

China and Allies Back Russia Against U.S.-NATO Global Missile Shield

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ASTANA: Russia won the backing of China and other members of a regional security body in criticizing U.S. plans for a missile shield, saying on Wednesday it could undermine global security.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a security bloc grouping Russia, China and four ex-Soviet Central Asian states, signed a declaration condemning any unilateral build-up of missile defenses after their leaders met in the Kazakh capital.

"The unilateral and unlimited build-up of missile defense by a single state or by a narrow group of states could damage strategic stability and international security," the six members of the SCO said in the declaration.

Apart from regional heavyweights China and Russia, the SCO also includes the mostly Muslim ex-Soviet Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Iran, Pakistan, India and Mongolia have observer status in the body, set up 10 years ago to promote regional cooperation.

Moscow has recently stepped up criticism of U.S. plans to deploy missile defenses in Europe and has pressed for binding guarantees that the system would not weaken Russia's nuclear arsenal.

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev has threatened a new Cold War-style arms race if Moscow and Washington fail to resolve the missile defense spat.

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The United States says its planned shield is meant to reduce the threat of a missile attack by Iran. Moscow says it fears the true aim is to neutralize Russia's own nuclear arsenal.

"The Russian bear sits in its lair, and the NATO huntsman comes over to his house and asks him to come hunt the rabbit....Why do your rifles have the caliber to hunt the bear, not the rabbit?" Russia's NATO envoy Dmitry Rogozin said at a panel talk at London's Royal United Services Institute think-tank.

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Russia and China have often voiced unity in opposition to perceived U.S. global dominance. As permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, they have expressed opposition to Western-led resolutions, including an effort to condemn Syria's...crackdown on anti-government protests.

"The task of preserving global peace and promoting common development is getting more arduous and more onerous," Chinese President Hu Jintao said.

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Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who has upstaged previous SCO meetings, delivered a fiery 10-minute speech calling on members of the bloc to unite against Western powers.

"I believe that, through concerted actions, it is possible to change the general course of the world order in favor of peace, justice and peoples' prosperity," Ahmadinejad said at the end of a tirade against Western countries.

Russian news agency Interfax quoted Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari as reiterating his country's wish to become a fully fledged SCO member. A source in the Russian delegation, who asked not to be identified, said neither India nor Pakistan could join until they resolve their own territorial row.

(Additional reporting by Dmitry Solovyov, Ben Blanchard and Chris Buckley in Astana and Mohammed Abbas in London; Writing by Robin Paxton and Steve Gutterman; Editing by Alistair Lyon)

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