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Moscow Tones Down Criticism of New U.S. Missile Plans

By The Moscow Times

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The Foreign Ministry signaled Thursday that a change in U.S. plans for a European anti-missile shield could help the two sides make progress toward resolving a dispute that has severely strained ties between them.

On Friday, the United States announced plans to deploy 14 new anti-missile interceptors in Alaska after North Korea threatened a pre-emptive nuclear strike, and said it would forgo development of a new interceptor that would have been deployed in Central Europe.

Cold War-era foes Moscow and Washington have long been at loggerheads over the shield in Europe, and President Barack Obama's move in 2009 to scale down earlier, Bush-administration plans only offered a short-lived respite. Russia's main concern is that the European shield would weaken its nuclear deterrent.

Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said Thursday that the planned changes brought

a new element to the issue and called for further dialogue, although they did not dispel Moscow's concerns that U.S. missile defenses could threaten its security.

Ryabkov's remarks were more upbeat than Russia's initial, critical reaction to U.S. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel's announcement of changes in U.S. global missile defense plans Friday.

"There is no unequivocal answer yet to the question of what consequences all this can have for our security," Ryabkov told reporters.

"The causes for concern have not been removed, but dialogue is needed. It is in our interest and we welcome the fact that the American side also, it appears, wants to continue this dialogue," he said.

Washington says the anti-missile shield it has begun to deploy in Europe in cooperation with NATO nations is meant to counter a potential threat from Iran and poses no threat to Russia.

But Russia has said it would eventually enable the West to shoot down some Russian intercontinental ballistic missiles, tipping the post-Cold War balance of power, and has aired suspicions that this was the true aim of the system.

In its first official reaction to the new U.S. plan, the Foreign Ministry said Monday that Moscow would stick to its demand for binding guarantees that the system would not threaten Russia's security.

Ryabkov said Thursday that the United States had provided Russia with more information about its plans during his talks in Geneva this week with Rose Gottemoeller, the U.S. acting undersecretary of state for arms control and international security.

"The material is interesting. It brings something new into this situation," Ryabkov said. However, he added, "I would not venture to say now whether the decisions made by the [U.S.] administration are a plus or more of a minus."

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