"We agreed that the principle of reciprocal exercise briefings, including advance briefings, is useful," the NATO chief added. "We also agreed that we can enhance transparency and predictability in the Euro-Atlantic area through contact among our senior military leaders."

Stoltenberg said that the alliance and Russia also had a "frank exchange" on the security situation in Afghanistan and the "regional terrorist threat," adding, "Our analyses differ considerably."

However, he said the alliance and Moscow "share the same interest in ensuring security and stability in Afghanistan," where the Western-backed government is struggling to beat back insurgents in the wake of the exit of most NATO forces in 2014.

Moscow Denies Supporting Taliban

The NATO-Russia Council also addressed allegations that Russia is supporting the Afghan Taliban, which Moscow denies.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's special envoy for Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, who attended the meeting, said that "no documents were provided" as evidence for the claim, according to state-run Russian news agency TASS.

The commander of U.S. military operations in Afghanistan, General John Nicholson, told a U.S. Senate committee in February that Russia had significantly increased its covert and overt support for the Taliban, with a goal of "undermining the United States and NATO."

And in March, U.S. General Curtis Scaparrotti, NATO's supreme allied commander in Europe, told U.S. lawmakers that he had seen evidence of increasing Russian efforts to influence the Taliban "and perhaps even to supply" the militant group.

He did not say if he meant weapons or other kinds of equipment.

Kaynak/Source: