

U.S., Germany Say Russia Military Buildup at Ukraine Poses ‘Immediate and Urgent Challenge’

The United States and Germany both agree that the build-up of Russian troops along the Ukrainian border could result in major consequences.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock met in Washington on Wednesday to discuss various issues between the two countries. One critical issue was that of the increase of Russian troops along the border of its former Soviet neighbor Ukraine. The build-up is said to be caused by Ukraine's attempts to join NATO, which the U.S. and Germany are both members of. The two representatives agreed that this military presence can be dangerous.

“Both Germany and the United States see Russia's actions toward Ukraine as an immediate and urgent challenge to peace and stability in Europe,” said Blinken. “We condemn Russia's military buildup on Ukraine's borders, as well as Russia's increasingly harsh rhetoric as it continues to push the false narrative that Ukraine seeks to provoke them. That's a little bit like the fox saying it had no choice but to attack the henhouse because somehow the hens presented a threat.”

Without using analogies like her American counterpart, Baerbock agreed that Russia's actions are a form of intimidation.

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“We jointly reiterated that Russian actions and activities come with a clear price tag,” she explained, “and a renewed violation of Ukrainian sovereignty by Russia would have severe consequences.”

The Blinken-Baerbock meeting followed a telephone call last week between President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin, a conversation Sunday between Biden and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, and a group discussion Tuesday among Biden's national security adviser Jake Sullivan and his counterparts from the five Nordic nations.

It also preceded a flurry of meetings involving NATO foreign ministers, senior U.S. and Russian officials, the NATO-Russia Council and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe set for next week.

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“The real question is whether Russia is serious about diplomacy, serious about de-escalation,” Blinken said. “Let’s see where this goes over the next weeks.”

Western officials have hinted at any number of economically crippling sanctions that could be imposed should Russia act. Those include near-total cutoff from the international financial system and steps toward greater NATO integration with non-allied European nations.

But, there have been very few specifics and Blinken again declined to discuss them. “I’m not going to telegraph them publicly, but I can tell you with great confidence that a tremendous amount of work has been done already. There is very strong coordination and collaboration and very strong agreement on measures that would be taken in the event of renewed Russian aggression against Ukraine.”

As the Biden administration moves to build international consensus around a set of possible punitive measures, Germany is clearly the linchpin. Securing the support of Europe’s biggest economy will be key to both messaging and implementation of whatever is decided.

Baerbock is the top diplomat in the first German government in 16 years not headed by Angela Merkel. She has struck a tougher tone on Russia than her predecessor. But Germany has adopted a less confrontational stance toward Russia compared with many other European nations.

Germany’s business ties with Russia could provide leverage, but they could also prove a hindrance for forging a united front toward Moscow. Despite strong criticism from the U.S., the center-left government of new Chancellor Olaf Scholz hasn’t shown itself willing to block the start of natural gas deliveries through a newly built pipeline linking Russia and Germany—a move that would hurt both countries.

Under Merkel, Germany persuaded the Biden administration last year not to impose sanctions on the company building the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which

many believe will leave Europe beholden to Russia for energy and Ukraine more vulnerable.

Blinken noted that the pipeline, while completed, has yet to go into operation and said gas flows through it would be unlikely if Russia invades Ukraine.

“If Russia renews its aggression toward Ukraine, it would certainly be difficult to see gas flowing through it in the future,” he said. This actually gives the EU leverage over Russia, he said, rather than the other way around.

Baerbock sidestepped the question of whether the pipeline would be operationalized in the event of a Russian intervention. However, she said the new German government would abide by an agreement signed last summer with Washington that says Russia will not be allowed to use energy as a political weapon against Europe.

“We agreed on this, together with our European partners, that we would take effective measures together with our European partners, should Russia use energy as a weapon or should it continue its aggressive acts against Ukraine,” Baerbock said.

Blinken did not directly address her response but said the U.S. would press ahead with joint measures on the pipeline if necessary.

“We will continue to work in a way that I hope can be effective in dealing with energy issues and challenges, including those posed in our judgment by Nord Stream 2, and also in a way that preserves what is so vital, and that is strong trans-Atlantic solidarity. That is the most effective response and most effective tool that we have in countering Russian aggression,” he said.

Nord Stream 2 is a topic of major concern in Washington, and Congress is expected to take up two bills related to it and other Russia sanctions next week, just as the meetings in Europe are happening. A GOP bill would automatically impose Nord Stream sanctions, while a Democratic version would impose a wider range of penalties on Russia should it invade Ukraine.

Both Democratic and Republican lawmakers in Washington have blamed Nord Stream 2 for increasing Russia’s leverage over Germany and limiting what Berlin would be willing to do in response to a new invasion. Germany, like much of the

European Union, is heavily reliant on Russian natural gas.

Blinken said the U.S. has delivered weapons to Ukraine and would continue to do so in the event of a further Russian military assault on the country.

Echoing concerns by some in Germany that this could stoke military tensions with Russia, Baerbock said “we have a different position on arms supply to Ukraine,” but noted that Berlin has provided a military hospital to the Ukrainian army and support in treating wounded soldiers.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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