

# Lavrov Says 'Hot Potato' Deal Is Near

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Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said the United States and Russia are close to reaching an agreement on missile defense, the “hot potato” issue that has held up the New START nuclear arms reduction treaty between the two countries.

Presidents Barack Obama and Dmitry Medvedev, who last met in June, agreed to come up with a joint expert review on the risks of missile proliferation, Lavrov said Friday in an interview published in Rossiiskaya Gazeta, the government’s official newspaper.

“The paper should be ready soon,” Lavrov said.

The next step will then be to examine common responses, together with the Europeans, beginning with diplomacy and not excluding military force, the foreign minister said.

U.S. missile defense plans were a cause for the deterioration of relations under former President George W. Bush, and Senate opposition to New START centers on concern that the treaty will cripple America’s ability to develop a missile shield. The Obama administration has dismissed the criticism as unfounded as it seeks to win greater Russian cooperation on Iran and Afghanistan.

While Lavrov said missile defense remains a “hot potato,” he praised the improvement in ties since the Obama administration called for a “reset” in relations last year.

Russia has welcomed the rapprochement, avoiding a harsh reaction to a summer spy scandal, in which 10 Russian agents were deported from the United States, and glossing over Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s reiteration in July of plans to speed up a missile defense system in Poland. Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov paid his first visit to the Pentagon in September, pledging closer cooperation with his U.S. counterpart, Robert Gates.

“You need to present your positions in talks, not through the microphone as was so often the case with the previous administration,” Lavrov said. “The more we strengthen the fabric of our trade, investment and innovation relations, the firmer the Russian-American partnership will become.”

Medvedev, who is seeking U.S. experience and capital to build a Russian “Silicon Valley” outside Moscow, has been willing to support U.S. policies on Iran and Afghanistan in return. Russia’s support for tighter UN sanctions against Iran because of its nuclear program this summer was “not an isolated action,” Lavrov said.

“I think Iran clearly heard the opinion of the international community,” said Lavrov, adding there’s “reason to believe” that Iran will soon return to talks in the “P5 Plus One” format comprising the United States, Britain, France, Russia, China and Germany.

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