

Lavrov Slams NATO Response to Ukraine

By [Yekaterina Kravtsova](#)

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Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu (left) shaking hands with NATO Secretary General, Anders Fogh Rasmussen.

BRUSSELS — At a meeting with NATO counterparts on Wednesday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov slammed NATO's response to recent protests in Ukraine and said last month's deal on Iran's nuclear program renders the need for missile defense in Europe obsolete.

In response to a joint resolution issued by NATO on Tuesday condemning the "excessive use of force" by Ukrainian police against anti-government protesters over the weekend, Lavrov said, "I do not understand why NATO adopts such statements."

"We encourage everybody not to interfere" in the situation in Ukraine, he told a news conference after talks with NATO foreign ministers in Brussels, adding that statements in defense of the anti-government protesters in Kiev could create a distorted impression of what is taking place there.

Kiev has witnessed the largest protests since the 2004 Orange Revolution after President

Viktor Yanukovich opted not to sign an association agreement with the European Union last month in favor of closer ties with Russia. Hundreds of thousands took to the streets to protest Yanukovich's decision, and Kiev's city hall has been occupied since Sunday.

Russia's position over the matter has pitted it against NATO members, with Lavrov urging the international community to let the Ukrainian government handle the crisis on its own.

"This is the internal business of Ukrainian authorities [whether to sign an agreement or not]," Lavrov said, noting that the Ukrainian opposition had acted violently at recent protests. His words echoed that of President Vladimir Putin, who said earlier this week that what was happening in Ukraine "was not a revolution, but a pogrom."

Lavrov's statements come in sharp contrast to accusations by European leaders last week that Russia had pressured Ukraine into backing out of the EU deal.

Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt wrote on his Twitter account that Ukrainian Foreign Minister Leonid Kozhara admitted during talks ahead of the summit in Vilnius that Kiev had been forced to give in to "Russia's harsh economic pressure."

Russia made a similar accusation against the EU, with Putin saying the planned Association Agreement would only "choke off whole sectors" of Ukraine's economy "just to please" European leaders.

At Wednesday's meeting in Brussels, NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen reassured Lavrov that Russia's concerns over NATO's influence in the former Soviet republics were baseless, pointing out that Ukraine had already made it clear that it did not intend to become a member of NATO.

Rasmussen's comments come a month after Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu named NATO expansion as one of Russia's biggest security threats.

Georgia's newly elected authorities who met with NATO as part of the NATO-Georgia Commission on Wednesday confirmed the intentions of their government to be a full-fledged NATO member, however, highlighting Russia's fears of NATO dominating the former Soviet republics.

Rasmussen said that within the five years since the NATO-Georgia Commission was established, Georgia had moved closer to NATO and become a unique and highly valued partner, an example for other countries in the region. He added that NATO's enlargement could make the Euro-Atlantic region more secure, which would benefit Russia as well.

Georgia contributes to NATO's mission in Afghanistan and intends to continue to assist Afghan forces after 2014.

Lavrov called the organization's expansion to Eastern Europe a violation of commitments to security and integrity made by NATO members at the highest level.

"We are convinced that NATO's expansion, particularly regarding Georgia, is a continuation of the old logic of the Cold War; it not only preserves the division lines that we all pledged to eliminate but also moves these lines further to the east," Lavrov said.

There was some progress at Wednesday's meeting, however.

Foreign ministers agreed on a plan of chemical weapons disposal in Syria, marking a step forward in NATO-Russia Council work.

"We have had a pretty good meeting, exchanged our views on the current situation in the world, expressed our satisfaction with positive shifts on chemical weapons disposal in Syria and the convening of the Geneva-2 peace conference," Lavrov said.

He said Russia believed that the U.S. in particular and NATO in general "would abide by international norms" regarding Syria in the future.

The agreement is designed to ensure the implementation of the joint mission by the United Nations and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons to oversee the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons stockpiles and production facilities, as well as the U.S.-Russia deal on the elimination of Syrian chemical weapons reached in September.

The NATO-Russia Council has also agreed to continue joint activities in the fight against drug trafficking, terrorism and piracy. In addition, the council decided to launch a project to dispose of obsolete ammunition in Russia's Kaliningrad region, which would cost some 50 million euros and take five years.

Rasmussen also said NATO and Russia would begin cooperating in new areas next year, such as mine disposal in Afghanistan, which would "promote stability in Afghanistan and thus in the Euro-Atlantic region."

Lavrov made it clear, however, that Russia would strongly oppose NATO's missile defense plans in Europe. The deal to freeze Iran's nuclear program concluded last month should make a missile defense system in Europe unnecessary, he said.

"Our [NATO] colleagues said the Iran nuclear deal was a breakthrough, so if the deal is fully implemented, this problem is fully resolved, and the Iran nuclear program is put under tight control of the International Atomic Energy Agency, those arguments that are currently cited as a reason for setting up a missile defense system in Europe will be baseless," Lavrov said.

The missile defense issue is an ongoing bone of contention between Russia and NATO, with Russia saying the system could be used against it and NATO saying it is purely meant as a defense against possible threats.

Contact the author at e.kravtsova@imedia.ru

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