

Russia Warns of Missile Deployment

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MOSCOW — President Dmitri A. Medvedev of Russia greeted his future American counterpart, Senator Barack Obama, with bristling language on Wednesday, promising to place short-range missiles on Russia's western border if Washington proceeded with its planned missile defense system in Eastern Europe.

In a speech to the Federal Assembly, Mr. Medvedev said Russia had “no inherent conflict with America” and invited the new administration to start afresh with Moscow. However, he did not congratulate Mr. Obama on the election he had won only hours before, or even mention him by name.

Later in the day, the Kremlin announced that Mr. Medvedev had sent Mr. Obama a congratulatory telegram.

The speech — which was rescheduled twice in recent weeks for revisions as the financial crisis worsened — showed Mr. Medvedev asserting himself with concrete plans, including a proposal to lengthen the presidential term to six years from four. He harshly condemned state interference in civil society, calling for reforms that seemed to have been deferred by a string of crises this fall.

“The state bureaucracy, as 20 years ago, is being guided by the same old mistrust in the free individual and in free enterprise,” he said, in a state of the nation address that has been a tradition since 1994. “A strong state and an all-powerful bureaucracy is not the same thing. The former is an instrument which society needs to develop, to maintain order and strengthens democratic institutions. The latter is extremely dangerous.”

Mr. Medvedev also proposed new rules that would allow opposition parties marginally more representation in Parliament, challenging the consolidation of power that was the trademark of his predecessor, Vladimir V. Putin, who is now the prime minister. He also proposed granting slightly more self-determination in local administrations.

“He showed that he wants to be a real president,” said Konstantin V. Remchukov, editor in chief of the Independent Newspaper, a respected Moscow daily.

Sergei A. Karaganov, a prominent Russian political scientist, said he was “amazed” to hear Mr. Medvedev committing to liberalization at a time of crisis.

“It went against the wind,” Mr. Karaganov said. “At this juncture, we just need to see whether he follows up on it.”

As the speech approached, Mr. Medvedev faced intense pressure to calm nerves in Russia, crippled this fall by capital flight, a plunge in the stock market and a precipitous drop in oil prices. Mr. Putin typically gave the speech in the spring, using it to announce crowd-pleasing investments in infrastructure projects and social welfare programs.

Mr. Medvedev, by contrast, had to address the two shocks that had befallen Russia since he became president, the financial crisis and the war in Georgia, while combating the impression that Mr. Putin retained control over major decisions.

The speech he gave Wednesday, originally planned for Oct. 23, gave scant information about the government’s economic strategy going forward. It did, however, squarely lay blame for Russia’s troubles on the United States.

Mr. Medvedev said that American regulators had inflated a financial bubble and that the ensuing collapse “carried in its downfall to the trajectory of recession all financial markets of the planet.” He also said Washington had started the war in Georgia, saying, “Tskhinvali’s tragedy is, among other things, the result of the arrogant course of the U.S. administration, which hates criticism and prefers unilateral decisions.”

But it was the planned missile deployment, a possible early foreign policy test for Mr. Obama, that captured attention in the West on Wednesday.

Mr. Medvedev described specific measures Moscow would take if Washington went ahead with a plan to station a missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic. He said Russia would post mobile Iskander missiles — tactical weapons designed for use against targets like long-range artillery and airfields, in addition to missile defense systems — around

Kaliningrad, an enclave at Russia's western border. He also said Russia would use radio equipment to jam the Western missile defense system.

"These are forced measures," he said. "We have told our partners more than once that we want positive cooperation, we want to act together to combat common threats. But they, unfortunately, don't want to listen to us."

Geoff Morrell, the Pentagon press secretary, responded sharply in a telephone interview to Mr. Medvedev's pledge on missiles, calling it "literally and figuratively misguided."

"The Russians know full well that our European missile defense system is not capable of defeating their enormous ballistic missile arsenal," Mr. Morrell said with evident frustration. "Rather, it is meant to counter Iran's growing missile threat. And we have bent over backwards to invite the Russians to partner with us to defeat this common threat."

Speaking more broadly, another senior Bush administration official said the tone of the address "follows a line of attributing blame for things to outsiders, to the U.S."

The second official, who would speak only on condition of anonymity because of the need to maintain relations with Moscow, said it was no accident that the speech was scheduled for the day after the presidential election.

"The day the U.S. gets a new president, it's more important for them to make sure Russians hear what the Russian president says in his State of the Federation speech," this senior official said. "It's because it's all about them. They have to find an outside villain to offset the criticism they are starting to hear about their handling of the economy."

Other analysts agreed that the timing of the confrontational speech was not coincidental. Russian elites have staked their hopes on a victory by Mr. Obama, viewing him as a far friendlier negotiating partner than his Republican opponent, Senator John McCain.

"This is a warning, this is a clear warning," said Alexander Rahr, director of the Russian/Eurasian program at the German Council on Foreign Relations. "I think they want to show that Russia is important and we want a multipolar world."

Clifford Kupchan, a Russia expert at the Eurasia Group, a consultancy in Washington, said the chilly rhetoric was to be expected “in the context of a really bad relationship.”

“When a relationship is this troubled, you wait for concrete steps from the new guy,” Mr. Kupchan said. “You wait to see if his policy will be any better than the old one.”

In one of his biggest applause lines, Mr. Medvedev said Russia’s policy in Georgia expressed treasured values.

“There are things which cannot be traded off, there are things for which it’s necessary to fight and triumph,” he said. “This is what is dear to you, which is dear to me, to all of us. Something we cannot imagine our country without. This is why we shall not retreat in the Caucasus.”

For domestic audiences, among the biggest news was the proposed extension of the president’s term by two years. After Mr. Medvedev made his speech, Kremlin spokesmen told the Interfax news agency that the change to Russia’s Constitution would not require a vote, and that it would not apply to incumbent politicians.

Political observers were left to puzzle it out: Why would Mr. Medvedev push for a reform that would have no relevance for another eight years? The obvious answer, Mr. Rahr said, is that Mr. Putin is planning a quick return to his old job.

“Otherwise, it makes no sense,” he said. “A president in power for four months? This is not only foolish, this is completely impossible.”