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Russia Will Target European Countries if They Host U.S. Nuclear Missiles — Putin

By Reuters

October 25, 2018



Kremlin.ru

President Vladimir Putin said on Wednesday that Russia would be forced to target any European countries that agreed to host U.S. nuclear missiles following Washington's withdrawal from a landmark Cold War-era arms control treaty.

Speaking at a news conference after holding talks with Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, Putin said he wanted to discuss what he called dangerous U.S. plans to leave the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty with U.S. President Donald Trump.

The two leaders are expected to hold talks in Paris on Nov. 11.

Russia has called Trump's decision to quit the 1987 treaty, which eliminated both countries' land-based short- and intermediate-range ballistic missiles from Europe, dangerous. Trump has accused Russia of violating the treaty, something Moscow denies. It says Washington is

the one violating it.

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U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton told Putin on Tuesday that Washington would press ahead with plans to quit the pact despite objections from Russia and some European countries.

Putin told reporters on Wednesday that Russia would have to respond in kind and would do so swiftly if the United States quit the pact.

"Answering your question directly, can we respond," Putin said, when asked what Russia would do if Trump made good on his pledge to leave the treaty. "We can, and it will be very fast and very effective," he said.

"If the United States does withdraw from the INF treaty, the main question is what they will do with these [intermediate-range] missiles that will once again appear."

"If they will deliver them to Europe, naturally our response will have to mirror this, and European countries that agree to host them, if things go that far, must understand that they are putting their own territory at risk of a possible counter-strike."

Looming arms race

Putin said he did not understand why it was necessary to put Europe in such danger, saying it was a situation that Russia itself wanted to avoid if possible.

NATO's top official on Wednesday blamed Russia for breaching the treaty, but said he did not believe the Russian threat would lead to new deployments of U.S. missiles in Europe.

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Russia has the option of deploying intermediate-range missiles in its European exclave of Kaliningrad on the Baltic Sea, a move that would put a swath of Europe in range.

Putin said he feared the world might be about to slip into an arms race, saying the fate of another U.S.-Russian arms control treaty — the new START pact — which governs strategic nuclear missile launchers and is due to expire in 2021, was also unclear.

"If all this is dismantled, then nothing will be left when it comes to limiting the increase in arms," said Putin. "And then the situation will be, in my view, extremely dangerous. All that will be left is an arms race."

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