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STATEMENT BY MS. IULIA ZHDANOVA, HEAD OF THE DELEGATION OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION TO THE VIENNA NEGOTIATIONS ON MILITARY SECURITY AND ARMS CONTROL, AT THE 1152nd PLENARY MEETING OF THE OSCE FORUM FOR SECURITY CO-OPERATION

4 November 2026

Agenda item: Security Dialogue
Subject: Incident management – mitigating risks of unintended escalation

Mr. Chairperson,

We are grateful for the convening of a Security Dialogue dedicated to the issue of preventing dangerous military incidents, and we note the contribution made by the panellists to the discussion. This is one of the priority issues in terms of ensuring peace and security in the OSCE area. At the same time, we should like to draw attention straight away to the differences in the approaches taken by Russia and Western States. While our country advocates "incident prevention" (as it is worded in the relevant agreements), the Chairmanship and the overwhelming majority of delegations speak of "incident/escalation management". This is also the root of the problem. While Russia has, at every stage, advocated addressing the root causes of the deplorable security situation in the OSCE area, Western States, by contrast, seek to maintain a highly confrontational environment in which they would retain a free hand to inflict harm on the Russian Federation. The expectation that Russia will show restraint in response to this is utterly futile.

Of course, today's topic is intertwined with the concept of threat perception, which is itself inherently subjective. Each country assesses the degree of threat in its own way. For some politicians, for example, the very fact of Russia's existence is cause for concern, and no confidence-building measures will help in this regard. And, of course, it is difficult to speak of their effectiveness when there is a policy of inflicting a "strategic defeat" on our country on the battlefield and of building up NATO forces near Russia's borders.

As for those States and their alliances that are strengthening their military presence on our borders, as they draw closer to them – and this process has been going on for three decades now – their perception of the threat naturally intensifies. They realize that they are encroaching on sensitive areas for Russia's security and that, should they take further provocative steps, they are unlikely to receive a warm reception. And this is where talk about confidence-building measures, transponders, incident prevention and so on begins. We believe that a party which itself poses a threat cannot expect to enjoy comfortable conditions for pursuing a policy of force that is hostile towards us. There is one rule here: if you want to avoid military clashes, withdraw your armed forces from our borders and refrain from provocative actions.

Mr. Chairperson,

Over the years, our country has put forward specific initiatives designed to strengthen trust and prevent collisions between Russian and NATO member States' aircraft and ships, and has shown openness towards co-operation on a wide range of issues related to ensuring politico-military stability on the basis of the principles of equality, mutual respect and the reciprocal consideration of interests.

At the meeting of the NATO-Russia Council on 31 May 2018, proposals from the Russian Ministry of Defence for de-escalating tensions in Europe were communicated to the Alliance's representatives. These included:

– The resumption of military-to-military dialogue (starting with consultations between experts) to discuss issues of mutual interest to and matters of concern for Russia and our then partners;

– The adoption of measures to reduce the intensity of military activities along the line of direct contact between Russia and NATO (the Baltic States, the Black Sea, the Arctic) on a reciprocal basis;

– The enhancement of the mechanism for preventing dangerous military activities and incidents in the air and at sea, primarily in the Baltic and Black Sea regions (establishing the distance of closest approach for aircraft and ships and a procedure for interaction between the crews involved). The practical implementation of Finnish President Sauli Niinistö's initiative on ensuring flight safety over the Baltic Sea would be of great importance in this regard.

In proposing these measures, the Russian Federation assumed that their implementation would contribute to greater predictability of the politico-military situation in Europe. These were regularly brought to the attention of the participating States within the framework of the Structured Dialogue at the OSCE, as well as during high-level bilateral contacts with the NATO leadership.

At a meeting with NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe Tod Wolters in Baku on 10 July 2018, the Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, Valery Gerasimov, proposed a number of priority measures for reducing tensions in Europe, including moving the areas where operational exercises are held away from the Russia-NATO line of contact.

Measures for preventing incidents along the Russia-NATO line of contact were discussed during a meeting on 26 November 2018 with the Chairman of the NATO Military Committee, Stuart Peach. For the first time, there was acknowledgement of the possibility of resuming dialogue between military experts, which had already ceased at that time even when it came to the need to avoid unintended military incidents.

Possible measures for preventing incidents along the Russia-NATO line of contact were discussed during meetings between Russian Chief of the General Staff Gerasimov and NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe Wolters in Baku on 10 July 2019 and 6 February 2020. These are just a few examples.

We continued to await a constructive response from NATO to Russia's proposals.

The coronavirus pandemic crisis came as an unprecedented shock for all the OSCE participating States. In this regard, in April 2020, the Russian side "updated" its initiative on reciprocal steps for reducing tensions on the European continent. The Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Sergey Lavrov, sent a letter to NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg setting out Russia's proposals for freezing military exercises and observing military restraint for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing so, our country was guided by the need to reduce the level of confrontation against the backdrop of a global calamity, as well as to free up resources to combat the coronavirus disease.

On 23 September 2021, during a meeting on the margins of the 76th session of the United Nations General Assembly, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov again drew the attention of NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg to our concrete proposals for de-escalation and incident prevention along the line of contact.

Once again, there was no reaction.

With a view to comprehensively addressing security issues in Europe, we set out our proposals in a draft legally binding treaty between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on security guarantees, and a draft legally binding agreement on measures to ensure the security of the Russian Federation and member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Among them are:

– Not undertaking actions or supporting activities that affect each other's security;

– Not implementing security measures adopted individually or within the framework of a military alliance or coalition that affect the security of the other party;

– Not using the territory of other States with a view to preparing or carrying out an armed attack against the other party or actions affecting its core security interests;

– Maintaining dialogue and co-operating to improve mechanisms to prevent dangerous military activities on and over the high seas, including agreeing on a maximum distance of approach for warships and aircraft;

– Exercising restraint in military planning and during the conduct of exercises to reduce the risks of potential dangerous situations, in accordance with the provisions of intergovernmental agreements on the prevention of incidents at sea outside territorial waters and in the airspace above them (INCSEA)[1], as well as intergovernmental agreements on the prevention of dangerous military activities (PDMA);

– Maintaining dialogue and interaction on improving mechanisms to prevent incidents, primarily in the Baltics and the Black Sea region;

– Holding urgent consultations on a bilateral and multilateral basis, including within the NATO-Russia Council, to resolve problematic situations, as well as maintaining emergency contact via telephone hotlines;

– Refraining from conducting military exercises or other military activities above the brigade level in a zone of agreed width and configuration on either side of the borderline between the Russian Federation and the States with which it has a military alliance, on the one hand, and NATO member countries, on the other.

We also proposed other measures.

1 A total of 14 agreements have been concluded by the Government of the Soviet Union or the Government of the Russian Federation with the following leading maritime powers: the United States (1972), the United Kingdom (1986), the Federal Republic of Germany (1988), France (1989), Canada (1989), Italy (1989), the Netherlands (1990), Norway (1990), Spain (1990), Greece (1991), Japan (1993), the Republic of Korea (1994), Portugal (2000) and Türkiye (2004). Twelve of these countries are members of the OSCE (and NATO), and two are OSCE Partners for Co-operation.

I wish to make it absolutely clear (and this is of crucial importance in view of the topic raised today) that the Western OSCE participating States rejected the aforementioned proposals.

The facts cited clearly demonstrate that the Russian side has, in practice, repeatedly confirmed its fundamental willingness to address de-escalation issues. We have advocated broadening the participation in agreements on the prevention of incidents and dangerous military activities. Nevertheless, our NATO colleagues refused to give our proposals constructive consideration, even in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. They also refused to discuss incident prevention within the Russia-NATO format. Thus, statements by the Alliance's leadership regarding the need for dialogue with our country and the importance of taking each other's security concerns into account have not translated into practice.

Mr. Chairperson,

Let us now turn to the present stage, which began with the Alliance's decision to "wind down" the activities of the NATO-Russia Council and its member States' decision to "freeze" military contacts with the Russian Federation. The annual consultations between naval experts, as provided for in the INCSEA agreements, have not taken place for five years now, apart from a relatively recent meeting between representatives of the Russian and Norwegian Ministries of Defence. Operational communication channels for use in the event of incidents have been disrupted as a result of either the expulsion of military attachés or a drastic reduction in their staff (and it was not Russia that initiated this). The Structured Dialogue, which back in the day was established as a platform for communication between military experts, has been laid to rest. During the most recent Annual Implementation Assessment Meeting on the Vienna Document 2011 on Confidence- and Security-Building Measures, only one delegation – that of the Russian Federation – was present in the room. All the others "slammed the door", having made – as is being borne out today – a final decision to wage war against our country by proxy.

Against this backdrop, we are once again hearing in Vienna about the need to utilize OSCE tools for preventing dangerous military incidents and reducing risks in the context of the Vienna Document 2011. The problem is that, in a climate of confrontation, confidence- and security-building measures are often used not for their intended purpose, but for political ends, including for the purpose of escalating tensions further. Indeed, we all remember very well the US request in 2014 to carry out an inspection on Ukrainian territory, "including the Crimean peninsula". Nor can we forget the persistent refusal by NATO countries in the same year to recognize the results of numerous inspections and observation flights along certain sections of the Russian-Ukrainian border, which showed that there was no build-up of Russian armed forces. It must be acknowledged that the extensive politicization of the Vienna Document 2011 since the start of the crisis in Ukraine has, to a certain extent, discredited it in the eyes of our military experts.

The policy of EU and NATO countries towards further shipments of arms to Ukraine, providing it with intelligence, the increase in exercises and reconnaissance flights near our borders, the accelerated militarization of Europe, the seizure of merchant ships carrying Russian cargo and the rehearsal of a blockade of the Kaliningrad region does not contribute to de-escalation either. At this very moment, while we are discussing "incident management", Poland continues to mass troops near the Russian region.

In such circumstances, our country sees no point in reinventing the wheel. If Western countries are genuinely interested in reducing the level of confrontation, they should refrain from provocative actions, exercise restraint and return to complying with existing agreements on the prevention of incidents and dangerous military activities.

I thank you for your attention and request that the text of this statement be attached to the journal of the day.