

Rebuffing U.S., Kremlin Denies Bid to Rebuild Soviet Empire

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday hosted leaders of five other ex-Soviet republics for economic and security talks, as the Kremlin rejected U.S. claims that Russia aims to rebuild the Soviet empire.

Putin held talks in the Kremlin with leaders of Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which are members of the Moscow-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization.

Speaking at the meeting, Putin said the organization needs to work out plans "reducing possible security risks" stemming from the planned 2014 withdrawal of coalition forces from Afghanistan, which Russia fears could upset stability in Central Asia.

The meeting was followed by economic talks between leaders of the same countries — except Armenia — which are also members of the Eurasian Economic Community.

Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus, which formed a customs union to promote closer economic integration, were to meet separately later in the day.

Putin spokesman Dmitry Peskov on Wednesday rejected U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's recent claim that the Russian-led alliances represent an attempt to restore the Soviet empire. Peskov described the integration efforts as a natural response to global market upheavals.

"In a world where the smell of crisis is around us constantly, the only viable trend is the trend for integration, the integration processes," Peskov said in an interview with state television. "To associate natural processes that are maturing throughout the former Soviet space with attempts at Sovietization means failing to understand practically anything about what is happening in the former Soviet space."

Russia has touted the Collective Security Treaty Organization as a response to NATO, but the pact has remained amorphous and weakened by internal differences. Members created a joint rapid-reaction force, which held sporadic exercises, but its numbers were small and its mission vague.

Uzbekistan initially was a member, quit in 1999, returned in 2006 and walked out again this year, reflecting its strongman ruler's opportunistic maneuvering between Russia and the West. At the summit Wednesday, Uzbekistan's membership was formally suspended.

Putin has described the existing economic and security groupings as precursors to a stronger Eurasian union, which he pledged to form by 2015. He insisted that the new alliance would help Russia and its neighbors boost economic efficiency and compete more successfully in global markets.

The Kremlin views Ukraine's involvement in the customs union as key for the success of its integration projects and has aggressively courted its neighbor.

But Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, who is friendlier with Russia than his pro-Western predecessor, has been hesitant. He is eager to protect Ukrainian business interests against Russian business expansion and is also mindful of the strong public support for closer ties with the European Union.

Russia has sought to entice Yanukovich into joining the customs union by offering a discount on natural gas, which Ukraine badly needs. The discount is contingent on Ukrainian membership in the alliance.

Difficult talks have dragged on for months, and Yanukovich was to visit Moscow on Tuesday apparently to sign a deal, but it fell through at the last minute.

The Kremlin and Yanukovich's office said experts had not finalized the agreements for signing, but they refrained from further comment.

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