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Russia hits back at 'anti-Russian' NATO 'hysteria'

Holly Ellyatt,
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The Kremlin has hit back at a decision by NATO to station several thousand troops in Baltic countries and Eastern Europe, amid rising tensions between Europe and Russia, as "anti-Russian hysteria."

At a NATO summit in Warsaw, Poland on Friday, the military alliance is expected to formally agree to deploy four battalions with a total of 3,000 to 4,000 troops to the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) and Poland on a rotational basis.

The deployment comes amid increasing concerns in those areas (all of which were under Soviet control during the Cold War) that **Russia could be prepared to try to increase or regain its sphere of influence**.

In a statement on Thursday, NATO also said it would "strengthen political and practical cooperation with Ukraine, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova" - all former Soviet republics experiencing increasing tensions with Russia due to their political and economic relations with the EU.

In addition, the EU and NATO signed a declaration on Friday aimed at bolstering the region's security ahead of the full NATO summit Friday afternoon.

Left out in the cold from NATO and ostensibly the reason for such a deployment, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov reportedly hit back at the alliance, saying its actions were akin to "anti-Russian hysteria."

"If one needs badly to look for an enemy image so that [one can] promote anti-Russian, so to say, hysteria, and then, with this emotional background, to deploy more and more air force units, ground troop units, getting them closer to Russian borders, then one can hardly find any common ground for cooperation," he was quoted by Russia's Itar Tass news agency as saying.

Peskov was also quoted by Reuters as telling reporters that it was "absurd to talk about any threat coming from Russia at a time when dozens of people are dying in the center of Europe and when hundreds of people are dying in the Middle East daily," adding that "you have to be extremely short-sighted to twist things in that way."

Relations between the EU and Russia are at a low ebb after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its **support for a pro-Russian uprising in east Ukraine**. A fragile peace treaty between Russia and Ukraine known as the "Minsk agreement" is in place, but the EU and U.S. have said that sanctions remain until Russia fully implements the conditions of the agreement.

The meeting of the U.S., EU and NATO is seen as an opportunity to "underline transatlantic unity and discuss common political, economic and international security challenges," the European Council said in a statement. The EU and NATO marked the strengthening of their cooperation on Friday by signing a declaration on "increasing practical cooperation in selected areas. These include hybrid threats, cyber security, coordinated exercises and strengthened maritime security cooperation."

The declaration was to be followed by the NATO summit itself which is focusing on "projecting stability to the East" with **an increasingly nationalist and bellicose Russia** a key focus of concern.

U.S. President Barack Obama and European leaders gave a show of unity on Friday ahead of the NATO summit and warned any "opponents" that any "attack" on the European Union was the same as attacking the U.S.

Speaking on Friday, Obama praised the EU's political and economic union and said the U.S. would "always be a strong and steady partner of the EU" on the political, economic and security front.

"The security of America and Europe is indivisible," Obama said, commenting after meeting with European Council President Donald Tusk and European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker on the sidelines of the NATO summit in Warsaw, Poland.

"Here in Europe, we'll continue to support Ukraine as it undertakes important economic and political reforms. The U.S. and EU are united in our commitment to maintaining sanctions on Russia until they fully implement its obligations under the Minsk (Ukraine ceasefire) agreement," he said.

The U.K.'s vote to leave the EU last month reflected years of anti-EU sentiment both in the U.K. and on the continent and the result was heralded by anti-EU and anti-establishment parties across the region, with several calling for their own votes on EU membership.

Analysts believed that Russia was likely pleased with the result too as it could destabilize and weaken the EU at a time of increasingly tense relations between the country and its neighbors.

On Friday, Tusk said that any "opponents" hoping that the split would herald the end of the EU would be disappointed, however.

"We know that the geopolitical consequences of Brexit may be very serious...but it is equally important to send a strong message to the whole world today that Brexit, as sad and meaningful as it is, is just an incident and is not the beginning of the process," he said.

"To all our opponents on the inside and out who are hoping for a sequel to Brexit, I want to say loud and clear that you won't see on the screen the words 'to be continued'."

"We know that between the 'Old World' (of Europe) and the 'New World' (of the U.S.) there is a world apart, with different values and different strategic aims...and it would be good if we state clearly today that whoever turns against America, harms Europe; whoever attacks the European Union, harms America. And whoever undermines the foundations of liberal democracy harms one and the other."