

Russian claims of scarce talks with U.S. on Polish, Czech missile defense groundless – NATO

VIENNA. APRIL 23. INTERFAX CENTRAL EUROPE - Russian claims of insufficient consultation by the United States on the plan to deploy elements of its missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic have no basis in fact, NATO spokesman Robert Pszczel told the Europe-Russia Forum in Vienna Monday.

"First of all, there has been a lot of consultation," Pszczel said. "The United States have had consultations on many levels, and we have had several consultations on an expert level."

Poland and the Czech Republic are expected to agree to the U.S. proposal to deploy the so-called "missile shield," with ten anti-ballistic missile interceptors to be placed at an extraterritorial base in the former and radars in the latter. The plans have caused Russian anger and threats the nuclear power would aim its own missiles at Czech and Polish targets.

The United States, Poland and the Czech Republic all insist the interceptors are directed against potential attacks by so-called rogue states, such as Iran or North Korea, and are not aimed at Russia. Officials point out a meager ten interceptors would be no match to Moscow's huge nuclear arsenal.

But Russia, which has hundreds of interceptors deployed in a circle around its capital, remains skeptical.

"When my friends at NATO tell me that it's a shield from North Korean missiles, I'm sorry, it doesn't work," Andrei Fedorov, political projects director at Russia's Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, told the forum. "I know North Korea quite well and they unfortunately don't have a chance, or rather fortunately they don't have a chance to reach Europe with their missiles in their lives. Now missiles from Iran – that could work."

Some independent analysts also are critical of the handling of the situation, though they apportion the blame equally to all sides.

"This has been a classic example of how not to handle a rather delicate defense situation," Fraser Cameron, director of the EU-Russia center in Brussels, said. "Complete lack of consultation by Washington, the refusal by the Polish and Czech governments to recognize that this is part of the European defense agenda, and Russia completely overreacting. It has been a complete mess and, crucially, it could have been easily avoided."

Bur Pszczel dismissed the criticism of the approach adopted by the relevant governments to the issue.

"When two NATO allies, the United Kingdom and Denmark, have been part of the U.S. missile defense for many years, it is hard to describe a bilateral approach – which is in fact quite normal in such matters – as something to be scared of."

The U.S. proposal seemed, however, to find few enthusiasts.

"I am no fan of the missile defense system," Donald Jensen, director of communications at Radio Free Europe, said. "I think the American proposal is interesting, because it raises a lot of questions [...] and there are no answers."

While the focus was squarely on the problems with the U.S. proposal, Russia's aggressive reaction to the U.S. plans have won it few friends, analysts also said.

"Reallocation of strategic weapons to western Russia would be punishing Europe for an issue that is not European in origin, [though] it is European in execution," Jensen said.

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