

WEST IS 'UNITED' AGAINST RUSSIA: BIDEN

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U.S. President Joe Biden declared “total” unity among Western powers on Monday after crisis talks with European leaders on deterring Russia from an attack against Ukraine, while the Pentagon said 8,500 U.S. troops were put on standby for possible deployment to boost NATO.

“I had a very, very, very good meeting — total unanimity with all the European leaders,” Mr. Biden told reporters shortly after finishing a one-hour-and-20-minute video conference with allied leaders from Europe and NATO.

In London, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s office also said “the leaders agreed on the importance of international unity in the face of growing Russian hostility”.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said, “it is up to Russia to undertake visible de-escalation”, while NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg warned of “severe costs” if there is “any further aggression” by Moscow against Ukraine.

Also on the call were the leaders of France, Italy, Poland and the European Union.

In Washington, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said a force of up to 8,500 U.S. troops was on “heightened alert” for potential deployment to reinforce any activation of the NATO Response Force in the region, where there are growing fears of spillover from the Ukraine conflict.

“What this is about... is re-assurance to our NATO allies,” Mr. Kirby said. “It sends a very clear signal to Mr. Putin that we take our responsibilities to NATO seriously.”

NATO also said it was sending jets and ships to bolster its eastern flank.

The French government announced that Russian and Ukrainian officials would meet, along with French and German counterparts, in Paris on Wednesday to try to find a way out of the impasse. French President Emmanuel Macron “thinks there is a space for diplomacy, a path to de-escalation,” an aide said, confirming that Mr. Macron would speak to Mr. Putin “in the coming days.”

Washington is trying to maintain transatlantic unity to build a credible threat of sanctions as a deterrence against Moscow.

However, members of the 27-nation EU have starkly differing approaches and ties to Russia, which supplies about 40% of the trade bloc’s natural gas supplies.

NATO ‘on standby’

The U.S.-led NATO alliance said members were placing troops “on standby” and sending ships and jets to bolster eastern Europe’s defences, pointing to recent mobilisations by Denmark, Spain and the Netherlands.

Mr. Stoltenberg said the alliance “will continue to take all necessary measures to protect” members.

The Kremlin accused NATO of “hysteria.”

It also claimed that Ukrainian troops fighting Russian-backed separatists in the east of the country could launch an offensive, prompting President Volodymyr Zelensky’s office to say that Ukraine will not “succumb to provocations.”

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