

RELEASE IN FULL

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Subject: Russia criticises latest U.S. missile defence deal (Reuters)

MOSCOW (Reuters) - Russia said on Thursday moves by the United States to create a NATO-wide missile shield could undermine its security, ramping up criticism of the project following a new deal that will see U.S. anti-missile warships deployed on the Spanish coast.

The agreement with Spain "cannot fail to cause concern," the Foreign Ministry said in a statement. It said the deployment would represent a "significant increase in U.S. anti-missile capabilities in the European zone".

The criticism clouds prospects for cooperation between the former Cold War superpowers on the European missile shield.

U.S. President Barack Obama's plan calls for an initial deployment of ship-based anti-ballistic missiles in the Mediterranean followed by ground-based systems in Romania, Poland and Turkey.

The system, which is expected to become fully operational in 2018, is designed to protect European NATO states and the United States from missile attack from countries such as Iran, which is developing longer-range missiles .

Obama pleased the Kremlin by scrapping his predecessor's plan for longer-range interceptor missiles in Poland and a radar installation in the Czech Republic, a move that helped to improve U.S.-Russia ties.

Moscow, however, says Obama's version could undermine Russia's security if it becomes capable of shooting down Russian nuclear missiles and has warned of a new arms race if its concerns are not dispelled.

"If events continue to develop this way ... the opportunity to turn missile defence from an area of confrontation into a subject of cooperation will be lost," the Foreign Ministry said.

Russia is demanding a legally binding guarantee that the system would not be aimed against Russia, something the United States is unlikely to provide because of strong opposition in Washington to any set restrictions on missile defence.

The U.S. ambassador to Russia expressed confidence this week that Russia and NATO would reach an agreement on missile defence cooperation -- a goal laid out by the former foes in November 2010 -- in time for an alliance summit next May.

But Russia warned that U.S. deployment plans such as the agreement with Spain were undermining chances for a deal.

The Foreign Ministry said it saw no sign the United States was prepared to address its desire for binding guarantees that the NATO system would not be a threat to Russia.

"On the contrary, we are seeing an ongoing effort to broaden the areas of deployment of U.S. anti-missile facilities," the Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

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