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Experts: Russia's cooperation with NATO is result of disbelief in progress of talks with Iran

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Nov. 26--The decision to establish possible cooperation between Russia and NATO to create a joint missile defense system is due to low confidence in the negotiation process with Iran, experts report. NATO countries believe that such a step would help to achieve progress in the upcoming talks in December.

"Promises on the talks with Iran in terms of its nuclear program have sounded for a long time, but they have led to nothing," Oksana Antonenko, the director of Russia and Eurasia Programs at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, told Trend over phone.

"So decisions about the possibility of a unified missile defense system in Europe, of course, are taken in the context of expectations from countries participating in these talks," she said. "But I think that they are being made due to the fact no progress has yet been observed in these talks."

An agreement between Russia and NATO to jointly work to develop a missile defense system in Europe was the main result of the recent NATO-Russia summit in Lisbon last Saturday. The joint missile defense system could be created in the medium-term.

Although the NATO summit's final document does not specify potential threat sources, French President Nicolas Sarkozy said "things need to be called by their names, and the missile threat today comes from Iran."

The summit in Lisbon was held on the eve of a new round of the "P5+1" talks with Iran scheduled for Dec. 5. In early November this year, Tehran's representatives offered in a letter to the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Catherine Ashton to hold talks on nuclear problems in Istanbul. However, Ashton, in turn, offered to hold a summit in Geneva.

Antonenko believes that Russia's concerns over Iran's nuclear program, which have significantly increased in recent years, are primarily motivated by national interests.

"Russia is concerned that Iran's approach to the possibility of acquiring nuclear weapons could provoke a military strike against Israel or the spread of nuclear weapons to the Middle East, as well as the Persian Gulf," she said.

Meanwhile, Vice President of the Cato Institute's Defense and Foreign Policy Studies Department Ted Galen Carpenter believes that NATO-Russia cooperation on missile defense will increase Iran's sense of isolation and alienation.

"In particular, Tehran is likely to view this move as the latest evidence of a Russian betrayal," Carpenter wrote Trend in an e-mail. " The development will not slow -- and may even slightly accelerate -- Tehran's nuclear and missile programs."

Iranian nuclear program have caused concern since 2003, when the IAEA became aware of its secret activities. In late 2003, Iran signed the Additional Protocol to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and voluntarily announced suspension of uranium enrichment. However, it later returned back to these activities.

Enriched uranium can be used to produce nuclear weapons. However, it is also necessary as fuel for nuclear power plants. A number of states, including the United States, believe that Iran is seeking to develop nuclear weapons, and want to prevent this development.

German political analyst Alexander Rahr said there is nothing sensational about Sarkozy's statement. It is no secret for Iran that the West wants to ensure its own defense against the country and any possible attacks.

In addition, he said, Iran openly threatens Israel and Iran has repeatedly said it disagrees with the country's existence.

"This is an open threat of one state against another, which allows Western leaders to call Iran a country that poses a threat, against which they may have to fight," Rahr said.

However, there is disagreement among NATO members on the assessment of the threat posed by Iran. For instance, Turkey has insisted that Iran should be excluded as a "potential enemy of the West" from the final document of NATO Lisbon summit.