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U.S. offers Russia significant new concessions to gain support for missile shield

By Judy Dempsey, International Herald Tribune

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The United States has offered significant new concessions to Russia in its drive to gain Russian support for the antiballistic missile shield the Pentagon intends to deploy in Eastern Europe, according to U.S. and NATO officials.

The offer, made last week in Moscow by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Defense Secretary William Gates, was formally presented Wednesday to NATO ambassadors and top Russian security officials.

NATO diplomats said it was an important shift by the Bush administration as it seeks the endorsement of the 26-member alliance. The United States says the shield is a response to potential threats from rogue nations, principally Iran, while Russian officials have called the system a Trojan horse designed to counter Moscow's strategic rocket forces

"I consider the U.S. proposal on missile defense as very important," Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, the NATO secretary general, said in an interview. "The Americans have made a substantial and fundamental offer. I sincerely hope the Russians will pick it up."

The plan, presented to NATO by Daniel Fried, the assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs, and Lieutenant General Henry Obering, head of the U.S. Missile Defense Agency, contained several elements that diplomats said were part of a bigger package that would include the future status of Kosovo and the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty, an accord Russia has threatened to leave next month.

U.S. officials said the offer to Russia contained three main elements:

First, the antimissile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic would be deployed on the basis of threat. The United States and Russia would jointly decide the nature of the threat.

"Our missile defense program is threat-based," said Fried. "If that threat went away, or more realistically was greatly attenuated then obviously we would be much freer to make programmatic adjustments. Our program with the Poles and Czechs is threat-based."



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"Russia is interested in this idea," said Fried. "It has concerns about Iran, too. This could be a beginning in defining together the threats."

The second element would involve Russian plans to build its own shield in Gabala, Azerbaijan, which Putin announced in July at a G-8 summit meeting in Germany in response to the U.S plan. Obering said "this could be linked up to the U.S. plan through sharing data."

"By being able to share data across those networks, even at the very preliminary level, to be able to cut radars and that type of thing, you get increased capability," Obering said. "Then, if you actually tie it to where you could get a radar data all the way through from one U.S radar, for example, or a European radar into the Russian system and vice versa, that's when you start getting this expansion of capability."

Third, Russia would also be able to monitor what the U.S. was doing in Poland and the Czech Republic, provided both countries agreed. The plan is that Russia could send liaison officers to these countries. "We said we would be in a position to offer things with respect to our own facilities and command and control elements," Fried said.

The linkage of the shield debate to other issues represents a big change by the Bush administration which, until now, has had a splintered policy toward Russia over Iran, Kosovo and arms negotiations.

It involves the future status of the Serbian province of Kosovo as well as Russia's threat to suspend the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty, which has been a cornerstone of European security since the end of the Cold War.

The special "troika" on Kosovo, which consists of the United States, the European Union and Russia, will deliver its final report on Dec. 10 on the outcome of negotiations between Serbia and Kosovo over the province's status. Diplomats from the troika were at NATO headquarters this week to brief ambassadors on options in order to break the deadlock on possible independence for Kosovo.

The Europeans are very reluctant to recognize Kosovo's independence without UN backing. But most EU member states, frustrated by the lack of progress in negotiations between Serbia and Kosovo, may recognize independence if there is no breakthrough.

Russia insists that independence without consensus from the UN security council would be a dangerous precedent for other regions seeking independence.

A senior U.S. official said Friday "we are encouraged by the creativity" of the talks. "This is not a stalled process."