

Russia Seeks to Limit New NATO Members

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The  Moscow Times

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has handed a draft agreement to NATO demanding that a new cooperation agreement with the alliance ban "significant military forces" in states that joined since the Soviet breakup in 1991, Kommersant reported Wednesday.

President Dmitry Medvedev is set to attend an annual NATO summit in Portugal next month, when a new cooperation deal could be struck.

The demand was contained in a draft Russia-NATO cooperation agreement that Lavrov handed to NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen in December, Kommersant said.

"We want to secure a situation in which the level of predictability of military activities in countries that recently joined NATO be higher than it is now," Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov told the newspaper.

Any move to limit troops in countries that originally joined NATO to throw off Moscow's domination, including the Czech Republic and Poland, looks likely to be met with resistance.

Fogh Rasmussen is set to visit Russia before the Nov. 19 summit in Lisbon.

Russia's envoy to NATO, Dmitry Rogozin, told the newspaper that Moscow wanted the troop limits as a way to make nonaggression agreements already secured on a political level legally binding.

But NATO has been cool on the proposition, in part because of the vagueness of the term "significant forces," the report said.

"Lavrov proposed we sign the legally binding agreement you are referring to. But it is difficult right now to say what will become of it," Kommersant quoted an unidentified NATO official as saying. "Countries must have the right to self-defense."

Meanwhile, Fogh Rasmussen said in an interview published Wednesday in the Financial Times that Medvedev's attendance at the NATO summit would boost relations.

"The summit will represent a new start in the relationship between NATO and Russia," Rasmussen said. "It will be a very substantive NATO-Russia summit and definitely the most important event for cooperation since the Rome summit of 2002 when we established the NATO-Russia council."

He said the summit could see NATO and Russia deepening cooperation on Afghanistan.

The Financial Times quoted NATO officials as saying the United States and Russia were working on a package that could see Moscow providing more than 20 helicopters to Afghan forces.

It said NATO was also exploring whether Russia would allow the alliance to ship more goods, including weapons, across its territory to NATO forces in Afghanistan. Rasmussen said one of the central issues at the summit would be whether NATO and Russia could begin cooperating on the creation of a missile defense shield.

"I would expect a decision on missile cooperation to be one of the most important outcomes of the NATO-Russia summit," he said.

(Reuters, AP)

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