

General: NATO Air Hub Being Tested

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Bartels, visiting Moscow for the first time since being appointed as NATO's top military adviser last fall, discussed military cooperation over Afghanistan with Valery Gerasimov, above left, the new head of the General Staff of the armed forces. **Alexsey Druginyn**

A planned air cargo route for NATO countries' military equipment from Afghanistan via Ulyanovsk is being tested and should be operating soon, a top general for the alliance said.

General Knud Bartels, who chairs the alliance's military committee, told reporters Friday that containers are being shipped from Afghanistan to Britain via that route.

"A live trial along the northern distribution route has been running since Dec. 3," the Danish general said after meetings with Russia's top military brass in Moscow.

A NATO official later explained that the containers are being flown from Afghanistan to Ulyanovsk and then transported via rail to Riga.

Bartels dismissed reports that cast doubts on the route's workability.

"I'm optimistic. We will see the route being used in the future," he said.

NATO officials have not explained why Ulyanovsk has not been used for cargo flights from Afghanistan since July, when an agreement was finalized with the Russian government that sets the legal framework for the transit.

Bartels dismissed media reports that the reason might be that NATO member countries and the Volga-Dnepr freight carrier cannot agree on prices.

He said there should be no hurdles for commercial agreements. But he stressed that he was not involved in negotiations.

A senior Volga-Dnepr executive also denied the reports.

"Information about overpricing has been quoted out of context," Denis Gliznutsa, vice president for development at the Ulyanovsk-based air freight operator, said by e-mail.

Gliznutsa added that it was clear that air transportation was more expensive than land transportation and that the Ulyanovsk route is one of only five routes for bringing NATO equipment out of Afghanistan via Russia.

"The project has not been worked out, and currently documentation and processes are being tested to ensure legitimate transit," he said.

The plans have been met with fierce resistance from Communists and other left-wing opposition groups, which accuse the government of selling out the country's strategic heartland to the West. Ulyanovsk is Soviet founder Vladimir Lenin's birthplace.

Analysts have speculated that Russian authorities have been deliberately holding up the Ulyanovsk transit route as long as they perceive it to be politically inexpedient to cooperate with NATO.

Bartels was visiting Moscow for the first time since being appointed as NATO's top military adviser last fall. On Thursday, he met Valery Gerasimov, the new head of the General Staff of the armed forces.

Bartels said he and Gerasimov discussed military cooperation over Afghanistan, anti-piracy missions and NATO's plans for a European missile defense. A proposal by the Western alliance to help Russia destroy its huge ammunition stockpiles was not raised, he said.

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