

# Russian general threatens pre-emptive attack on US missile defence system in Europe

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On Wednesday, the Russian chief of the armed forces and deputy minister of defence, Nikolay Makarov, threatened pre-emptive attacks on missile-defence sites in Poland and other parts of eastern Europe. The threat came amidst deepening tensions between Moscow and Washington and just a few days before today's inauguration of Vladimir Putin as president.

Speaking at a conference on antiballistic policy in Moscow, Makarov said, "Taking into account a missile defence system's destabilising nature, that is, the creation of an illusion that a disarming strike can be launched with impunity, a decision on the pre-emptive use of the attack weapons available will be made when the situation worsens."

Makarov then gave a detailed description of the type of Russian short-range missiles that could target locations in eastern Europe. He complained that NATO has refused to offer any written guarantee that the missiles will not be directed against Russia and threatened to neutralise components of the defence system should NATO ignore Russia's concerns.

NATO reacted by downplaying the threats and insisting on the necessity of the missile defence system. NATO's deputy secretary, General Alexander Vershbow, said that "a lot of the countermeasures described by General Makarov were familiar, but I'd have to go back and do research.... We think the system we are developing poses no threat to Russia, so the whole notion of retaliation or countermeasures has no foundation."

Ellen O. Tauscher, the US special envoy for strategic stability and missile defence, stressed, "There's nothing I can imagine that will stop us making these deployments on time."

Following Makarov's threat, NATO's general secretary, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, had a conversation

with German chancellor Angela Merkel to prepare the NATO-Russia summit in Chicago in two weeks. Rasmussen emphasised that NATO didn't have any plans to attack Russia, while Merkel insisted that the defence system was "reasonable and correct".

The European missile defence system of NATO in eastern Europe has long been a point of contention between Russia and Washington. It was introduced in a provocative gesture under President George W. Bush and revived after a short halt under Barack Obama in the format of the so-called Phased Adaptive Approach. While the US and NATO claim that the system is directed against Iran, Russia quite reasonably suspects it is the real target.

In a recent analysis of the missile systems of all major countries in Asia, the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* concluded that China, Russia and Israel are the only countries with the military capacity to launch missile attacks on European territory. The newspaper therefore suggests that the defence system is primarily directed against China and Russia.

Such outright threats of military assaults on European countries from the mouth of a Russian general are unheard of since the end of the Cold War. All the more astonishing is the virtual silence of the international media on the incident. Major newspapers such as the *Guardian* and *Le Monde* did not even report his comments, and only a few German newspapers commented on them. In Russia and the US, too, the coverage was less extensive than one might have expected. It seems that the media and politicians have deliberately tried to downplay the event.

The threats by Makarov mark a serious escalation of the already tense relationship between Russia and the US. Russia, together with China, opposes the war preparations of US imperialism and its allies against

Syria and Iran, which the Kremlin sees as a direct threat to its economic and strategic interests in the region. Moscow and Beijing have blocked two UN-resolutions on Syria. Both countries also vehemently oppose a military strike by Israel and the US against Iran.

In a commentary in early April, General Leonid Ivashov equated a war against Iran with a war against Russia. The Kremlin has already undertaken preparations for an Israeli-US attack on Iran, in which case it is likely to provide military support for Teheran. Ivashov and other commentators in the Russian press increasingly call for an alliance with China, the main target of US imperialism.

Russia and China have already conducted a major joint naval exercise in the Yellow Sea in April (see “China and Russia hold joint naval exercises in North East Asia”). Notwithstanding the economic and geopolitical rivalry between Moscow and Beijing, particularly in Central Asia, both countries see their interests endangered by US aggression in the Middle East.

The unprecedented aggressive remarks by General Makarov came only a few days before today’s inauguration of Vladimir Putin as president of the Russian Federation. They cannot have been made without Putin’s consent.

The decision by the ruling elites for a third presidency of Putin, which was made after long hesitation in autumn last year, has been in large measure a response to the growing tensions with Washington. Relations have grown particularly tense after the war against Libya, which ran counter to Russian, Chinese and German interests. There were furious debates within the ruling elites in Russia, between Putin and Medvedev in particular, over how to respond to the aggressive activities of US imperialism.

Putin is known to favour a more aggressive stance toward the US than Medvedev. He is said to represent the interests of the so-called Siloviki, a section of the ruling elites recruited from the secret services and the military that favours a more aggressive stance by the Kremlin toward Washington.

It is worth recalling that Putin’s first presidency began in 2000 with the second war in Chechnya, which lasted four years and claimed the lives of up to 200 000 people. The assault on the North Caucasian republic was, on the one hand, a response to the growing

influence and military interference of the West in the oil-rich Caucasian region. On the other, it was a convenient way to divert from the social catastrophe that resulted from the restoration of capitalism in the former Soviet Union. The “war on terror” also provided an opportune pretext for a massive attack on the democratic rights of the population.

The Russian economy now faces the worst economic slump since the 1990s, and the endeavour to divert from growing social tensions remains a critical component of the Kremlin’s increasingly nationalist and aggressive rhetoric toward the West.

The threats by Makarov to launch pre-emptive military strikes in eastern Europe must not be taken lightly. They underline the growing geopolitical tensions between the major powers that threaten to plunge mankind into a third world war.



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