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Lavrov Backs NATO Using Ulyanovsk Base

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A new deal allowing NATO to use an Ulyanovsk air base for transit of troops and military cargo to Afghanistan would help ensure Russia's own security, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Wednesday.

Lavrov said a plan to permit NATO to use the base will soon be considered by the Cabinet. If approved, the deal could help repair Russian ties with the United States, which have become increasingly strained over Washington's missile defense plans in Europe and the Syrian crisis.

Moscow has provided NATO with air corridors and railway routes for carrying supplies to and from Afghanistan. The new agreement would for the first time allow alliance members to set up a logistics facility for troops and cargo on Russian territory.

Lavrov strongly defended such a deal, saying the success of NATO's mission is essential for fending off the spread of terrorism and illegal drugs from Afghanistan into Central Asian nations and Russia.

"It's in our interests that the coalition achieves a success before withdrawing and makes sure that the Afghans are capable of defending their country and ensuring an acceptable level of security," Lavrov told the State Duma.

Some lawmakers argued that the U.S. military's use of the Ulyanovsk facility could threaten Russia by allowing foreign troops on its soil.

"We want those who are fending off threats directed at Russia to efficiently fulfill their tasks," Lavrov said. "We are helping the coalition to proceed from our own interests."

In Belgium, NATO spokeswoman Oana Lungescu said boosting cooperation on the Afghan transit would benefit both the alliance and Russia.

"Clearly we welcome the cooperation we have with Russia already on transit from and to Afghanistan," she said. "We look forward to reinforcing that agreement because ... NATO and Russia have a joint interest in a stable and secure Afghanistan."

Lavrov said the deal to be considered by the Cabinet would allow the transit of NATO troops but that they wouldn't be allowed to stay there.

"They aren't going to live there. They will only be moving from one transportation means to another," Lavrov said.

He sought to assuage lawmakers' concerns by saying Russia would reserve the right to check the cargo, but failed to provide specifics about the deal.

Earlier this week, Izvestia published excerpts from an official letter sent to the Duma by Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov, which said the Ulyanovsk facility would be overseen by civilian authorities and include customs control.

Kremlin-linked analyst Vyacheslav Nikonov told Izvestia that the deal on the air base would allow Russia to ask for U.S. favors in return.

"By providing a transit hub, Russia will get the chance to make its demands," Nikonov said. "It will be a very good foreign policy argument."

The air base proposal comes amid shrinking supply options to coalition forces in Afghanistan.

Earlier this month, U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta met with Kyrgyzstan's leaders to stress that Washington needed the continued use of the U.S. air base there beyond the end of its contract in 2014, largely as a transit center to bring troops home from Afghanistan.

The supply routes across the former Soviet Union also have become vital after Pakistan shut down its ground supply routes following the U.S. airstrikes in November that killed a number of Pakistani troops. The high-speed rail route through Russia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan handles the bulk of the ground supplies.

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