

Gen. Keane: Russian troops likely to invade Belarus if pro-democracy president assumes power

Keane says Belarus' location is 'very strategic' to Putin who wants to increase Russia's 'sphere of influence'

Belarus' location is "very strategic" to Russian President Vladimir Putin who "wants to increase the sphere of influence of Russia in the region, in Eastern Europe in particular and also in the Middle East," Fox News senior strategic analyst and retired Army Gen. Jack Keane said on Monday.

Keane made the comments on "America's Newsroom" the weekend after thousands of demonstrators flooded the streets of Minsk, the capital city of Belarus, to protest police violence against peaceful demonstrators earlier in the week after a disputed presidential election.

Belarusians marched in the capital shouting "Go Away" to President Alexander Lukashenko, and demanded his resignation after his 26-year reign.

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION LEADER FLEES TO LITHUANIA AFTER DISPUTING PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION RESULTS

Protestors have claimed Sunday's election, in which Lukashenko received 80 of the vote and opposition candidate Svetlana Tikhanovskaya received 10 percent, was rigged.

Lukashenko reportedly spoke with Putin over the weekend and said the Russian president told him Moscow stands ready to provide support in the face of what he described as foreign aggression. He claimed that NATO, however, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said Monday that the alliance has no military buildup in the region.

"We've got a dictator who changed the constitution, he's been in power 26 years so he could do that, similar to what Putin has done where he's going to stay 16 more years in addition to the 20 that he's already been in power," Keane said on Monday, adding that Lukashenko "has worn out his welcome."

“He’s corrupt, he’s authoritarian, he’s repressive, he blew the pandemic,” Keane continued. “He actually blamed the deaths of the people on the people themselves and was oblivious to the fact that older people may in fact get sick and die from it [and] took no precautionary measures.”

Keane then said that people there are “fed up” and “believe the election was fraudulent.”

Keane then stressed that the what is happening in Belarus “really matters” to Putin because “Belarus’s location is very strategic to him.”

“Long term what he would want is military bases in Belarus to weaken NATO, weaken the trans-Atlantic alliance,” Keane said.

Host Trace Gallagher asked Keane, “How important is this to the United States, our perspective and our interests?”

Keane responded by providing some context.

“The Eastern European countries were all annexed by [Soviet dictator Josef] Stalin post World War II as a result of the spoils of victory, all of that went away when the Soviet Union collapsed,” Keane said. “Most of those countries are now a part of NATO, some are not, Belarus is one that is not.”

“And What Putin has been trying to do is regain that sphere of influence with them,” Keane continued. “Why does he want that? The Russians always see Eastern Europe as a buffer against someone invading their country.”

“So yes, this is what this is about, and to accomplish that and why we should care is they want to weaken NATO as a result of that. They see NATO as a huge threat to their long-term security,” Keane went on to explain.

He pointed out, however, that “nobody in Europe is ever thinking about invading Russia.” He also said, “You can’t be dismissive how Russia feels about their own security, their own national security, and how they look at the west as the antithesis of being able to maintain their own stability and security.”

“Putin is a thug. Lukashenko is a thug. They have a lot in common,” Keane went on to say.

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He added, "I think what Putin is looking at is can Lukashenko calm the waters and stay in power or can somebody take over for Lukashenko, who is similar to him in terms of his political stripes and therefore Putin will be able to work with them."

"But if he [Putin] sees someone coming in who is pro-democracy, then we're likely going to see Russian boots on the ground in Belarus," Keane continued.

Fox News' Caitlin McFall and The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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