

NATO Urges Missile Defense Pact, Cites Iran Threat

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Global Research, March 26, 2010

[Reuters](#) 26 March 2010

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NATO states should agree at a summit this year to make missile defense systems against states including Iran an alliance mission and look at every opportunity to cooperate on this with Russia, the head of NATO says.

In a speech prepared for delivery at a conference in Brussels Saturday, alliance Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said a NATO-wide missile defense system would show collective will to defend against a growing threat.

"We need a decision by NATO's next summit in November that missile defense for our populations and territories is an alliance mission. And that we will explore every opportunity to cooperate with Russia," Rasmussen said in an advance text of the speech made available by NATO.

In reiterating his wish to see collaboration with Russia, Rasmussen said this required a decision by Moscow "to see missile defense as an opportunity, rather than a threat."

He said current trends showed a "real and growing" threat from weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery, with more than 30 countries possessing or developing missiles with greater and greater ranges.

"In many cases, these missiles could eventually threaten our populations and territories," he said.

Iranian Missile Threat

Iran, which the West suspects of working to produce nuclear weapons, has said it possesses missiles with a range that would put NATO members Turkey, Greece, Romania and Bulgaria within reach, Rasmussen said.

If Tehran were to complete development of intermediate and intercontinental missiles after taking a key step in introducing its SAFIR 2 space-launch vehicle last year, "then the whole of the European continent, as well as all of Russia would be in range," he said.

"Proliferators must know that we are unwavering in our determination to collective defense."

Russia reacted positively when Rasmussen called last September for cooperation in missile defense, but has questioned the motives of the U.S. system any pan-NATO system would be linked up with, saying it should be properly consulted on plans.

Last year, U.S. President Barack Obama shelved Bush-era plans to install a land-based

missile shield in Europe to guard against long-range threats from Iran, in favor of sea-based interceptors and a second-phase of land-based systems to which existing anti-missile hardware in NATO states could be linked.

Some security experts say that despite NATO enthusiasm for Russian missile defense involvement, technical and security problems mean this would take years and cooperation was unlikely to go beyond limited exchange of early warning data.

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