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Uncertainty Clouds New NATO Era

By Nabi Abdullaev

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President Dmitry Medvedev leaving the VIP area to give a media briefing at the end of a NATO summit, hailed as a “fresh start,” in Lisbon on Saturday. **Armando Franca**

NATO and Russia declared an end to an era of confrontation at a summit in Lisbon on Saturday, but uncertainty lingers over how they can move their current cooperation on terrorism and fighting drug trafficking to the areas of nuclear security and missile defense.

"It is a very important stage of building productive, full-fleshed and partnership relations between Russia and NATO," President Dmitry Medvedev told reporters after the NATO-Russia summit on Saturday.

A day earlier, NATO adopted a new strategic concept that officially says the alliance no longer considers Russia a threat and pledges to expand security cooperation with Moscow.

NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen was even more upbeat Saturday, calling the summit "historical" and a "fresh start" in the alliance's relations with Moscow.

U.S. President Barack Obama, in an article published on Gazeta.ru on Friday, said NATO-Russia relations should undergo the same "reset" that U.S.-Russian relations have experienced since spring 2009.

Relations grew seriously strained after a brief 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, a staunch U.S. ally that has actively sought NATO entry in recent years.

On Friday, NATO's 28 member states agreed to jointly develop an anti-missile shield over Europe that soured relations between Moscow and Washington during George W. Bush's presidency, and Medvedev said Saturday that Russia could join the effort.

But Medvedev voiced reservations over whether NATO partners had grasped the shield plan in all its tricky details, and he said Russia would cooperate on the condition of being an equal partner in the system.

"Our participation should be absolutely of that of equals. ... We either participate in full, exchange information and are responsible for solving this or that problem, or we don't participate at all," Medvedev said. "But if we don't participate at all, then we for obvious reasons will be forced to protect ourselves."

Medvedev also said: "It is quite evident that the Europeans themselves do not have a full understanding of how it will look, how much it will cost. But everybody understands that the missile defense system needs to be comprehensive."

Russian officials had opposed to the U.S.-led shield plan, saying it would undermine its capacity for a nuclear retaliation strike if Russia were attacked first. Washington has maintained that it needs the shield to protect the United States and its European allies from potential missile strikes by Iran or other rogues countries.

Vladimir Putin, during his presidency, and top U.S. officials proposed several times that a radar station in Armavir of the Krasnodar region and a Russian-rented radar in Azerbaijan be integrated into the future anti-missile system. But the Americans would not concede to a demand from Moscow for joint control over the entire system.

Medvedev said Saturday that Russia has formulated several ideas on how a joint system should work and that he had offered them to NATO leaders for their consideration at the summit.

NATO and Russia agreed Saturday to discuss — among their military top brass — the possibilities of further cooperation in this area. Russian and NATO defense ministers will meet in June to review progress of the joint analysis.

"So far we even have a different perception of the nature of the threats," said Alexander Konovalov, head of the Institute of Strategic Assessments, a security think tank in Moscow. "For example, Washington views Iran as a real and nearly immediate threat, but Moscow believes that it will take years for Iran to develop long-range missiles."

He predicted that the Americans would never give Russians the right to block a decision to use the European missile shield to respond to a possible missile attack. But, he said, they may well concede to the presence of Russian officials at the control facilities.

Still, Obama praised Medvedev's decision to join the initiative, saying it "turns a source of past tensions into a source of potential cooperation against a shared threat."

Medvedev said in Lisbon that he met with the Iranian leader Mahmoud Ahmadinejad at a Baku summit on Thursday and urged him to fully disclose his country's nuclear program to international watchdogs.

Another problematic issue raised by Medvedev at the Lisbon summit was the risk that the U.S. Senate might fail to ratify the New START treaty that he and Obama signed in April.

Six NATO nations called on the U.S. Senate on Saturday to ratify the treaty, which aims to cut both counties' nuclear stockpiles and allow inspections of each other's nuclear facilities. NATO leaders said approval of the document would ease security concerns in Europe.

On Saturday, NATO and Russia signed a joint statement that said the two sides share "common important interests and face common challenges."

In the document, Russia pledged to expand cooperation with NATO in its war in Afghanistan, offering to expand capacities for the transit of goods and personnel over its territory and more Russian helicopters and training for pilots in the Afghan military. Russia also agreed to set up a new training program for anti-drug officials from Afghanistan and other Central Asian states.

Medvedev told reporters Saturday that NATO and Russia still seriously disagree over the 2008 war with Georgia and Russia's subsequent recognition of independence for Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia's two separatist republics. He said, however, that the disagreement would not hinder cooperation between Moscow and the alliance.

Meanwhile, the new NATO strategy approved Friday states that the alliance's doors are open to new members.

Moscow has complained about NATO expansion, which has brought its members right up to Russia's borders.

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