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Germany Wants NATO-Russia Warning System to Avoid Accidents

December 03, 2014



NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg speaks at the Alliance's headquarters during a NATO foreign ministers meeting in Brussels on Dec. 2, 2014.

BRUSSELS — Germany has urged NATO to set up an early warning system with Russia to prevent any military accident from spiraling out of control.

NATO's ties with Moscow have hit a post-Cold War low over Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea region and what the alliance says is Russian backing for separatists in the east of the former Soviet republic.

Both NATO and Russia have stepped up military exercises, and experts say more frequent Russian air and sea patrols around Europe have raised the risk of an accident or clash.

As NATO has suspended cooperation with Russia, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said Tuesday that there were few possibilities for the two sides to exchange information on exercises and overflights.

"I think we are obliged to ... take care that a conflict does not get out of control and lead to a military escalation. We need certain channels to check if some reports are true or not," he told reporters at a meeting of NATO foreign ministers.

NATO and Russian ambassadors have met only twice since the Crimea crisis erupted. One diplomat said a few countries, including France, Germany and Italy, were backing a proposal to use the existing NATO-Russia Council as a mechanism to avoid escalation.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said the standoff between Russia and the West over Ukraine may last a long time.

"The changes we have seen are maybe something that will not go back to normal within a short period. NATO doesn't seek confrontation with Russia and NATO does not want a new Cold War. But we cannot compromise on the principles on which the security and peace in Europe have been based for many decades," he told a news conference.

Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico said Tuesday that there was a high chance the Ukraine-Russia crisis would grow into a large conflict involving more than just those two countries.

"The probability of a military conflict is 70 percent," he told a forum hosted by daily newspaper Hospodarske Noviny.

"I am talking about a large military conflict now; I am not talking about a Russia-Ukraine conflict."

NATO has said repeatedly it has no plans to intervene in Ukraine, which is not an alliance member, but has reinforced eastern European allies worried about Russian intentions.

Original url:
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