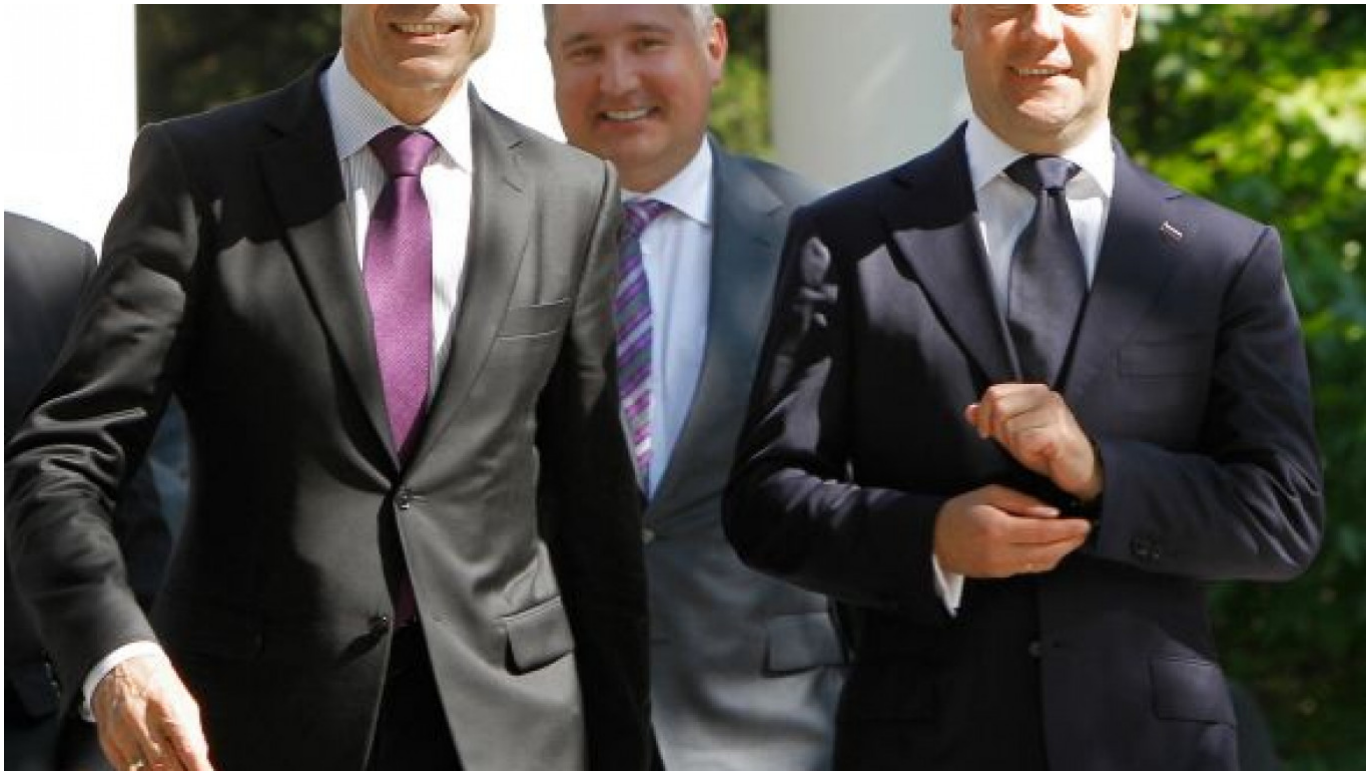
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NATO, Jacob Zuma Talk Libya

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Rasmussen, left, and Medvedev walking with Ambassador Dmitry Rozgin during meetings in Sochi on Monday. **Vladimir Rodionov**

SOCHI — NATO's chief defended the alliance's Libya operation on Monday during a visit to Russia, which has accused the Western coalition conducting airstrikes of overstepping its UN mandate to protect civilians.

NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen spoke during a break from a meeting of the NATO-Russia Council in the Black Sea resort of Sochi, where Russian President Dmitry Medvedev also met South African President Jacob Zuma to discuss Libya.

International leaders are puzzling over how to end the war in Libya, where, despite three months of NATO bombing, Moammar Gadhafi has resisted calls to give up power in the face of a rebel offensive aimed at ending his 41-year rule.

Russia abstained from the UN Security Council resolution in March that authorized military intervention to protect civilians. It has criticized the NATO operation but also joined Western nations in calling for Gadhafi to give up power.

“We look at Libya’s future practically identically, and everyone would like Libya to be a modern state, naturally, and a sovereign and democratic state,” Medvedev said at a meeting with Rasmussen and envoys from NATO nations.

Medvedev called the Libya crisis a real-life test of NATO’s new Strategic Concept. Since the end of its Cold War confrontation with Moscow, the U.S.-backed alliance has been adapting its mission.

On Libya, the Kremlin has emphasized its support for African Union and UN peacemaking efforts.

On Friday, African Union leaders offered to host talks between the Libyan government and rebels, and Zuma said at the time that the talks would start soon in Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital, where the organization is headquartered.

Sitting down with Medvedev, Zuma said he wanted to share “what the AU’s thinking is, what the AU’s plan is” on Libya.

At a trilateral meeting along with Rasmussen, Zuma presented the African Union’s peace plan for Libya, according to a NATO official who said the alliance would study the plan.

None of the parties discussed details publicly.

At a news conference after the talks, Rasmussen said any cease-fire must be credible and verifiable and that a peaceful solution “must accommodate the legitimate aspirations of the Libyan people.”

“It is for the Libyan people to shape the future of their country. The mission we are conducting aims at meeting very specific military objectives,” the NATO chief said when asked whether Gadhafi should stay in office. “The only acceptable solution is to accommodate the legit aspirations of the Libyan people and see a transition to a fully fledged democracy.”

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov also said in Sochi that differences remain over a proposed missile defense system in Europe, which Rasmussen acknowledged.

“Many key issues need to be addressed. We never said we would agree on ballistic missile defense in a few weeks or months,” Rasmussen said. “But we are determined to keep up the dialogue and keep up the work, and we are making progress.”

Russia is demanding to jointly run the system, while the United States and NATO are offering Moscow a more limited role. Experts from both sides are scheduled to report this month on details of the proposal, but the two sides still have not come up with a good understanding of how a joint program would work.

“The [Russia-NATO] dialogue is not proceeding as easily as we expected after the Lisbon summit,” Lavrov said, referring to the meeting of Russia’s and NATO’s heads of state in the Portuguese capital in November, when the former Cold War rivals decided to forge a close partnership.

Rasmussen acknowledged the differences but insisted that “the spirit of Lisbon lives on and

continues to guide us. Cooperation is the best choice, partnership is the only path forward."

The military alliance and Russia must build on their cooperation in the Afghan War and the fight against maritime piracy to create a solid strategic partnership, the NATO chief said.

(Reuters, AP)

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