

NATO Unveils 'Working' European Missile Shield At Chicago Summit

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CHICAGO — NATO has announced that its long-planned European missile shield is up and running, with a basic capability to shoot down incoming missiles.

NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen made the announcement at the end of the first day of the NATO summit in Chicago.

Rasmussen said the shield's "interim capability" stage is the first step in the goal of providing full coverage and protection for all NATO Europe populations, territory, and forces from threats outside the Euro-Atlantic area by 2022.

Russia has vociferously opposed the missile shield, calling it a national-security threat despite U.S. insistence it is meant to defend against missiles from Iran or other rogue states.

A look ahead at what leaders are discussing at the NATO summit

With the missile-shield announcement, leaders crossed off one of their three stated priorities for the two-day meeting. The other two include a plan to keep the military alliance strong and relevant in the 21st century and, more immediately, agreeing how NATO will help Afghanistan attain peace and stability after combat operations end in 2014.

'We Will Stand Together'

Summit host U.S. President Barack Obama officially opened the gathering by welcoming hundreds of foreign leaders and their delegations to his hometown of Chicago, the first place in the United States outside Washington to host a NATO summit. Fresh off a morning meeting with Afghan President Hamid Karzai, Obama set the stage for what the leaders hope to accomplish.

"Over the next two days we'll meet — first as allies and then with President Karzai and our international partners — to chart the next phase of the transition in Afghanistan," Obama told participants. "Just as we've sacrificed together for our common security, we will stand together, united in our determination to complete this mission."

Following his meeting with Karzai, Obama said that "the world is behind the strategy" that the alliance agreed to in Lisbon 18 months ago to end the war. The main work at the summit will involve deciding how to implement it, he said.

Obama also warned of "hard days ahead" but said he and the Afghan leader agreed that the

end of the war is in sight and things are on the right track.

'Resilient Opponent' In Afghanistan

For his part, Karzai thanked the American people for their "taxpayer dollars" that have paid for his country's multiyear battle against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda and looked ahead to a day when the fighting ends.

"We have had a good meeting today in which Afghanistan reaffirmed its commitment to the transition process and to the completion of it in 2013 and the completion of the withdrawal of our partners in 2014 so that Afghanistan is no longer a burden on the shoulders of our friends in the international community."

But between now and then, the top commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan warned, fierce fighting lies ahead.

General John Allen said he did not want to "understate the challenge" ahead, adding, "The Taliban is still a resilient and capable opponent."

European Anxiety

Battlefield injuries and deaths, along with the economic crisis, have made the war deeply unpopular in many European countries, including France, where newly elected President Francois Hollande has promised to end the country's combat involvement two years early.

On day one of the summit, German Chancellor Angela Merkel reminded allies of the NATO credo "In together, out together."

But Hollande said his decision to bring France's 3,400 troops home this year was a "pragmatic" decision based on a pledge made during his campaign. The current international fighting force stands at 130,000, including 98,000 U.S. troops.

The first day of the summit also saw Secretary of State Hillary Clinton meeting with Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari to discuss efforts to reopen major roads used to supply NATO fighting forces in Afghanistan.

Pakistan closed the supply routes in November after a U.S. air strike killed two dozen Pakistani soldiers. White House officials said no deal was reached on May 20 but that there were "positive" signs.

May 21 will kick off with an early morning meeting on Afghanistan.

Outside the gathering, 45 demonstrators were arrested and four police officers reported injured when police clashed with antiwar protesters who marched on the summit. Police estimated about 3,000 people attended the protest on May 20, although many participants estimated that the crowd was larger. Organizers had been hoping to attract 10,000 people.

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