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Russia Skeptical of Any Deeper Nuclear Cuts

By The Moscow Times

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Russia's top military officer on Thursday voiced skepticism about deeper nuclear arms cuts, saying they should require parallel reductions in non-nuclear precision weapons.

The statement by chief of Russia's military General Staff, Gen. Valery Gerasimov, appeared to signal the Kremlin's reluctance to negotiate a new nuclear arms deal with Washington.

President Barack Obama, who signed the landmark New Start arms treaty with Russia, has pledged to work with Moscow to seek further reductions in nuclear arsenals. But Russia, which has increasingly relied on its nuclear deterrent due to a relative weakness of its conventional forces, is worried about the U.S. edge in precision weapons.

"We can't take the path of cutting only strategic nuclear arsenals and leaving outside the framework of talks other weapons, in which some of our partners have an indisputable quantitative and qualitative advantage," Gerasimov said, adding that such approach would

hurt Russia's security.

While he did not mention the United States, Gerasimov appeared to refer to U.S. plans to fit conventional warheads to some of its long-range nuclear missiles. He said that such weapons should be part of arms control talks.

The United States has considered the development of so-called "prompt global strike" weapons that would allow the Pentagon to strike targets anywhere on the globe in as little as an hour. Such plans included modifying some of the existing nuclear-armed missiles to carry conventional warheads as well as designing new hypersonic vehicles capable of traveling at speeds at least five times the speed of sound.

Russia, which has lagged behind in designing such weapons, has strongly opposed the U.S. plans, saying it could tilt the balance of power.

"Such precision weapons, which don't fall under any qualitative, quantitative or territorial restrictions, can be used to target strategic facilities," Gerasimov said at Moscow's international security conference that was sponsored by the Defense Ministry.

Gerasimov's statement came as a clear indication that Russia would likely reject any attempts by Obama's administration to negotiate only on deeper nuclear arms cuts.

Russian officials said Obama offered Russia's President Vladimir Putin new ways to cooperate in a letter delivered last month by Tom Donilon, Obama's national security adviser.

The Kremlin wouldn't divulge the letter's content, but the business daily Kommersant reported last week that it included a proposal to negotiate deeper nuclear arms cuts and offered to sign a deal on information exchange to assuage Moscow's concerns about the U.S.-led NATO missile defense plans for Europe.

Gerasimov and other Russian officials, who spoke at Thursday's conference, reaffirmed Moscow's strong concern about the U.S. missile shield.

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