

Lavrov Pledges 'Expanded' Help for NATO in Afghanistan

November 02, 2010

The  **Moscow Times**

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov promised to do more to help NATO in Afghanistan but stopped short of making any specific commitments.

After talks with NATO chief Anders Fogh Rasmussen in Moscow, Lavrov said Wednesday that Russia and NATO share interests in Afghanistan.

"We will expand our cooperation in Afghanistan. It's in our common vital interests," the foreign minister said without elaborating.

Until now, Moscow has offered only tepid support for the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan and has limited itself to letting NATO transport military supplies across its territory. It said in response to NATO's request to provide helicopters and training for Afghan pilots that it was ready to do so, but only if the alliance members pay the bill.

Rasmussen told reporters Wednesday that he hoped Russia and NATO could reach an agreement that would be combination of "some bilateral arrangements between Russia and

the U.S." as well as Russia and NATO.

Rasmussen also handed over new proposals on cooperation with Russia on missile defense and mentioned the possibility of establishing a NATO-Russia council trust fund to finance Russia's supply of helicopters and Afghan pilot training.

In the past Moscow has seen the planned U.S. missile defense sites in Europe as a threat to national security, but it said it was ready to consider a joint response to missile threats from rogue nations.

Rasmussen and Lavrov gave no details of the new NATO proposals. Lavrov said they reflected NATO's understanding that cooperation on missile defense must be equal.

Rasmussen also met Wednesday with President Dmitry Medvedev, who is expected to attend a Russia-NATO Council summit in Lisbon later this month.

"I think our summit in Lisbon will represent a fresh start in the NATO-Russia relationship," Rasmussen told reporters after the talks.

However, Russia's official military doctrine cites NATO's possible expansion toward its borders as the country's No.1 foreign threat.

Before heading to Moscow, Rasmussen said on his Facebook page that "the clear message to the Russian people is that NATO does not see Russia as an enemy, but as a partner of strategic importance."

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