

NATO Expansion Plan Brings Back Iron Curtain Era

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Anders Fogh Rasmussen

NATO will set up new bases in Eastern Europe in an attempt to deter President Vladimir Putin from meddling in the internal affairs of countries that used to be under Moscow's control, the organization's secretary-general told journalists in an interview published Wednesday.

The move effectively returns the state of European security back to the Cold War era, when the collective defense ministry alliance that came into being in 1949 acted as a deterrent and main rival to the Warsaw Pact nations led by the Soviet Union.

"We have to face the reality that Russia does not consider NATO a partner. Russia is a nation that unfortunately for the first time since the Second World War has grabbed land by force. Obviously we have to adapt to that," Anders Fogh Rasmussen said in an interview with The Guardian and five other European newspapers.

"The bottom line is you will in the future see a more visible NATO presence in the East," he said ahead of a NATO summit in Cardiff next week.

The new bases would likely be located on Russia's doorstep, experts said: in the Baltic states and Poland, which have been calling for a stronger NATO presence ever since the Ukraine crisis unfolded.

The bases will be stationed on Russian borders "for as long as necessary," The Guardian quoted Rasmussen as saying.

According to analysts from across the political spectrum questioned by The Moscow Times, NATO's decision will raise the stakes and invite a tough response from the Kremlin.

"You cannot step into the same river twice, and this time the situation is much worse than during the Cold War because Russia is backed into a corner where it has nowhere to go but to fight back," Alexei Arbatov, a scholar at the Carnegie Moscow Center think tank and deputy chairman of the State Duma Defense Committee from 1995-2003, told The Moscow Times.

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

Putin has repeatedly claimed that the reason Russia cannot afford to be indifferent to the political situation in Ukraine is because there is a permanent threat of its neighbor joining NATO. This was one of the Kremlin's main justifications for annexing Crimea in March: Moscow feared that if Ukraine joined NATO, Russia would be expelled from its Black Sea naval base on the Crimean Peninsula.

The perceived threat from both sides and mutual lack of trust have turned the situation into a self-fulfilling prophecy, when an expectation of threat and the preparation to deflect it invited the other side to do the same, pundits agreed.

Following the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, a NATO equivalent led by the Kremlin, Russia did not appear to see NATO as a threat, with Putin suggesting in 2000 that Moscow might join the alliance at some point.

But as NATO continued its expansion into Russia's former socialist orbit, Moscow began to see it as a mounting threat and began to respond with military overhaul and increasingly hostile public rhetoric, Arbatov said.

"The problem is that the Kremlin dissolved the Warsaw Pact alliance of its own accord and did not represent a threat to the West in the 1990s, while NATO recklessly started to move toward Moscow," the analyst said.

The resulting tension grew steadily, culminating in verbal flare-ups over the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and Russian war with Georgia in 2008, but the current crisis over Ukraine has brought the mutual animosity to unprecedented heights.

According to Arbatov, the current conflict in Ukraine could boil over into an outright war between Russia and the West, which could then turn nuclear.

Russian Response

Russia reacted to Rasmussen's statements by saying that NATO considers it a "hostile actor."

"Russia will react to NATO moves eastward with a view to ensure its security," Russia's permanent mission to NATO said on its Twitter account.

Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin, who is in charge of Russia's ongoing large-scale military revamp program, said the threat posed by NATO's top official is serious.

"This is being said at the secretary-general level. They have probably already come up with some plan while moving NATO eastward," he said, Interfax reported Wednesday.

Since the inclusion of the Baltic states, NATO has bordered Russia, but so far the only base behind the former Iron Curtain was the headquarters of the Multinational Corps Northeast at Szczecin in Poland. According to The Guardian, this will be the new hub for NATO operations in the East.

On Wednesday, Finland and Sweden said they would work more closely with NATO, dealing another blow to Russia. Finland was always one of Russia's key mediators in the West.

No Reason to Fight

According to Pavel Zolotarev, deputy director of Russia's Institute for U.S. and Canadian Studies think tank, NATO reinitiated the Cold War deterrence policy toward Russia back in the middle of the 1990s, and the expansion of its bases further to the east is the natural outcome of an existing policy.

"The U.S. is trying to silence Russia, as it is the only state that is willing and capable of speaking up for what it thinks is right," he said in a phone interview.

At the same time, unlike during the Cold War, the sides do not profess antagonistic ideologies. Moreover, they have common enemies, such as Islamic militants in the Middle East and Central Asia.

"Life moves in a zigzag pattern, so I expect this round of confrontation to subside at some point," said Viktor Litovkin, a prominent Russian military expert.

"NATO and Russia will continue to exist, and they will have to cooperate on the subject of terrorism, Iranian missiles and many other questions," he said.

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05