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NATO-Russia meetings resume amid fears of military clash in Europe

By Alex Lantier

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The ambassadors of NATO countries and Russia assembled yesterday in Brussels for a meeting of the NATO-Russian Council, which was suspended in February 2014 after the NATO-backed putsch in Kiev and the ensuing conflict in Ukraine.

The main concern prompting the resumption of the council meetings was fear that NATO military deployments to eastern Europe and the resulting close proximity between NATO and Russian forces could lead to a military clash and escalate to all-out war. The meeting came after a series of incidents in which Russian fighters flew very close to NATO warships or surveillance aircraft operating near Russia in the Baltic Sea area.

After the meeting, NATO secretary-general Jens Stoltenberg announced, “I have just chaired a meeting of the NATO-Russian Council. And we all agree that it is in all our interest to keep political channels for political dialogue open.”

According to Stoltenberg, issues discussed included the “crisis in and around Ukraine,” the “security situation in Afghanistan, including regional terrorist threats,” and “transparency and risk reduction” related to “military activities.”

He explained, “NATO allies expressed concern about last week’s incidents in the Baltic region involving Russian military aircraft. It is important to consider what steps we can all take to

increase transparency and predictability.” He added, “Especially when tensions are high, political dialogue is necessary to discuss our differences and to reduce the risk of military incidents.”

Stoltenberg’s remarks are a barely veiled admission that the reckless policies pursued by NATO in Europe since the Kiev putsch have heightened international tensions to the point that a border clash could easily erupt, leading to a military escalation with horrific consequences.

The immediacy of the danger was made clear last year, when Turkish fighters shot down a Russian bomber flying a mission over Syria—the first time a NATO member state had destroyed a Russian warplane since the Korean War, over 60 years ago.

Nonetheless, despite the immense dangers facing Europe and the entire world, the NATO-Russian council meeting took no concrete action to calm the tensions between the major powers. Stoltenberg confirmed that there would be “no return to practical cooperation” with Russia, stating, “NATO and Russia have profound and persistent disagreements. Today’s meeting did not change that.”

The meeting came two days after a phone call between US president Barack Obama and Russian president Vladimir Putin, described as “intense” by US officials, over reports that Russian artillery was being positioned in northern Syria for a possible renewed offensive there.

This danger of military escalation in this situation was stressed also by German diplomat Wolfgang Ischinger, the head of the Munich Security Conference, in an interview with *Deutsche Welle*. Asked whether it was a mistake for NATO to break off the NATO-Russia Council meetings, Ischinger replied that the decision to suspend the meetings was “not a great moment for diplomacy.” He added that the current situation is “the most dangerous there has been since the end of the Cold War.”

He explained, “Over the past few days, there have been two so-called ‘close encounters’ in the Baltic Sea between Russian military aircraft and a US warship as well as a US reconnaissance plane. In such situations, one false move can quickly lead to an incalculable escalation.”

Ischinger stressed that the NATO-Russia Council should reconvene, adding, “I would say that the first order of business must be the establishment of a much-needed, 24/7 military crisis prevention arrangement. Western and Russian officers have to make sure that such near misses, and the possible misunderstandings that they give rise to, be avoided.”

Such remarks highlight that the provocative policy pursued over the last several years by the NATO powers of aggressively stoking tensions with Russia and China has placed the world on the verge of a world war between nuclear-armed powers. Ischinger’s remarks also undermine the official account of the Kiev putsch and the resulting NATO-Russian proxy war in Ukraine, which falsely blamed the entire conflict on Russian aggressiveness. They make clear that it was NATO, and not the Kremlin, that broke off lines of communication after the Kiev putsch.

Nonetheless, the NATO powers have all fallen behind a policy of confrontation with Russia over Ukraine, led by Washington and Berlin. NATO is itself deeply and publicly divided over

NATO's limited attempts to de-escalate the conflict, with prominent governments particularly in eastern Europe pressing for a hard, anti-Russian line.

Polish defense minister Antoni Macierewicz, whose government has announced that it will seek continued NATO military escalation in eastern Europe aimed at Russia at a NATO summit in Warsaw in July, called for further increases of NATO troops' strength near Russian borders. "So far, all Russian behavior attests to systematic preparation for aggressive," he told the *Rzeczpospolita* daily in an interview. "And it's time to talk about it openly."

Le Monde reported that Germany and France had pressed for the NATO-Russia Council meeting in the face of opposition from the Baltic republics, Poland and Canada. It added, "It was in reality the more conciliatory attitude of US Secretary of State John Kerry that finally made possible an event that would have been unimaginable only a few weeks ago."

Russian officials indicated that they were open to more talks to calm tensions, but that these tensions would not subside as long as NATO was escalating its military presence in eastern Europe threatening Russia.

"A further dialog on new confidence-building measures is impossible without real moves from NATO to cut military activity at the Russian borders," said Russian ambassador to NATO Alexander Grushko as he left the council meeting. "Policy and military planning of NATO that base on deterrence of Russia are incompatible with any plans to create confidence-building measures."

The Kremlin nonetheless indicated that it was open to cooperation on selected measures, such as on a reactionary plan to extend NATO's "Resolute Support" operation in Afghanistan, keeping thousands of troops in the country ostensibly to train its security forces.