
Russia threatening new cold war over missile defence.

By Luke Harding in Moscow
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Kremlin accuses US of deception on east European interceptor bases

Russia is preparing its own military response to the US's controversial plans to build a new missile defence system in eastern Europe, according to Kremlin officials, in a move likely to increase fears of a cold war-style arms race.

The Kremlin is considering active counter-measures in response to Washington's decision to base interceptor missiles and radar installations in Poland and the Czech Republic, a move Russia says will change "the world's strategic stability".

The Kremlin has not publicly spelt out its plans. But defence experts said its response is likely to include upgrading its nuclear missile arsenal so that it is harder to shoot down, putting more missiles on mobile launchers, and moving its fleet of nuclear submarines to the north pole, where they are virtually undetectable.

Russia could also bring the new US silos within the range of its Iskander missiles launched potentially from the nearby Russian enclave of Kaliningrad, they add.

In an interview with the Guardian, the Kremlin's chief spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, said Moscow felt betrayed by the Pentagon's move. "We were extremely concerned and disappointed. We were never informed in advance about these plans.

It brings tremendous change to the strategic balance in Europe, and to the world's strategic stability."

He added: "We feel ourselves deceived. Potentially we will have to create alternatives to this but with low cost and higher efficiency." Any response would be within "existing technologies", he said. As well as military counter-measures, Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, also wanted "dialogue" and "negotiations", he added.

The Bush administration says the bases are designed to shoot down rogue missiles fired by Iran or North Korea. Its proposed system would be helpless against Russia's vast nuclear arsenal, it says.

But this claim has been greeted with widespread incredulity, not just in Russia but also among some of the US's nervous Nato allies. They include Germany, where the Social Democrat leader, Kurt Beck, warned last month that the US and Russia were on the brink of another arms race "on European soil".

Defence experts say there is little doubt that the real target of the shield is Russia. "The geography of the deployment doesn't give any doubt the main targets are Russian and Chinese nuclear forces," General Vladimir Belous, Russia's leading expert on anti-ballistic weaponry, told the Guardian. "The US bases represent a real threat to our strategic nuclear forces."

The threat of a new arms race comes at a time when relations between Russia and the US are at their worst for a decade. In February Mr

Putin accused the Bush administration during a speech in Munich of seeking a "world of one master, one sovereign". On Friday Russia's дума, or lower house or parliament, warned that the US's plans could ignite a second cold war. "Such decisions, which are useless in terms of preventing potential or imaginary threats from countries of the middle and far-east, are already bringing about a new split in Europe and unleashing another arms race," the declaration - passed unanimously by Russian MPs - said.

The same day Russia ruled out cooperating with the US over the shield.

"Despite certain signals received in recent days from the US side ... I see no political foundation for it," said Sergei Ryabkov, a foreign ministry spokesman.

Moscow now had little choice but to take the bases "into account in our strategic planning", he said.

Analysts said there was a common feeling in Russia that the US had reneged on an agreement after the collapse of the Soviet Union to abandon cold war politics. "Cold war thinking has prevailed, especially on the western side," Yevgeny Myasnikov, a senior research scientist at Moscow's Centre for Arms Control, told the Guardian. "Russia has been deeply disappointed by what has happened after 1991. Nato started to expand, and the US started to think it had won the cold war. We had hoped for a partnership. But it didn't happen."
