# US-Russian tensions mount

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Relations between the US and Russia, which have been deteriorating over the course of the year, grew more tense last week when Russia's NATO envoy, Dmitri Rogozin, said Moscow might cut off the only alternative US and NATO supply route into Afghanistan to routes through Pakistan that were shut down by Islamabad following the US attack on two Pakistani military bases at the end of November.

The Russian threat was the latest salvo in its increasingly bitter protest against US plans to deploy a missile defense system in Europe.

The Northern Distribution Network through Russia and former Soviet republics now accounts for at least 52 percent of NATO supplies for 130,000 coalition troops in Afghanistan. The route has been built up by the US and NATO since 2009 in response to repeated attacks on supply routes through Pakistan by forces opposed to the US-led war across the border in Afghanistan. NATO plans to ship up to 75 percent of all fuel to Afghanistan via the Northern Distribution Network by the end of the year.

The chief executive of the US-based defense analysis web site Stratfor, George Friedman, warned last Wednesday that were Pakistan and Russia to simultaneously suspend US-NATO access to supply routes, the US would "face the choice of going to war to seize supply lines—something well beyond US conventional capacity at this time—or to concede the war."

While Russian backing for the Afghan war makes its highly unlikely that Moscow would undertake such a move, Rogozin's threat underscores the intensity of the Kremlin's opposition to efforts by the US to shore up its position in Central and Eastern Europe by extending its military presence.

The Russian threat to close down the trans-Russia supply route into Afghanistan followed a sharp public statement by Russian President Dmitri Medvedev in late November against US plans to set up a missile defense system in Europe.

Washington recently concluded agreements to place 24 interceptor missiles in Romania as well as a sophisticated radar system in Turkey. While the anti-missile system is allegedly aimed at protecting Europe against a potential attack by Iran, Moscow fears it could be directed against Russian territory. This summer, NATO refused to sign a binding document stating that any future anti-missile defense system it established in Europe would not be directed against Russia.

Ongoing negotiations over the issue have not resolved the differences. On November 23, President Medvedev said bilateral discussions had failed. He instructed the Russian armed forces "to develop measures for disabling missile defense data and control systems," and warned the US that Russian strategic ballistic missiles would "be equipped with advanced missile defense penetration systems and new highly effective warheads."

The Russian president also announced that Moscow was considering withdrawing from the New START treaty, an agreement signed by President Obama and Medvedev in 2010 that provides for a reduction in certain types of nuclear weapons.

Commenting on Medvedev's statements, Maxim Shevchenko, a well known right-wing journalist and television presenter, told the Russian newspaper *Vzgliad* on November 24, "Finally it was stated clearly and firmly that rearmament is necessary, that there is a direct threat of war against the Russian Federation and that this threat comes from NATO, and not from Iran or North Korea." He concluded that Washington's backing for new sanctions against Syria, which Russia opposes, and Medvedev's statements regarding the anti-missile defense shield herald "the approaching World War III."

The latest disagreement between Moscow and

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Washington comes in the midst of growing tensions over a host of issues. Russia opposes the US drive for regime-change in Syria, recently using its position on the Security Council to block further sanctions against Damascus. Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who is expected to assume the presidency once again next year, was openly hostile to the installation of a pro-US government in Libya through the overthrow of Gaddafi.

One major point of concern for the US is the increasingly close relationship between Moscow and Berlin, which some fear could grow into an anti-American alliance that would call into question the viability of NATO.

In October, the Nord Stream pipeline, which delivers Russian gas directly to Germany while bypassing transit countries like Ukraine, Poland and Belarus, was launched, strengthening Russo-German relations. Economic ties between the two countries also continue to develop, with trade between them having increased by 35 percent since the beginning of this year, according to the German *Handelsblatt*.

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