
A Caucasus Radar : American Missile Defense Will Extend To Russia's Southern Borders.

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Georgia or Azerbaijan might host an American radar station; The United States intends to deploy a radar in the Caucasus for its national missile defense system. This was announced by Lieutenant-General Henry Obering, head of the US Missile Defense Agency. Once again, as usual, we are hearing assurances that the new radar won't be aimed at Russia.

The United States intends to deploy a radar in the Caucasus for its national missile defense system. This was announced in Brussels by Lieutenant-General Henry Obering, head of the US Missile Defense Agency. It's as if the United States has heeded the words of Russian defense analysts who have recommended basing a radar in Turkey, for example, rather than the Czech Republic. Obering said that an additional radar of this kind "would be very useful for the anti-missile system, though not essential." If the radar's location turns out to be a former Soviet country in the Caucasus, NATO membership for that country would be fast-tracked automatically.

Presumably, this will be a mobile radar system which can be installed within days - similar to some Russian radar systems which are ready for use almost as soon as they leave the factory. The American radar would detect missile launches and transmit the data to a stationary radar in the Czech Republic.

Once again, as usual, we are hearing assurances that the new radar won't be aimed at Russia. In this case, it would be aimed at Iran.

Obering said: "We couldn't turn it around and track targets in Russia. And even if we could, the radar wouldn't see far enough into Russian territory to detect Russian missile launches." Obering is right in the sense that it would indeed be difficult for the radar to detect Russian missile launches, since its signals would be obstructed by the Caucasus mountain range to the north.

But Anatoly Kornukov, former Air Force commander, maintains that an American radar in the Caucasus "would directly affect Russia's national security," since it "would probably provide a 360-degree view" and its objective would be "to monitor our country's southern regions."

Exactly where in the Caucasus do the Americans intend to deploy a new radar by 2011? That still remains unknown. Most Russian military experts are inclined to believe it will be in Georgia or Azerbaijan.

Tbilisi has declared that military cooperation with the United States and NATO is one of its foreign policy priorities. The Georgians are already saying that the possible deployment of US missile defense elements in Georgia "might act as a deterrent factor in relation to Russia," and that "Russia might pose a more serious threat than Iranian missiles." Forces opposed to President Mikhail Saakashvili predict that "the Georgian leadership won't be able to say no to its patron." The Georgian leadership's recent statements about being prepared to send troops to Afghanistan are evidence of this.

Colonel-General Leonid Ivashov, vice president of the Geopolitical Studies Academy, maintains that the most likely radar location is Georgia, which "never refuses any request from the United States."

But Ivashov does not rule out the possibility of the radar being based in Azerbaijan.

The experts we approached for comments noted that American and Turkish military commanders have visited Azerbaijan recently.

However, the Baku government would also have to consider the disapproval of Moscow and Tehran. Experts also point out that Azerbaijan already hosts two American radar stations - but these are part of a Caucasus monitoring project, tracking sea targets that may involve terrorists; these radars have nothing to do with missile defense.

Official representatives of both potential host nations have denied all of these assumptions. The Georgian Foreign ministry said: "This issue is not on the current agenda in Georgian-American relations, and it has never been raised. No such request has been received, and we have not received any official communications regarding this matter." The Defense Ministry of Azerbaijan says it has no information about the possibility of American missile defense elements being deployed in Azerbaijan. Armenia, which maintains good relations with both Russia and America, also says it hasn't received any official requests from the United States about hosting a missile defense radar.

There is no precise information about what the American missile defense system entails, but Obering's statement was the first official admission that Washington won't confine itself to installing missile defense elements in the Czech Republic and Poland alone.

Until now, neither American military officials nor American diplomats had spoken directly of plans to install a radar in the Caucasus.

American missile defense commanders are now talking of ten missile defense elements, three of which will be based in Europe.

Moreover, for the first time, the US State Department has officially mentioned Ukraine among countries with which Washington is cooperating closely on missile defense. This statement came from John Rood, recently appointed as Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security. He also accused Moscow of pursuing some missile defense programs of its own, including defense against short-range missiles.

But let's get back to the Caucasus. The Gabala radar station in Azerbaijan has been operating since the Soviet era; Russia currently leases it. This radar is aimed at the Indian Ocean, tracking around 6,500 kilometers of airspace - Iran, Iraq, part of India. Russia would not object to sharing essential data with the Americans. But it seems that the Americans haven't abandoned the idea of deploying paired systems around Russia's borders: pairs of radars and anti-missile bases.

A Caucasus radar would be able to monitor the Russian Air Force's activities across the Black Sea, Armenia, and the Caspian Sea. It would even be able to monitor air defense tests and exercises at the Ashuluk firing range on the Lower Volga and the Sary-Shagan range in Kazakhstan. With some modifications, an American radar could be used

to interfere with the Russian early warning system radar in Azerbaijan.

Russian experts say that the Caucasus radar idea is primarily aimed against Russia's Topol-M ICBM, which can carry supersonic maneuverable warheads capable of penetrating any missile defense system. In future, radars and interceptor missiles in Europe and the Caucasus, along with resources on US territory, could be combined into a single missile defense system - a powerful shield.

It should be noted that facilities such as a radar for national missile defense can only be deployed in countries which are US allies within NATO. Consequently, any country which agrees to host an American radar would automatically be on the fast track to NATO membership.
