

Russian gen. warns on missile defense

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MOSCOW - In a statement reflecting the growing distrust between Moscow and the West, a top Russian general on Monday warned that Poland and the Czech Republic risk being targeted by Russian missiles if they agree to host U.S. missile defense bases.

The stark threat, by missile forces chief Gen. Nikolai Solovtsov, was one of the most bellicose comments yet by Russian officials on the issue, which 10 days ago led President Vladimir Putin to warn of a "new Cold War" in a speech in Munich that shocked Western governments.

"If the governments of Poland and the Czech Republic take such a step ... the Strategic Missile Forces will be capable of targeting these facilities if a relevant decision is made," Solovtsov told reporters in Moscow, asserting the U.S. plan could upset strategic balance of power in the region.

Solovtsov spoke as Czech Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek and his Polish counterpart, Jarosław Kaczyński, both in Warsaw, suggested they were ready to move forward with a plan by Washington to put 10 interceptor missiles in Poland and a radar site in the Czech Republic.

Topolánek said both countries will probably agree to the basic U.S. proposal, though they must still work out the details. "I think it is in our joint interest to negotiate this initiative and to build ... the missile defense," he said.

U.S. officials say that the 10 proposed interceptors - which they say are designed to stop a launch from the Middle East - are not aimed at Russia. Moscow, with its huge and sophisticated nuclear arsenal, could easily overwhelm such a small system simply by launching more than 10 missiles.

Putin has said he does not trust U.S. claims that the missile defense system was intended to counter threats from Iran. He has warned that Russia could take retaliatory action.

Solovtsov, speaking before the announcement in Warsaw, voiced concern that Washington could in the future expand and upgrade the anti-missile system. That could, at least in theory, limit Russia's ability to retaliate to a nuclear missile strike against its territory.

Solovtsov also said Russia could easily make new, upgraded versions of Russian intermediate-range missiles scrapped under the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, negotiated between Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and President Ronald Reagan in 1987.

Kaczyński, the Polish prime minister, brushed aside Moscow's fears, saying "the missile defense is not directed against any normal state."

"Any statement suggesting that the missile defense would change the alignment of forces in Europe is a misunderstanding," he said. "This truth is being conveyed to our partners in the West and the East."

Analysts said the angry words reflect the growing climate of suspicion between Moscow and the West.

Slawomir Debski, at the Warsaw-based office of the Polish Institute of International Affairs, said Moscow's reaction "means that the Russian Federation see the U.S., Poland and the Czech Republic as enemy nations."

"The reaction shows that the rationale behind Poland's and Czech Republic's ties with the U.S. are correct," Debski said. "It proves this is the right alliance and that we need it because Russia is threatening us with nuclear weapons."

Alexander Rahr, a Russia expert at the German Council of Foreign Relations, said Russia is irritated because it feels that it is being ignored by Washington. "It shows there is a new Cold War, in their heads."

Washington should have tried harder to persuade Moscow to accept the new anti-missile system before proceeding with efforts to deploy it, he said. "We humiliate Russia on these issues. We could have proposed cooperation to Russia, and if they said no, then we do it," he said. "But we say first, you Russians ... don't matter."

Rahr said Russia sees the missile system as payback for its sales of air defense missiles to Iran and Syria. Russia also views the move, he said, as an attempt to bind NATO members Poland and the Czech Republic, which Moscow dominated during the Soviet period, more tightly into the Western military alliance - whose expansion Russia has long opposed.

Alexander Pikayev, a senior analyst at the Moscow-based Institute for World Economy and International Relations, said the missile defenses will have "a negative effect on the whole system of Russian-U.S. relations."

Because of their limited speed and range, the European anti-missile system could not stop Russia's strategic missiles, he said. But Russian leaders are concerned that once the system is in place, it could be expanded and upgraded to create such a threat.

He said the move could prompt Moscow to question its commitment to arms control treaties - something at which top Russia officials have already hinted. He predicted Russia would escalate its efforts to block the expansion of NATO to the former Soviet states of Georgia and Ukraine.

Last month, U.S. Air Force Lt. Gen. Henry A. Obering, director of the Missile Defense Agency, said the bases in Poland and the Czech Republic would be designed to intercept missiles being developed by Iran.

Two other bases - at Fort Greely, Alaska, and Vandenberg Air Force Base in California - would protect the U.S. from threats from North Korea, Obering said.

Critics of the anti-missile system say it has not adequately been tested to prove it works. The interceptor missiles launch a small EKV, or exoatmospheric kill vehicle, designed to collide with an incoming warhead at high speed.

Obering has said that there was no way the limited number of interceptors could neutralize the hundreds of missiles at Russia's disposal.