

Moscow warns NATO against military build-up targeting Russia

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President Vladimir Putin told an annual gathering of the nation's military top brass Tuesday that an appropriate response to "muscle-flexing" by NATO is crucial when setting guidelines for development of the armed forces.

Addressing the annual gathering as commander in chief for the last time before his term ends in May, Putin accused NATO of encroaching on Russia's borders "in violation of previous agreements."

"Military resources of NATO members are being built up next to our borders," Putin told top commanders at the Defense Ministry's headquarters in central Moscow. "Of course, we cannot allow ourselves to remain indifferent to this obvious muscle-flexing."

Putin did not specify which countries' militaries are in violation of previous agreements, but said the Kremlin's plan to suspend participation in the adapted Conventional Forces in Europe treaty was part of an "adequate response."

The treaty, which a number of NATO members including East European countries have not joined, regulates the deployment of non-nuclear weapons such as aircraft and tanks around Europe. NATO insists that Russia first make good on a pledge to withdraw troops from Georgia and Moldova before joining the treaty. The Kremlin has rejected the demands, and Putin announced earlier this year that Russia would suspend its participation in this key treaty — a suspension set to come into effect on Dec. 13.

"Some of our partners have not only failed to ratify but didn't even sign the treaty. ... Russia will consider the question of resuming its obligations as soon as they have joined the adapted treaty and, most importantly, begun complying with it," Putin said, according to a transcript of the speech posted on the Kremlin's web site.

Notably, Putin did not voice another of Russia's top security grievances vis-a-vis the West: U.S. plans to deploy elements of a global missile defense system in Eastern Europe. He did lament, however, that Russia's calls to NATO to build a joint missile defense system "with equal access for all participants" remain unheeded.

Putin touted progress made in strengthening Russia's response to NATO's expansion in the form of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a Moscow-led defense alliance comprising several former Soviet republics. He also praised the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which unites China, Russia and several Central Asian republics and which Moscow sees as an instrument to deter expansion of Western influence in Central Asia.

Putin, who served as an officer in the KGB's foreign intelligence arm during the Cold War, also outlined his vision for the development of the armed forces, saying the development of strategic nuclear forces should be a priority.

"They should be ready to give a quick and adequate response to any aggressor," he said. Conventional forces, he added, "should seek new forms of neutralizing threats at early stages."

Putin, who is heading up United Russia's federal ticket in the Dec. 2 State Duma elections, also used his speech to plug populist perks for the military. He said monthly salaries for servicemen will increase by 15 percent next month and reiterated his recent vow to pay all arrears to military pensioners, which will cost the federal budget billions of rubles.

In another populist gesture Putin gave a public — if misguided — scolding to a senior general responsible for health issues in the military, demanding an improvement in the quality of housing for soldiers.

"Our officers should no longer live in stinking slums," he said, adding that officers without housing — who number 150,000 — should be provided with adequate housing by 2012.

The Defense Ministry's health service is not responsible for military housing.

Putin's speech was followed by a report from Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov, who assured Putin that the commissioning of strategic nuclear weapons is being carried out "strictly" on schedule, Interfax reported.

Serdyukov boasted of an intensification of combat training, with around 300 war games conducted this year, and said the military would conduct a strategic exercise called Stability 2008 next year, focusing on stamping out armed conflicts "along the perimeter" of Russian borders, Interfax reported.

The exercise is clearly designed to send a signal to neighboring countries — like Georgia with separatist provinces within their borders.

The share of professional soldiers in the rank and file will reach some 44 percent next year, and all sailors serving on ships will be professional servicemen beginning in January, Serdyukov said.

Serdyukov, head of the Federal Tax Service until Putin appointed him to run the armed forces in February, said hazing had decreased dramatically in the ranks and that the overall number of hazing-related offenses decreased by 20 percent this year. Mortality in the armed forces dropped by 16.5 percent, Serdyukov said, giving credit not only to commanders but also to nongovernmental organizations.

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