

Russia's Putin talks U.S. Missile Defense, NATO, Iran in Munich

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Russian President Vladimir Putin, attending an international security conference in Munich Saturday, spoke on U.S. missile defense, NATO expansion, Iran's nuclear problem and the Energy Charter.

U.S. Missile Defense

Putin said deployment of a U.S. missile defense system in Central Europe could trigger a new spiral of the arms race.

The Russian leader told the 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy that the reasons the U.S. cited in favor of deploying a missile defense system in Europe are not convincing enough, as launching North Korean ballistic missiles against the U.S. across western Europe would be in conflict with the laws of ballistics.

"This clearly contradicts ballistics laws. Or, as we say in Russia, it's the like trying to reach your left ear with your right hand," he said.

Putin also said the U.S. ignores the basic principles of international law and is striving to impose its own rules on other countries.

"We are seeing increasing disregard for the fundamental principles of international law," the Russian president said.

Washington has recently moved its largest sea-based missile defense radar in the Pacific from Hawaii to the Aleutian Islands, not far from Russia's Kamchatka Peninsula. It has also announced plans to install a radar system in the Czech Republic and a missile interception system in Poland, which it says it needs to protect itself against a potential threat from Iran.

Putin reiterated that Russia's response to U.S. plans will be asymmetric.

At an annual news conference at the beginning of February, Putin called Washington's justification of the missile shield unconvincing, and pledged to amend Russia's military strategy.

"All our responses will be asymmetric, but highly effective," the president said then.

The Russian leader also said that despite all differences with the U.S., he believes U.S. President George Bush to be his friend.

“He is an honest person. I know that he is open to dialogue – and he is open to persuasion,” Putin said.

He said Russia and the U.S. will never be enemies. Commenting on Bush’s words that Russia and the U.S. will never be adversaries or enemies, the Russian president said: “I agree with him.”

Putin said Russia is committed to its obligations on the reduction of nuclear warheads by 2012.

The Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty, signed on May 24, 2002 by Vladimir Putin and U.S. President George Bush in Moscow, and expiring December 31, 2012, limited both countries’ nuclear arsenals to 1,700-2,200 warheads each. The treaty has been criticized for a lack of verification provisions and the possibility of re-deploying stored warheads.

“I hope that our partners will also act in a transparent manner and will not try to stash away an extra couple hundred nuclear warheads against a rainy day,” Putin said.

The Russian president also said Russia has prepared a draft treaty on preventing the deployment of weapons in outer space.

“It will be submitted to our partners as an official proposal in the very near future,” Putin said.

Putin called on the international community to resume dialogue on nuclear nonproliferation.

“Russia speaks for the resumption of dialogue on this most important issue. It’s necessary to preserve stability of the international legal disarmament base, and ensure the continuity of the nuclear arms reduction process,” he said.

NATO Expansion

Putin said NATO’s eastward expansion is affecting Russia’s relationship with the North Atlantic alliance and has nothing to do with modernizing the military bloc.

Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, and the three Baltic states – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – joined NATO in 2004. Georgia and Ukraine have recently been actively seeking to join the alliance. Russia has strongly protested the deployment of NATO bases on the territory of newly admitted member nations.

“It is evident that the process of NATO expansion has nothing to do with modernizing the alliance or with ensuring security in Europe. On the contrary, it is seriously eroding mutual trust,” the Russian leader said.

Putin said NATO’s expansion toward Russia’s borders has nothing to do with countering global threats, specifically terrorism.

“Why do they have to move their military infrastructure closer to our borders?” he said. “Is this connected with overcoming global threats today?”

The Russian leader said the main threat for Russia, the U.S. and Europe is international terrorism, which can only be fought through joint efforts.

Putin also said attempts to impose a concept of a unipolar world could lead to new conflicts.

"Today we are observing unrestrained, hypertrophied use of force in international affairs, a force that plunges the world into an abyss of recurring conflicts," Putin said.

He said the use of military force in international relations may only be justified on the basis of principles enshrined in the UN Charter.

"I am convinced that the UN Charter is the only legitimate decision-making mechanism for the use of military force as a last resort," he said.

"The UN must not be replaced either by NATO or the European Union," Vladimir Putin said.

Iran Problem

The Russian leader said Russia has not passed missile technology to Iran, but other countries, including European, did.

The Islamic Republic has been under international pressure since it resumed uranium enrichment in January 2006, which some Western countries suspect is part of a covert nuclear weapons program.

"I have no evidence to show that Russia, in the 1990s, helped Iran create its own missile technology. Other countries acted there. Technology was transferred through different channels. We have proof, and earlier I passed it directly to the U.S. president," Putin said.

"Technology is coming from Europe, from Asian countries. Russia has nothing to do with this," he said.

The Russian leader said he shares the concerns of the International Atomic Energy Agency, the UN nuclear watchdog, on Iran's nuclear program.

Although Tehran has repeatedly claimed its program is peaceful, the UN Security Council adopted a resolution in December imposing sanctions on the country.

The sanctions approved in response to Iran's nuclear ambitions banned activities involving uranium enrichment, chemical reprocessing, heavy water-based projects, and the production of nuclear weapons delivery systems.

Putin said military and technical cooperation between Russia and Iran is minimal.

"Russia supplied much less weaponry there than the U.S. or other countries did," he said, adding that Russia provided Iran with air defense systems with an effective range of 30 to 50 kilometers.

"We did that so that Iran would not feel driven into a corner," he said.

Putin said Iran has no missiles that could threaten Europe.

"As regards [fears that] Iran has missiles that could threaten Europe, you are wrong. Iran has missiles with a range of 1,600-1,700 km. Calculate how many kilometers it is from the Iranian border to Munich," the Russian leader said.

On February 23, the IAEA is expected to file a report on Iran's nuclear progress.

Russia, a key economic partner of Iran, has consistently supported the country's right to nuclear power under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and insisted that a previous, harsher draft of the resolution be revised and softened.

Energy Charter

Russia is already cooperating with European countries on the basis of principles recorded in the Energy Charter, but still does not want to ratify it, the Russian president told the Munich conference.

Russia has been unwilling to ratify the charter, which was drawn up as a mechanism of cooperation between Western and Eastern Europe on energy issues and signed at The Hague in 1991, as the document would force it to grant foreign investors free access to the country's oil and gas deposits and export pipelines.

"We have stated on numerous occasions that we are not against coordinating the principles of our relations with the European Union in the energy sphere. But we find the [Energy] Charter itself hard to accept," Putin said.

He said Russia's EU partners themselves are not observing the Charter, citing the nuclear materials market, which is still off limits to Russia.

"No one has opened it up for us. There are also other issues that I would not like to bring up just now," Putin said.

He also said Russia-EU energy relations should not be included in a new basic agreement replacing the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement.

"I do not think we should [include these relations in the basic agreement], as there are other [important] spheres in our interaction with the European Union, besides energy," he said.

Russia and the EU were set to begin talks on a new cooperation deal at the Russia-EU summit in Helsinki November 24 last year, but the negotiations were vetoed by Poland over Russia's ban on its meat exports and Moscow's refusal to sign the Energy Charter.

Kosovo Situation

Putin said Russia will only support a solution to the Kosovo problem that is suitable to all parties involved.

"Only the Kosovars and Serbs themselves may know what will happen in Kosovo," the Russian president said.

Consultations in Vienna between Belgrade and Pristina on the UN special envoy's proposals on Kosovo's future status have been postponed from February 13 to February 21, a deputy envoy said Friday.

United Nations envoy Martti Ahtisaari agreed to put off the talks on a request made on Monday by Serbian President Boris Tadic, requesting that Serbia hold the first session of parliament, elected January 21, in order to approve the new composition of a delegation to

the Vienna talks, and Belgrade's new political platform.

Albert Rohan said he expected the talks to end in early March, after which an adjusted text of Ahtisaari's proposals on the status of Kosovo could be submitted to the UN Security Council.

Earlier this month, Ahtisaari unveiled his Kosovo settlement plan, containing an implicit proposal to give independence to the predominantly ethnic Albanian region, which has been a UN protectorate since 1999. Belgrade has rejected the plan, saying it is willing to grant Kosovo broad autonomy, but that it will never let the province secede from Serbia.

Russian officials have repeatedly said that if Kosovo is granted sovereignty, the international community should also recognize as independent the separatist regions in the former Soviet Union, notably Georgia's Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and Moldova's Transdnestr.

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