

NATO Hopeful as Missile Shield Tension Builds

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NATO Deputy Secretary-General Alexander Vershbow is optimistic that the missile shield talks currently on in Moscow can yield positive results. **Igor Tabakov**

Moscow's criticism of NATO's missile defense plans is overblown and based on false assumptions, but both sides can still clinch a deal on cooperation, the Western alliance's second-highest civilian official said Thursday.

"When it comes to science, there is a broad consensus among Western experts that the Russian case is exaggerated," Deputy Secretary-General Alexander Vershbow told The Moscow Times in an interview.

Vershbow spoke on the sidelines of a Defense Ministry-sponsored conference on missile defense, in which Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov said talks had reached a dead-end and General Staff chief Nikolai Makarov warned that Russia might even launch a preemptive strike against NATO.

“A decision to use destructive force preemptively will be taken if the situation worsens,” Makarov was quoted [as saying](#) by RIA-Novosti.

Moscow has balked at the NATO-backed U.S. plans to deploy a system of radars and interceptors to protect European allies from attacks by states like Iran, saying it could neutralize Russian military capabilities. Makarov also renewed threats about placing short-range Iskander missiles in southern and northwestern Russia to counter the system’s “destabilizing” effect.

But Vershbow, who served as U.S. ambassador to Russia from 2001 to 2005 and was assistant defense secretary before moving to NATO in February, said a much-touted digital presentation by the Russian military’s top brass at the conference failed to convince him.

“It was very professionally done, but we still do not find it convincing because it is clear that the Russians are using false assumptions to prove their case,” he said.

One of those assumptions is that NATO could shoot down a Russian rocket before it has spent its fuel. Vershbow explained that this would not be possible even after the European missile shield is fully in place. He added that the shield’s size and quality would never reach proportions necessary to threaten Russia’s capacities.

“We would need 20 times more interceptors,” he said.

The deputy secretary-general complained that government officials downplayed facts that were well-known in the country. As proof, he produced an article [published](#) last month by retired Generals Viktor Yesin and Yevgeny Savostyanov in Nezavisimaya Gazeta, who concluded that NATO’s missile system won’t significantly reduce Russia’s capabilities.

But Makarov reiterated the official position Thursday by saying Defense Ministry research showed that once the shield reached its third and fourth stages, “the capability to intercept Russian intercontinental ballistic missiles will be real.”

At a later news conference, U.S. State Department special envoy Ellen Tauscher played down Makarov’s comments on preemptive measures

“We’ve heard it before,” she said. “We think that’s off on the horizon. We think they were showing us what could happen. I think we’re far from there, but we’re aware of what they’re saying.”

Vershbow also said he saw no dead-end in the talks.

“Clearly the Russians have dug in some of their positions, ... but I detected a clear willingness to lead a dialogue,” he said.

As an example, Vershbow pointed out that Makarov told the conference that guarantees that NATO’s shield won’t be turned against Russia could take various forms.

Moscow’s demand for legal guarantees has become one of the biggest obstacles because NATO officials have made it clear that members’ parliaments would never agree.

Vershbow pointed out that U.S President Barack Obama promised Senate leaders that his administration will accept no limitations on the shield's capabilities. He reiterated NATO's offer to reaffirm assurances not to use force against each other made in a treaty with Russia in 1997.

But he added that Moscow should just agree on a cooperation deal.

"[This is the] best guarantee they can get," he said.

Apart from the NATO contingent, Washington also sent a delegation to the Moscow conference. The eight officials will also visit sites for the A-135 missile defense system that protects the Russian capital.

Vershbow also dismissed fears that relations would further suffer when the alliance officially takes control of the shield at a summit in Chicago later this month by arguing that Moscow is well aware of the alliance's plans.

"I hope this won't cause any new difficulties ... because this is not going to be a real surprise to Russia," he said, adding that there was ample time for negotiations until the shield enters its planned second phase when interceptors are deployed in Romania in 2015.

NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said Thursday that the alliance would continue to seek an agreement after the May 20-21 summit.

"We will continue our dialogue with Russia ... after the Chicago meeting," he said in London, Reuters reported.

Russia also plays a prominent role in NATO's troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, which tops the summit's agenda because the alliance plans to transport the bulk of its military equipment via Russian rail and airspace.

President-elect Vladimir Putin has said he will not attend the Chicago event, but Rasmussen has invited Moscow to send a representative to a meeting of countries contributing to the Afghanistan operations.

NATO hopes to conduct much of the withdrawal through a Russian cargo airport in Ulyanovsk, but the plans are up in the air since the government has met an unexpected wave of resistance, including a short-lived hunger strike by Communist activists who criticize letting the Western alliance utilize a base in the country's strategic heartland.

Vershbow said Thursday that Moscow had not indicated when it would agree to such a deal and expressed hope that the "misunderstandings" can soon be resolved.

Analysts have said the protests are the result of the Kremlin's long-running policies of demonizing the Western alliance as an enemy, but Vershbow pleaded that both sides have to overcome lingering reservations.

"I take it as a sad reminder that there is still a lot of suspicion and old thinking about NATO here in Russia — just as there is still some old thinking about Russia in NATO countries — and the best way to get past that is to find ways to cooperate to mutual benefit so that people can

see that this is a win-win story for everybody,” he said.

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