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Putin is the 'greatest gift' to NATO since end of Cold War — ex-CIA head Petraeus

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Russia successfully 'breathed new life' into NATO by giving it a reason to boost military expansion into Eastern Europe and strengthen the US foothold on the continent, ex-CIA boss, retired four-star general David Petraeus said.

Russia singlehandedly gave the American-led military bloc "*a new reason for living*," the former general told the audience at an international conference in New Delhi, India on Wednesday.

Petraeus stressed that Moscow prompted the alliance to deploy more troops and aircraft into Eastern Europe and the Baltic States as well as set up new command HQs in the region.



Soldiers from the US National Guard participate in a NATO drill in Lithuania, June 2014. © AFP / Petras Malukas

It was done under the pretext of fighting 'Russian aggression' as relations between NATO and Moscow steadily deteriorated during the presidency of Vladimir Putin. In that sense, Putin is "*the greatest gift*" NATO has received since the conclusion of the Cold War, the American general said.

He also '*credited*' the Russian leader for providing the US with the rationale to return an armored brigade to Europe "*for the first time in a number of years.*" It is currently stationed in Poland.

The former CIA head told the audience that despite the occasional tensions between the US President Donald Trump and NATO, Washington remains the "*backbone*" of the alliance as its chief armed force and financial backer.

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In recent years, the US and its allies have been boosting military might in Europe, citing the need to deter Moscow following the Ukrainian crisis and the accession of Crimea into Russia. This strategy led to the increase of the number of combat-ready troops and large-scale military drills near the nation's borders.

The Kremlin, in turn, had been blasting NATO's continued expansion eastward. Russian politicians said that the growing militarization of the region undermines European security and may lead to destabilization in the region.

Four-star General David Petraeus was considered to be one of the most influential military policy-makers in the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations. Before being appointed the head of the CIA, he led the US Central Command.