

Barack Obama: 'We will defend our NATO allies'

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President Barack Obama cast efforts to push back Russia's aggression into Ukraine as "a moment of testing" for democratic values and the strength of the NATO alliance as he spoke Wednesday in Tallinn, Estonia.

"We must continue to stand united against Russia's aggression in Ukraine," Obama said during a speech aimed at all three Baltic states, on a trip that will take him to Wales for the annual NATO Summit. "This week, NATO must send an unmistakable message in support of Ukraine."

At the summit, NATO leaders will meet with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko to make clear they support his efforts to resist Russia and will continue taking steps to respond to Russian President Vladimir Putin's push into eastern Ukraine. The alliance, he said, "needs to make concrete commitments to help Ukraine modernize and strengthen" its defenses.

Sounding the note that he's repeated for months, but with the potential to take new action ahead at this week's summit for the 28 countries in NATO, Obama insisted that the United States and its allies "will not accept Russia's occupation and illegal annexation of Crimea, or any part of Ukraine."

"Russia's aggression ... is a brazen assault on the territorial integrity of Ukraine," he added.

Nor does NATO accept Russia's assertion that Ukraine and other former Soviet territories — including Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania — can only choose to align themselves with Russia or with the West. "We reject any talk of spheres of influence today," Obama said.

As NATO's ability to respond to a crisis is being tested in Ukraine, Obama offered assurance that the Baltic states, which are part of NATO, will get the support they need from the group, whether they face threats from Russia or other entities. "We will defend our NATO allies," he said. "We will defend the territorial integrity of every single ally."

But for NATO to be able to respond effectively to the threats its members face means that each and every member must "step up and commit to meeting its responsibilities to our alliance" by paying its full share to NATO, the president said. Estonia is already paying 2 percent of its gross domestic product in NATO dues, and Latvia and Lithuania are on the right path, he said.