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International

Russia preparing military response to U.S. missile plan

Luke Harding

Accuses Washington of deception on European bases

Moscow: Russia is preparing its own military response to the U.S.'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 was 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 U.S. silos within the range of its Iskander missiles launched potentially from the nearby Russian enclave of Kaliningrad, they add.

According to the Kremlin's chief spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, 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."

Alternatives

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. 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 U.S.'s nervous NATO allies. They include Germany, where Social Democrat leader Kurt Beck warned last month that the U.S. 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," Gen



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Vladimir Belous, Russia's expert on anti-ballistic weaponry, said. ``The U.S. 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 U.S. 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". —

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