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US Scraps Missile Defense Opposed by Kremlin

By Alexander Bratersky

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Chuck Hagel

Newly appointed U.S. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel said the U.S. would scrap part of its European missile defense shield, which has faced the biggest opposition from Russia.

The U.S. intends to cancel the fourth phase of the missile defense system, which can in theory shoot down some Russian intercontinental ballistic missiles. The first three phases, which target medium- and short-range missiles, will remain intact.

Hagel, who made his announcement at a Pentagon news conference Friday, said that instead of deploying SM-3 IIB land-based missiles in Poland, the U.S. will put 14 ground-based interceptors (GBIs) in Alaska by 2017.

The cost of the new deployment will amount to $1 billion, The Associated Press reported, citing U.S. Officials. U.S. authorities also said no interceptors would be deployed to Romania,

another planned site.

Hagel said the decision was made due to military funding cuts and a potential threat from North Korea. The totalitarian country has announced recently that it had cancelled a peace treaty with South Korea, a U.S. ally.

Hagel said that, by deploying additional interceptors in Alaska, the U.S. "will be able to add protection against missiles from Iran sooner while also providing additional protection against the North Korean threat," BBC reported.

A U.S. official told Itar-Tass on Sunday that the U.S. had informed Russia about its missile defense plans after Hagel's announcement. He spoke on condition of anonymity.

Meanwhile, Pentagon spokesman George Little told The New York Times on Saturday that Hagel's announcement was "in no way about Russia."

The deployment of the missile defense shield in Europe has been opposed by the Kremlin, which has seen it as a potential threat against its nuclear forces and called on the United States to provide written guarantees that the shield is not aimed against Russia.

President Vladimir Putin said in December that the European missile shield would render the Russian nuclear potential useless, which would upset the global strategic balance. In 2011 then-President Dmitry Medvedev said Russia could deploy Iskander missiles to the Kaliningrad region as a response to the U.S. plans.

The U.S. has argued that the shield was aimed against a possible missile threat from Iran. In March 2012, Ellen Tauscher, a State Department official, shared some information with Russia on European missile defense, but Russian officials called it "useless," Kommersant reported at the time.

Poland, the country where the interceptors were to be positioned, borders Belarus, a Russian ally.

It is the second time the Obama administration backs down on some of the U.S. missile defense plans in Europe. In 2009, the U.S. scrapped a missile defense site in Poland and a radar in the Czech Republic in favor of sea-based missile defense systems. The move was welcomed by Russia.

Tom Collina, research director at the Arms Control Association, said the intention to scrap SM-3 IIB missiles was a "win-win" situation for the United States, adding that the cancellation gave the country an opportunity to further negotiate arm reductions.

"We give up nothing since Phase 4 was not panning out anyway," he told the AP on Friday.

But Fyodor Voitolovsky, head of North American studies at the Institute for the Global Economy and International Relations, said the situation could "open a window of opportunities" to improve U.S.-Russian relations, but it would hardly lead to any new arms reductions.

"Strategic nuclear arms reductions are currently not on the agenda," said Voitolovsky, adding

that the cancellation of the fourth phase of the missile defense system was motivated primarily by the self-interest of the Americans.

Though the Kremlin has not yet reacted publicly to Hagel's announcement, analysts said the Russian authorities were unlikely to treat it as a significant concession.

"Russia understands that the United States needs a national missile defense system. But if it is positioned in France or Germany, it won't be a problem. The problem is that it will be close to our borders," military expert Igor Korotchenko, head of the National Defense magazine, said Saturday.

"The Russian position on European missile defense will remain the same and I believe that neither Putin nor the chief of staff have any illusions about the U.S. plans," Korotchenko said.

He added that the problem of the European missile defense might further complicate U.S.-Russian relations by 2020, when the shield is to be completed.

Independent political expert Georgy Bovt also said the plan to scrap the final phase of the missile defense shield can "lower the temperature" of Russia's talks with the U.S., but the problem would remain and resurface in "the near future."

He called the move a "tactical concession."

"The Americans are relocating their money to a place where they see a threat," he said, adding that it currently comes from North Korea.

Voitolovsky said the shift in the U.S. administration's attention to North Korea, which is backed by China, was also connected with its suspicions regarding Chinese military might.

"The priorities of the U.S. security policy are shifting toward the Asia-Pacific region," he said.

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