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Kremlin Says China Will Back Russia on Security at Games Talks

By Michael Mainville and Max Delany for AFP

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Roman Balandin / TASS

The Kremlin said Wednesday that China would back Russia over its security concerns with the West when President Vladimir Putin visits for the opening of the Winter Olympics this week.

As NATO leaders pursued diplomatic efforts to avert a feared Russian invasion of Ukraine, a senior Kremlin official said Putin and Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping were on the same page on global security ahead of Putin's visit to Beijing on Friday.

"A joint statement on international relations entering a new era has been prepared for the talks," the Kremlin's top foreign policy adviser Yury Ushakov told reporters, adding that it will reflect Moscow and Beijing's "common views" on security among other issues.

"China supports Russia's demands for security guarantees," Ushakov added.

Western leaders have accused Russia of amassing more than 100,000 troops on its borders

with pro-Western Ukraine and preparing for a potential invasion.

The West has warned that a Russian attack would be met with "severe consequences" including wide-ranging economic sanctions.

Russia denies any plans to invade, instead accusing the West of failing to respect Moscow's security concerns on its borders.

Russian officials have put forward a series of demands to ease tensions, including bans on Ukraine joining NATO and on the deployment of missile systems near Russia's borders, as well as a pullback of the U.S.-led military alliance's forces in eastern Europe.

'Ukraine just a tool'

In his first major remarks on the crisis in weeks, Putin on Tuesday accused the West of ignoring Russia's demands and suggested Washington was using Kyiv as an instrument to potentially drag Moscow into a war.

"Ukraine itself is just a tool to achieve this goal" of containing Russia, Putin said, suggesting the aim was "drawing us into some kind of armed conflict" in order to impose sanctions.

Putin left the door open to talks however, saying he hoped that "in the end we will find a solution."

The United States and NATO have provided written responses to Moscow's demands, which Putin said he is studying.

Spanish newspaper El Pais on Wednesday published what it said were leaked copies of the responses, which showed Washington and NATO offering Moscow arms control and trust-building measures.

The proposals remain firm on insisting that Ukraine and any other country has a right to apply to join the alliance.

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But the reported U.S. response suggests "reciprocal commitments by both the United States and Russia to refrain from deploying offensive ground-launched missile systems and permanent forces with a combat mission in the territory of Ukraine."

Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte was meanwhile the latest NATO leader to visit Kyiv in a show of support for Ukraine, where he met President Volodymyr Zelenskiy.

Tanks, 'copters in Belarus

The visit came a day after Zelenskiy met in Kyiv with British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who was due to hold a phone call with Putin on Wednesday.

After the talks, Zelenskiy said Ukraine was focused "only on peace," but insisted it has the

right to defend itself.

"It is essential for dialogue to continue between Russia and the United States, between Russia and NATO," Rutte told a joint press conference.

The tensions have been aggravated by plans for joint military exercises between Russia and neighboring Belarus, where Washington claims Moscow is preparing to send 30,000 troops.

Video footage released by the Russian Defense Ministry on Wednesday showed tanks speeding across snowy fields in Belarus and combat helicopters flying overhead as units from both countries practised ahead of the Feb. 10-20 drills.

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Johnson and the Polish prime minister were in Kyiv on Tuesday ahead of Rutte, and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan was due in Ukraine on Thursday.

Erdogan will try to leverage his strategic position in NATO and rapport with Putin to help resolve the crisis, though Ankara's supplying of combat drones to Ukraine has angered Moscow.

The French and German foreign ministers are also expected in Ukraine next week and to visit the frontline in the east where Kyiv's forces are battling Russian-backed separatists.

Putin has said French President Emmanuel Macron could also be traveling to Moscow in the coming days.

Ukraine has been battling Moscow-backed insurgencies in two separatist regions since 2014, when Moscow annexed the Crimean peninsula.

More than 13,000 people have been killed in the fighting, the last major ongoing war in Europe.

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