

Russia tracks rogue U.S. satellite containing nuclear material

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MOSCOW, February 15 (RIA Novosti) - Russia's Defense Ministry is closely monitoring a U.S. spy satellite that has gone out of control and may have nuclear material on board, a high-ranking defense source said on Friday.

"The Defense Ministry is using its space surveillance systems to track the satellite's movement in orbit," he said.

Russian military experts suggest the satellite could have an on board nuclear power source, a senior parliament member said.

Igor Barinov, first deputy chairman of the State Duma Defense Committee, also expressed concern that the U.S. had made a unilateral decision to destroy the satellite.

He said that decisions, which could jeopardize collective [security](#), "should be made taking into account all parties concerned and all countries involved in space research."

The U.S. Defense Department said Thursday it would shoot down the decaying satellite, which it earlier considered to be low risk. The department said the chances that the "uncontrollable U.S. experimental satellite" will hit a populated area are small, but "the potential consequences would be of enough concern to consider mitigating actions."

The U.S. will attempt to shoot down the satellite using a Navy Standard Missile 3, U.S. officials said.

They said the satellite will be shot down after the space shuttle Atlantis, which is in orbit, completes its mission and lands next week. NASA officials do not want to risk sending debris into the path of shuttle.

Marine Corps Gen. James E. Cartwright, the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said U.S. officials would attempt to hit the satellite at an altitude of 130 nautical miles, or just outside Earth's atmosphere, so that most of the debris would fall to Earth within two orbits.

He said the window of opportunity for taking the satellite down would open in three or four days, and would last for about seven or eight days.

If the missile shot is successful, much of the debris will burn up as it falls. The goal is to hit the fuel tank in order to minimize the amount of fuel that returns to Earth, Cartwright said.

The satellite was launched in 2006 and malfunctioned almost immediately. On board is around 1,000 pounds of propellant fuel (hydrazine), a hazardous material.

President George W Bush has authorized the destruction of the satellite using a sea-to-air missile within the next few days.

Earlier the director of the Henry L. Stimson Center, which monitors space security and research Michael Krepon, said that the reasons given for shooting down the satellite were "unpersuasive," adding previous satellites that had gone out of control had not caused any damage.

"The president has decided to take action to mitigate the risk to human lives by engaging the nonfunctioning satellite," the Defense Department explained in a news announcement. "Because our missile defense system is not designed to engage satellites, extraordinary measures have been taken to temporarily modify three sea-based tactical missiles and three ships to carry out the engagement."

Several government agencies are involved in monitoring and planning for re-entry of the satellite.