

Russia Says U.S. Missile Plans Hamper Nuclear Arms Cuts Talks

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Washington's continued efforts to build a missile defense shield in Europe have complicated nuclear arms reduction talks with Russia, Russia's deputy prime minister said on Saturday.

"It is impossible to talk seriously about the reduction of nuclear capabilities when a nuclear power is working to deploy protective systems against vehicles to deliver nuclear warheads possessed by other countries," Sergei Ivanov said at an international security conference in Munich.

Russia and the United States are in talks to replace the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START 1), the cornerstone of post-Cold War arms control, which expired in December with a new deal.

Russia on Friday expressed concerns about Romania's decision to host missiles as part of a U.S. missile defense shield to protect European allies from possible Iranian attacks, and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov demanded "clarifications."

The planned deployment in Romania comes after President Barack Obama scrapped plans for a radar and interceptor missiles in the Czech Republic and Poland, which Russia fiercely opposed as a national security threat and a blow on its nuclear deterrent. Moscow threatened retaliatory measures.

Ivanov reiterated that Moscow will seek explanations from the United States on the planned deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in Eastern Europe.

He said Russia unilaterally cut its tactical nuclear arsenals by 75% in the early 1990s, but the United States did respond with a similar move and even failed to withdraw its weapons from Europe. Ivanov said Russia will demand that nuclear weapons be kept on the territory of countries which they belong to.

Ivanov, however, confirmed earlier reports that the new bilateral nuclear arms pact could be signed in the first half of this year adding that ratification may take place in the fall.

Last week, Obama and Russian leader Dmitry Medvedev ordered a speedy completion of the deal.

Obama and Medvedev pledged at their first meeting in April 2009 to replace the START I treaty as part of broader efforts to "reset" bilateral ties strained in recent years.

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