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Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko's interview published in Rossiyskaya Gazeta on December 20, 2021

Question: Mr Grushko, discussions of the action plan regarding NATO's expansion, which Russia has proposed to Washington, are ongoing. You have mentioned a "military-technical alternative," if NATO rejects Moscow's proposals. What do you have in mind?

Alexander Grushko: If our concerns are disregarded and NATO countries are not ready to show military restraint, we will have to use the response instruments at our disposal. There is no other option. If the other side decides to project, let alone use force, that is, if it applies its defence capability as a means of economic or political pressure, this will be unacceptable to Russia, and we will find methods to neutralise these threats.

Question: What methods could this be?

Alexander Grushko: For example, if strike systems capable of reaching our command centres within a matter of minutes are deployed in the territory of NATO countries, we will have to create an appropriate situation for them.

Question: It is said that the Russian proposals sound like an ultimatum and that they leave the West no space for compromise.

Alexander Grushko: I don't see them as an ultimatum at all. Our proposals are absolutely clear. The time of undertones and taking words on trust is over. The seriousness of the situation calls for measures that stipulate a frank face-to-face conversation. For example, our NATO partners, who are talking about enlarging the alliance, say that Russia doesn't have a say on this matter, that the accession procedure is stipulated in the Washington (North Atlantic) Treaty, and that all countries have a right to freely choose methods of ensuring their security, including by joining military alliances. This is where our NATO partners put a full stop. But

the other part of the formula says clearly that by making such a choice these countries must also respect the security interests of other parties. It should be remembered that NATO's expansion is a policy, an "open door policy."

Let us look back at 1990 and 1991 and imagine Mikhail Gorbachev talking with Francois Mitterrand, Helmut Kohl, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, James Baker and other leaders about the parameters of Germany's reunification in the context of European security. Can you imagine these politicians replying to Gorbachev's concerns about NATO's potential eastward expansion in the language their successors are using now? Can you imagine them saying, "Sorry, but we have the Washington Treaty, all countries are free to decide what alliances to join, and the Soviet Union has no say on this matter?" Moreover, Germany's status and NATO membership were discussed by the Soviet Union and the other great powers. And they coordinated a formula according to which the Alliance would not expand eastward or even deploy its troops in the territory of the former GDR, and that the Russian party would be notified about any international activity. The parties also coordinated the largest possible number of troops and agreed that the Bundeswehr should be scaled down.

Here is another example. Our partners claim that our demands on the non-deployment of troops affect NATO's core. But if the Alliance demands that we pull our troops back from the border with Ukraine even though they are deployed a thousand kilometres away from NATO's borders, why can't Russia demand that the bloc withdraw its troops and armaments from its borders? The proposals we have put on the table are open and clear and show our partners what Russia thinks about the current state of military security.

Question: How did the parties end up in this situation?

Alexander Grushko: This situation did not just happen out of the blue. Even after 2014, when NATO almost completely curtailed cooperation with the Russian Federation and simply discarded the positive agenda that had been achieved with such difficulty, we proposed specific steps that could, if not improve the situation amid the destruction of security mechanisms, at least achieve some de-escalation. That was our response to NATO's calls to take steps to lower tensions. We agreed. And where has that got us? The line of contact between Russia and NATO is extending. During the Soviet era, the contact was only along the Turkish and Norwegian borders. Who created this line of contact and now says they are concerned about Russia's activity? What, do we have to tighten our belt now? Pull

our forces back to the Urals?

Our approach is well grounded and based on the new reality. Even if we compare it with 1997, when NATO and Russia signed the Founding Act, which included NATO's pledge not to deploy additional substantial combat forces in the new member states on a permanent basis or change its nuclear strategy, configuration of nuclear weapons and infrastructure – these commitments are also in question now. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg recently said the Alliance could deploy nuclear weapons in Eastern Europe. This is a serious challenge to the very foundations of European security. NATO used to play with phrases such as “temporary deployment.” Now they are talking about a fully sustainable and rotational presence. This, in fact, means a permanent presence. All of this directly affects our security. If you read the reports by the leading Western political science centres, they frankly admit that NATO has created new vulnerabilities for itself by moving its borders to the suburbs of St Petersburg. At the same time, the distance from Tallinn to St Petersburg can be covered by bike; NATO combat aircraft can reach St Petersburg in less than ten minutes. This factor cannot be neglected. It must be taken into account in military planning, and we will certainly do so.

NATO expansion has turned the Baltic region, which used to be one of the most peaceful regions, into a theatre of military rivalry that no one needs, least of all Russia. During the Cold War, NATO believed it had one vulnerable spot – the Fulda Gap, a series of passes through the hills the Warsaw Pact tanks could hypothetically use to reach the English Channel. Now the alliance is concerned about the Suwalki Corridor, a 65-kilometre-wide strip linking Poland with Lithuania, squeezed between the Kaliningrad Region, a Russian exclave, and Belarus. It connects NATO with its Baltic members, which fear they could be cut off in the event of a conflict. Apparently, NATO's eastward expansion has compromised the alliance's own security. If NATO had remained within the borders our Western partners promised to Mikhail Gorbachev, who would they have to defend themselves from now? The whole expansion process was, in fact, a way to prove the alliance's relevance. But today, it is affecting fundamental security interests. And when we talk with our Western partners, and they complain about military activities on the border between Russia and Ukraine, we reply: “Look at the map.”

Question: Are we ready to concede some of the requirements set forth in

Russia's proposal to the United States, or have we taken a tough stance?

Alexander Grushko: We have a tough stance, but our message is very clear to the West. We expect a substantive dialogue with the United States. We have already formed a team, and we are willing to start talking as soon as the Americans are ready.

Question: Is the limited communication between the Russian and US military a problem?

Alexander Grushko: Of course. The fact that military contacts have been cut off poses a danger. We need to discuss issues such as moving exercise grounds away from the contact line, we need to jointly improve mechanisms for avoiding unintentional military incidents and set the permitted approach distances for warships and combat aircraft – all this requires the involvement of communication channels between the military. These things should be discussed by experts. Yet, for some reason, NATO considers this a political matter. If we are serious about de-escalation, if we want to take steps to deflect the danger of military incidents and all the risks, we will have to reopen those channels. Indeed, what we are doing today is a reaction to the lack of any reasonable movement towards lowering risks.

Question: Have you had an answer from the United States so far?

Alexander Grushko: No, not as far as I am aware. But we are ready to start work; we put the cards on the table. The West knows how we see the military security architecture in Europe.

Question: Does this mean Russia is trying to significantly change the picture of relations in the world?

Alexander Grushko: Strategically speaking, the world is rapidly adopting a new agenda, which includes a multipolar order and the need to harmonise relations between several global centres that are gaining strength. The unipolar and bipolar worlds are a thing of the past. Change necessitates a positive agenda. Climate change, digitalisation, fighting the pandemic, social change driven by the new technological transformation – all this requires a fundamentally new level of interaction. The world needs a global unifying approach in these fields, not dividing lines. So far, we are struggling with an agenda inherited from the Cold War. We wanted to leave it in the past, but they are forcing it on us again. And we cannot ignore what is happening on our borders and affecting our fundamental interests.



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