

Lavrov and Rogozin Rap NATO Missile Shield

By [Alexandra Odynova](#)

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Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov speaking at a press conference at NATO's headquarters in Brussels on Thursday. **Sebastien Pirlet**

BRUSSELS — Officials clashed at a NATO-Russia meeting over a missile defense shield in Europe on Thursday, with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov reiterating a Kremlin threat to deploy missiles in Kaliningrad after NATO's chief accused Russia of wasting money.

Lavrov said Russia's position on the issue hadn't changed and reminded NATO officials of President Dmitry Medvedev's warning last month that Russia was ready to point missiles in Kaliningrad and other parts of the country at the U.S.-led shield unless Russian concerns were met.

Lavrov complained that NATO was not yet ready for cooperation that would answer concerns that the shield might pose a security threat to Russia and asked NATO member states not to underestimate Russia.

“We would like our intellectual abilities and our military expertise, which also exists, to be treated with respect when we are called for cooperation,” Lavrov said, speaking in Russian at a brief news conference after the two-day meeting in Brussels.

NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said Wednesday that Russia’s missile deployment plan was “a waste of valuable money” against “an artificial enemy.”

On Thursday, Fogh Rasmussen rejected Russian criticism that NATO was ignoring its concerns and added that the defense alliance did not “consider Russia as an enemy.” He expressed hope that the missile defense shield flap could be resolved by a NATO summit that Russia has been invited to attend in Chicago in May.

Considering Russia’s tough position and the scant progress achieved over the past year, the deadlock could well continue after the summit.

Thursday’s meeting was preceded by “unprecedentedly harsh rhetoric from Russia,” a NATO diplomatic source told The Moscow Times on condition of anonymity, citing a lack of authorization to comment on the issue. “And everyone sees here that Medvedev’s remarks can’t assist the progress in the conflict’s resolution.”

As an example illustrating Russia’s concerns, Lavrov mentioned that the defense missile plan includes a U.S.-Turkey agreement to set up a “powerful radar” on Turkish territory against the perceived threat of a missile attack from Iran. “A similar radar is already located there. The new radar will double up with the existing one and will also cover a great part of the Russia territory,” Lavrov told reporters.

The NATO source replied: “But Russia has radars that cover Europe, so why can’t other radars cover Russia?”

Russia’s NATO envoy, Dmitry Rogozin, linked Kremlin support for NATO’s Afghanistan campaign to a resolution on missile defense. “Mr. Lavrov said that for us, cooperation is a complex of all the projects,” Rogozin told reporters, Reuters reported. “You can’t say to us: ‘No on the anti-missile shield, but yes for the other projects.’”

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