

Russia cannot 'dictate' NATO military posture, Germany says

New Defence Minister Christine Lambrecht visits German troops in Lithuania.

Germany's new Defence Minister Christine Lambrecht said Sunday that NATO allies were willing to discuss a raft of demands put forward by Russia, which has massed troops along the Ukrainian border, but would not allow Moscow to "dictate" to the alliance or its partners.

Lambrecht's comments came during a visit to German troops stationed in Lithuania as part of NATO's forward operating presence — an initiative created to deter Russian military aggression after the 2014 annexation of Crimea.

Lithuanian Defense Minister Arvydas Anušauskas, who accompanied Lambrecht on the visit, rejected the demands issued by Russia on Friday, saying they were intended to divide NATO allies.

The demands, put forward by Russia's Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ryabkov, include the withdrawal of NATO's forward operating battalions from Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, and firm commitments that Ukraine and Georgia will never join NATO.

"We have to talk to each other, which means discussing the proposals that Russia has put forward," Lambrecht said during the visit, "But it cannot be that Russia dictates to NATO partners how they position themselves, and that is something that we will make very clear."

Lithuania's defense ministry tweeted later: "We must make clear that Russia has no right to tell NATO members how they should behave." It said that Anušauskas and Lambrecht "agreed that [Russia's] demands are unacceptable. The only aim of such demands is to split the unity of the alliance."

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg has repeatedly rejected Russia's demands that Ukraine and Georgia be excluded, saying Moscow has no right to decide who can join the alliance.

"We support the right of all countries to decide their own future and foreign

policy free from outside interference,” NATO said in a statement this week. “NATO’s relationship with Ukraine is a matter only for Ukraine and the 30 NATO Allies. We firmly reject any attempts to divide Allied security.”

In an interview with the newspaper Bild published Sunday, Lambrecht called for sanctions against Putin and his inner circle.

She said NATO allies “have to use the entire set of instruments that we have. Right now we have to target Putin and those around him. Those responsible for the aggression must feel the personal consequences.”

The U.S., and EU have threatened to impose “high-impact” sanctions on Russia in the event of “military escalation” against Ukraine.

Ryabkov defended Russia’s demands in an interview with Russian news agency Interfax. He said they did not constitute an “ultimatum” but cautioned “the seriousness of our warning should not be underestimated.”

David M. Herszenhorn contributed reporting.

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