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MOSCOW, July 24 (RIA Novosti) - Russian strategic bombers may soon be deployed at airbases in Cuba, Venezuela and Algeria as a response to the U.S. missile shield in Europe and NATO's expansion, Russian daily Izvestia said on Thursday.

Moscow has strongly opposed the possible deployment by the U.S. of 10 interceptor missiles in Poland and an accompanying tracking radar in the Czech Republic as a threat to its national security. Washington says the defenses are needed to deter a possible strike from Iran, or other "rogue" states.

Moscow has also expressed concern over NATO's expansion to Russia's borders and pledged to take "appropriate measures" to counter the U.S. and NATO moves.

Izvestia cited sources in the Russian Defense Ministry as saying that crews of Tu-160 Blackjack and Tu-95MS Bear strategic bombers recently visited Cuba and conducted an inspection of a site and facilities for a possible forward landing airfield that could be used as a refueling stopover for Russian strategic bombers.

Russia resumed strategic bomber patrol flights over the Pacific, Atlantic, and Arctic oceans last August, following an order signed by former president Vladimir Putin.

At present the Russian military is considering the possibility of establishing so-called "jump-up" bases in various regions of the world to provide refueling and maintenance support for the patrolling bombers.

"The flight to the U.S. [from southern Russia where the bombers are based] takes about 10 hours and even with two mid-air refuellings the aircraft can spend only 1.5 hours near the U.S. coast," said Gen. of the Army Pyotr Deinekin, former commander of the Russian Air Force.

The use of forward landing airfields in Latin America would practically erase the time constraints for the Russian bombers and make their presence near the U.S. borders almost permanent, the general said.

If a political decision is made, Cuba will most likely host Russian Il-78 aerial tankers, which will provide nuclear-capable strategic bombers with mid-air refueling, sources in the Defense Ministry told Izvestia.

Both Tu-160 and Tu-95MS bombers have been recently modernized and fitted with new X-555 cruise missiles with a range of over 3,500 km (2,200 miles). Therefore, the bombers do not have to be permanently based near the U.S. borders to hit any target on U.S. territory in case of a potential conflict. (Image Gallery)

In the meantime, the bombers may be primarily used to spy on the United States using electronic means, much like the former Russian SIGINT station at Lourdes near Havana, which was closed in 2002.

However, another Russian publication, Nezavisimaya Gazeta, said on Thursday that the ambitious plans of Russian politicians and some military commanders may be nothing more than "saber-rattling in empty air."

The prospect of maintaining refueling posts for Russian bombers all over the world would require an enormous amount of investment in construction of infrastructure, fuel supplies and re-supplies.

The Russian defense budget simply does not have sufficient resources to ensure the implementation of these plans, the newspaper said.

Russian bombers with nuclear missiles on board policing the globe would only harm Russia's image in the international arena, and it is unlikely that their presence near the U.S. borders will scare the Americans.

The U.S. military consider long-range bombers an obsolete and highly vulnerable component of the nuclear triad. The Pentagon stopped strategic bomber patrols almost two decades ago.

<http://en.rian.ru/russia/20080724/114821813.html>

Moscow must answer U.S. shield with Cuban 'spy' site - analyst

MOSCOW, July 23 (RIA Novosti) - Russia should respond to U.S. missile defense plans for Central Europe by reopening a 'spy' facility in Cuba to gather intelligence on the United States, a Russian analyst said on Wednesday.

The electronic monitoring and surveillance facility near Havana at Torrens, also known as the Lourdes facility, the largest Russian Sigint site abroad, was shut down in October 2001 by then-president Vladimir Putin.

"Cuba is a unique place to gather intelligence on the United States. I believe that the reopening of this station is both possible and necessary amid the threat that the Americans are creating for Russia," Alexander Pikayev, head of the disarmament and conflict resolution department at the Russian Academy of Sciences' World Economics and International Relations Institute, told a news conference at RIA Novosti.

"Russia has every right to respond," he added.

Moscow has strongly opposed the possible deployment by the U.S. of 10 interceptor missiles in Poland and a radar station in the Czech Republic as a threat to its security. Washington says the missile shield is needed to deter possible strikes from "rogue states."

A Russian military source was earlier quoted as saying that Russian strategic bombers could be stationed again in Cuba, only 90 miles from the U.S. coast, in response to the U.S. missile shield plans for Central Europe.

The Lourdes facility reportedly covered a 28 square-mile area, with 1,000-1,500 Russian engineers, technicians, and military personnel working at the base.

The complex was capable of monitoring a wide array of commercial and government communications throughout the southeastern United States, and between the United States and Europe.

Lourdes intercepted transmissions from microwave towers in the United States, communication satellite downlinks, and a wide range of shortwave and high-frequency radio transmissions.

In October 1962, the Cuban Missile Crisis brought the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. to the brink of nuclear war when Soviet missiles were stationed in Cuba.

The crisis was resolved after 12 days when the Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, backed down and ordered the missiles removed.

<http://en.rian.ru/russia/20080723/114761709.html>