

Trump warns Putin not to set U.S., Russia on 'alternate path'

By VIVIAN SALAMA
Associated Press

WEST PALM BEACH, Florida — After months of promising to engage more with Russia, President-elect Donald Trump vowed to enhance America's nuclear capabilities, warning Russian President Vladimir Putin Friday to avoid circumstances that may set the two global powers on an "alternate path."

Trump passed along a "very nice letter" his transition team says was sent to him by Putin, which urges Trump to act "in a constructive and pragmatic manner" to "restore the framework of bilateral cooperation."

Putin's letter, dated Dec. 15, also notes that serious global and regional challenges "show that the relations between Russia and the U.S. remain an important factor in ensuring stability and security in the modern world."

Trump said in response to the letter that Putin's "thoughts are so correct," noting that he hoped "both sides are able to live up to these thoughts, and we do not have to travel an alternate path."

The Russian government did not immediately respond to a request for confirmation that Putin sent the letter. The Kremlin does not always report the letters Putin sends to foreign leaders. Trump's transition team said the English-language letter was an unofficial translation.

The exchange comes on the heels of comments by both Trump and Putin about the need to strengthen their countries' nuclear arsenals. Trump re-opened the debate over nuclear proliferation Thursday, declaring on Twitter that the U.S.



AP Photo/Andrew Harnik
President-elect Donald Trump, left, accompanied by Trump Chief of Staff Reince Priebus, right, and Retired Gen. Michael Flynn, a senior adviser to Trump, center, speaks to members of the media in Palm Beach, Fla., Wednesday.

should "greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear capability" until the rest of the world "comes to its senses" regarding nuclear weapons. Those comments echoed an earlier statement by Putin who said this week that strengthening his country's nuclear capabilities should be a chief military objective in the coming year.

But Putin downplayed the significance of Trump's comments Friday at a marathon end-of-year news conference, saying he sees "nothing unusual" in Trump's pledge to strengthen the U.S. nuclear forces, calling the statement in line with the president-elect's campaign promises.

In his wide-ranging remarks, the Russian leader claimed that his country's military is stronger

than any potential aggressor, but acknowledged that the U.S. military is bigger. He also cast the modernization of Russia's nuclear arsenals as a necessary response to the U.S. missile defense system.

Trump extolled Putin's leadership during the campaign and called for a tempered approach to U.S.-Russia relations. And while Putin had described Trump as "bright and talented" during the campaign, observers say Russia's interest is centered around relief from crippling sanctions implemented under the Obama administration, which is viewed as a gateway to bolstering Russia as the political and economic equivalent of the United States.

Renewed tensions have mounted between the U.S. and Russia in recent months over accusations that

Radio City Rockettes' owners say attendance at inauguration is a choice

NEW YORK (AP) — The Radio City Rockettes will be dancing at President-elect Donald Trump's inauguration next month, but not everyone is kicking up their heels at the booking.

One of the famed dancers took to Instagram to say she was "embarrassed and disappointed" by the gig, triggering calls for a boycott by some on social media.

But Madison Square Garden Co., which employs the dancers, said Friday no dancers are being compelled to attend the event.

"For a Rockette to be considered for an event, they must voluntarily sign up and are never told they have to perform at a particular event, including the inaugural," the company said in a statement. "It is always their choice. In fact, for the coming inauguration, we had more Rockettes request to participate than we have slots available."

The dancers who choose to attend will join The Mormon Tabernacle Choir at the swearing-in ceremony on Jan. 20.

The presence of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, which has performed at several past inaugurations, hasn't been met with universal applause.

Former choir member John Bonner, for one, said he was shocked and upset when he heard the news.

"I expect the church to stand on their moral high ground," Bonner told KUTV in Salt Lake City.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints acknowledged that the response to the announcement has been mixed, though church spokesman Eric Hawkins said in a statement that the appearance is a demonstration of support for the office rather than party affiliations or politics.

the Russian government hacked the emails of U.S. citizens and institutions, including political organizations. The FBI said this month that it supported the CIA's conclusion that Russia interfered in the presidential election with the goal of supporting Trump.

Trump has repeatedly dismissed claims that Russia sought to usher in his victory, but his remarks, both in the letter and over the need for beefed up nuclear capabilities, indicate that Russia may not be an exception to Trump's vow to assert American

influence through "unquestioned military strength." However, his comments are prompting fears of a nuclear race-in-the-making if Trump breaks nuclear treaties, and countries like Russia interpret the move as a threat.

The two countries signed the New START treaty in 2010, capping the number of nuclear warheads and missile launchers each country can possess.

The agreement is in effect until 2021 and can be extended for another five years.

U.N. condemns Israeli settlements, Obama does not veto

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — In a striking rupture with past practice, the United States allowed the U.N. Security Council on Friday to condemn Israeli settlements in the West Bank and east Jerusalem as a "flagrant violation" of international law. In doing so, the outgoing Obama administration brushed aside Donald Trump's demands that the U.S. exercise its veto and provided a climax to years of icy relations with Israel's leadership.

The decision to abstain from the council's 14-0 vote is one of the biggest American rebukes of its longstanding ally in recent memory. And it could have significant ramifications for the Jewish state, potentially hindering Israel's negotiating position in future peace talks. Given the world's widespread opposition to settlements, the action will be almost impossible for anyone, including Trump, to reverse.

Nevertheless, Trump vowed via Twitter: "As to the U.N., things will be different after Jan. 20th."

The resolution said Israel's settlements in lands the Palestinians want to include in their future state have "no legal validity." It demanded a halt to such activities for the sake of "salvaging the two-state solution." Loud applause erupted in the council chamber after U.S. Ambassador Samantha Power permitted the resolution to pass.

Friday's condemnation, a day after Egypt suddenly postponed a scheduled showdown, capped days of frantic diplomacy in capitals around the world.

American officials indicated they would have been prepared to let the resolution pass, despite blocking such proposals for years. Israeli officials said they were aware of such plans and turned to Trump for support. The U.S. president-elect sent a tweet urging President Barack Obama to block the U.N. effort. Egypt then pulled its resolution, with U.S. officials citing fierce Israeli pressure as the reason. Israeli officials then accused Obama of colluding with the Palestinians in a "shameful move" against the Jewish state. Washington denied the charge.

Most of the world is opposed to Israel's construction of Jewish settlements in lands it seized in the 1967 Mideast War. The primary holdout at the U.N. has been the United States, which sees settlements as illegitimate but has traditionally used its veto power as a perma-



AP Photo/Nasser Nasser
A Palestinian protester dressed as Santa Claus runs to avoid tear gas during clashes with Israeli border police officers, in the West Bank city of Bethlehem on Dec. 23.

nent member of the Security Council to block such resolutions on the grounds that Israeli-Palestinian disputes should be addressed through negotiation.

Underscoring that unity, Friday's resolution was proposed by nations in four different parts of the world: Malaysia, New Zealand, Senegal and Venezuela. It is the first resolution on settlements to pass in 36 years, Malaysia's U.N. Ambassador Ramlan Bin Ibrahim said.

Explaining the U.S. vote, Power quoted a 1982 statement from then-U.S. President Ronald Reagan, which declared that Washington "will not support the use of any additional land for the purpose of settlements."

"That has been the policy of every administration, Republican and Democrat, since before President Reagan and all the way through to the present day," Power said.

"One would think that it would be a routine vote," Power said. But she acknowledged that, in reality, the vote was "not straightforward" because it occurred at the United Nations, a body that has singled out Israel for criticism for decades.

In a statement, Secretary of State John Kerry said the vote was guided by one principle: "To pervert the possibility of the two-state solution."

Chief Palestinian negotiation Saeb

Erekat hailed the result as a "victory for the justice of the Palestinian cause." He said Trump's choice was now between "international legitimacy" or siding with "settlers and extremists."

But Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office voiced anger.

"Israel rejects this shameful anti-Israel resolution at the U.N. and will not abide by its terms," it said, blaming Obama for failing to "protect Israel against this gang-up at the UN" and even colluding with the country's detractors. "Israel looks forward to working with President-elect Trump and with all our friends in Congress, Republicans and Democrats alike, to negate the harmful effects of this absurd resolution," the statement said.

In some ways, the American abstention served as a direct reflection of the deep distrust between Obama and Netanyahu. It followed months of intensely secret deliberations in Washington, including what one official said was an unannounced meeting earlier this month between Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry, and a spate of fresh Israeli settlement announcements that have wrought exasperation and anger from American officials.

Trump has signaled he will be far more sympathetic to Israel's stances on the two territories, where some 600,000 Israelis live.

BRIEFLY

U.S. warns of possible attacks on churches, holiday gatherings

WASHINGTON (AP) — Federal authorities are warning Americans that Islamic State sympathizers are continuing to call for attacks on churches and other holiday gathering sites. The warning was issued after a publicly available list of U.S. churches was posted on a militants' social media site.

The FBI and the Department of Homeland Security issued the warning to law enforcement agencies nationwide Friday, just days after an attack at a Christmas market in Berlin. Islamic State militants claimed responsibility for Monday's attack in which a truck plowed into the holiday market, killing 12 people and injuring 56.

FBI spokesman Andrew Ames says the FBI is aware of the list of churches posted online and is investigating its credibility.

More states consider working around the Electoral College

HARTFORD, Conn. (AP) — Frustrated after seeing another candidate secure the presidency without winning the national popular vote, mostly Democratic lawmakers in several capitols want their states to join a 10-year-old movement to work around the Electoral College.

In states including Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Ohio and New Mexico, legislators have said they plan to introduce legislation that would require their state's Electoral College voters cast ballots for the presidential candidate who earns the most votes nationwide, regardless of the statewide results.

"Every vote in this country should have equal weight. The Electoral College is a relic of a bygone era, and we need to change this system," said Connecticut state Sen. Mae Flexer, who filed a bill with several fellow Democrats requiring Connecticut to join the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact.

Since 2006, 11 states have signed onto the compact, which require their Electoral College voters to cast ballots for the national popular vote winner. In theory it would take effect once it involves states representing at least 270 electoral votes, the threshold to win the presidency.

When people vote for president, they are really choosing the electors from the political parties. The college is made up of 538 electors, which corresponds to the number of a state's seats in the U.S. Senate and House, plus the three votes allotted to Washington, D.C.

The states that have already passed legislation to join the group includes California, Hawaii, Illinois, Massachusetts, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, Vermont, Washington and D.C.

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