

U.S. Reassures Poles on Russia Missile Defense Role

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WARSAW — A senior U.S. arms control negotiator said Friday that she had reassured Poland and the Baltic nations that plans to involve Russia in developing European missile defense would not compromise their security.

U.S. President Barack Obama has scrapped Bush-era plans for radar and interceptor missiles in Eastern Europe that Moscow saw as a threat to its own security and has invited Russia to join a revised blueprint that involves shorter-range interceptors.

Russia has cautiously accepted the offer but says it must have significant input, raising concerns among ex-Soviet satellites such as Poland, now NATO members, that Moscow may have a de facto veto over the development of missile defense.

Rose Gottemoeller, assistant secretary of state for arms control, said she has heard concerns across the region about Russian threats to build up its stockpile of tactical weapons in Kaliningrad, a Russian territory wedged between Poland and Lithuania.

Russia has not said whether it has nuclear weapons in Kaliningrad, but officials in neighboring countries are convinced they are there. Lithuanian Defense Minister Rasa Juknevičienė said last week that it's "no secret" that Russia has tactical weaponry in Kaliningrad.

"There is a generalized concern about Kaliningrad and Russian propensity to, every time a concern is aroused in Moscow, to say, well, 'time to bring something else to Kaliningrad,'" Gottemoeller said.

But she told reporters after meeting Polish officials that she has "really stressed in my talks that the guiding principle, as set out by President Obama in Lisbon, is that NATO protects NATO."

"We have resolved, and NATO has resolved, to develop robust cooperation with Russia on missile defense. ... There is a will in all NATO capitals to make this work," said Gottemoeller, who has also visited Ukraine and NATO members Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in the past few days.

"The signals [from Russia] are very good," she added, citing discussions between U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Munich last weekend.

In Munich, the United States and Russia formally inaugurated their New START nuclear arms treaty that caps two years of work to "reset" relations strained by the disagreements over missile defense and other issues.

Poland has been pursuing its own "reset" in long-chilly ties with Russia but is sensitive to any sign that Washington may concede too much to Moscow, whose support Obama needs on issues such as Iran and Afghanistan.

At a NATO summit last November, the allies agreed to develop a new missile defense shield linking systems in the United States and Europe to protect member states against long-range attacks from regions such as the Middle East.

The plans involve the stationing of ship-based interceptors in the Mediterranean from this year, followed by land-based interceptors in Romania from 2015 and in Poland from 2018.

Despite its agreement to take part in the initiative, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has said Russia could deploy nuclear weapons and "strike forces" if it were shut out of the Western missile shield.

(Reuters, AP)

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