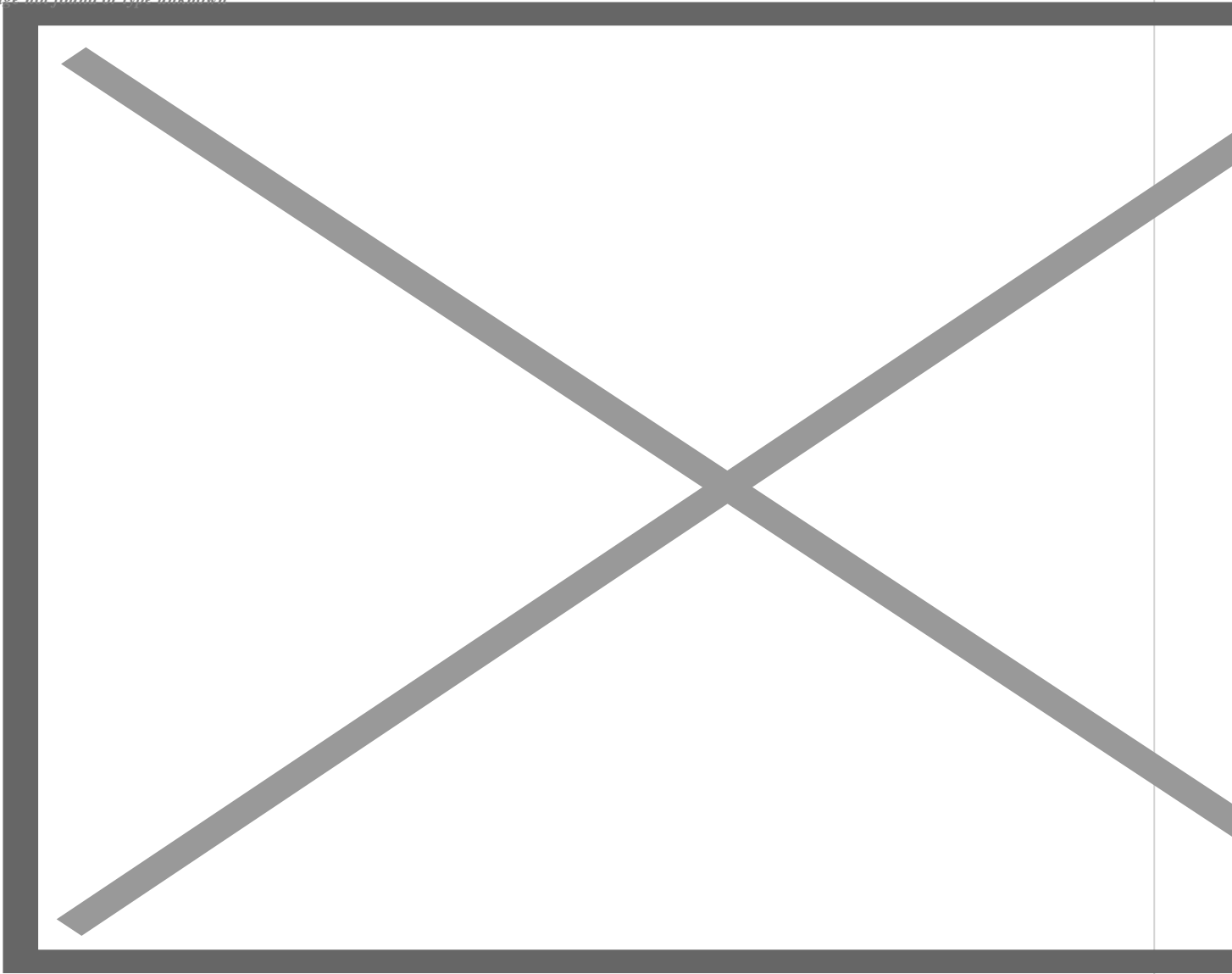


Russia orders U.S. diplomats to leave as Ukraine tensions escalate

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Ties between Washington and Moscow, which have been languishing at post-Cold War lows for years, are now under increasing pressure due to mounting concerns over a Russian troop build-up near Ukraine [File: Alexander Zemlianichenko/AP]

Moscow, December 1 (RHC)-- Tensions between Russia and the United States have further soured a day before top officials from both countries are set to meet, with Moscow moving to expel U.S. diplomats.

Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said on Wednesday that U.S. embassy staff who have been in Moscow for more than three years were being ordered to fly home by January 31, an apparently retaliatory move.

Russia's ambassador to the U.S. said last week that 27 Russian diplomats and their families in Washington were being expelled from the country and would leave on January 30. "We ... intend to respond in the corresponding way," foreign ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova told a briefing.

The developments came ahead of an anticipated meeting between US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov on the sidelines of the Organization for Security and Cooperation on Europe (OSCE) summit in Stockholm on Thursday -- and against the backdrop of Washington-led NATO talks on Ukraine.

Russia's RIA news agency cited Zakharova as saying that new US rules meant Russian diplomats who had been forced to leave the country were also banned from working as diplomats there for three years.

The U.S. embassy in Moscow is the last operational U.S. mission in the country, which has shrunk to 120 staff from about 1,200 in early 2017, Washington says. Further reductions in U.S. embassy staff would put pressure on an operation that Washington has previously described as being close to a "caretaker presence."

Ties between Washington and Moscow, which have been languishing at post-Cold War lows for years, are under increasing pressure because of Western concerns over a Russian troop buildup near Ukraine.

Ukraine on Wednesday urged Washington and the U.S.-headed NATO transatlantic security alliance to prepare economic sanctions on Russia to deter a possible invasion by tens of thousands of Russian troops.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said he would make the request to NATO foreign ministers meeting for a second day in Latvia on Wednesday. "We will call on the allies to join Ukraine in putting together a deterrence package," Kuleba told reporters as he arrived for talks in Riga. Kuleba added that NATO should also boost military and defence cooperation with Ukraine.

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