

Russians threaten to counter US shield

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Russia could site cruise missiles in Kaliningrad, the Russian enclave between Poland and Lithuania, if the US goes ahead with plans for a missile defence shield in central Europe, Russia's first deputy prime minister warned on Wednesday.

The televised comments by Sergei Ivanov – a possible successor to President Vladimir Putin – came two days after Mr Putin proposed using a new radar station being built in southern Russia in place of a planned US radar in the Czech Republic. The proposal was made during informal talks with US president George W. Bush in Kennebunkport, Maine.

"If our proposal is accepted, then the need will disappear for us to place ... new weapons, including missiles, in the European part of the country, including Kaliningrad, to counter those threats that ... will appear if the decision is taken to place the missile defence system in Poland and the Czech Republic," Mr Ivanov said.

His comments, during a visit to Uzbekistan, appeared calculated to reinforce Mr Putin's repeated warnings of a new arms race in Europe if the central European missile shield plan is implemented.

They continued Russia's carrot-and-stick approach to Washington's plans. Mr Putin warned last month that Moscow would once again target Europe with nuclear missiles if the US shield went ahead. He later proposed at the G8 summit that a former Soviet early warning radar in Azerbaijan be used as a substitute for the planned Czech radar.

The Pentagon welcomed the proposal – it was already considering trying to place a forward radar in the Caucasus – but made clear it could not replace the powerful tracking radar it wants to place in the Czech Republic.

Russian analysts and media had referred to missiles possibly being deployed in Kaliningrad after Mr Ivanov watched a test of a high-precision cruise missile for its existing Iskander missile system in May – on the same day Moscow tested a new intercontinental ballistic missile. But Mr Ivanov's words were the first time the threat had been made explicitly by a senior official.

Kaliningrad has remained heavily militarised since the Soviet era. It already houses Russian Tochka missiles, though these are shorter range than the Iskander.

"[Cruise missiles] in Kaliningrad would be a direct military threat to Poland and Germany," said Ivan Safranchuk, an analyst at the World Security Institute.

Mr Ivanov suggested the latest Russian proposals on co-operation could defuse the missile defence issue. But it was unclear whether Mr Putin's proposal on a southern Russian radar station referred to the powerful tracking radar, which the US says is crucial because of its precision tracking which helps interceptors lock on to incoming missiles, or just another early warning radar.

Formerly the German-speaking region of East Prussia, Kaliningrad became part of the Soviet Union after 1945. In the cold war it was a military base and closed to outsiders. After the break-up of the USSR in 1991, Kaliningrad became an enclave cut off from Russia.

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