

Responding to US threats, Russian President Putin proclaims nuclear arms race

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In a belligerently nationalistic speech before the Russian parliament Thursday, Russian President Vladimir Putin boasted about advances in Russia's nuclear arsenal, threatened "immediate" retaliation against any US nuclear attack, and played a video depicting a nuclear strike on the United States.

Putin's speech, coming amid a fanatical war-mongering campaign against Russia in the US media, is perhaps the most explicit statement to date of the breakdown in US-Russian relations, highlighting the looming threat posed to humanity of a nuclear war between the two countries.

Bragging that "The operation in Syria has proved the increased capabilities of the Russian Armed Forces," Putin outlined far-advanced plans by Russia to modernize its nuclear weapons and bypass US missile defense systems.

The most important of these is the so-called Sarmat missile system, a new heavy intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) that has already been deployed by Russian forces. In addition to numerous other features enabling it to avoid detection and interception, Putin said the new missile is able to attack the United States from the south, bypassing most existing missile defense systems, which are oriented toward the north.

Putin also outlined, in substantial detail, a series of next-generation weapons systems, all of which he said were in advanced stages of testing. These included an ICBM-launched hypersonic reentry vehicle, which "flies to its target like a meteorite, like a ball of fire," a nuclear-armed cruise missile powered by a nuclear reactor, a nuclear-armed undersea drone and an aircraft-launched hypersonic nuclear delivery vehicle.

Putin said that the development of these systems was Russia's "response to the unilateral withdrawal of the United States of America from the Anti-Ballistic

Missile Treaty and the practical deployment of their missile defence systems both in the US and beyond their national borders."

Putin framed his speech as a response to a series of escalatory measures by the United States, most notably the publication on February 2 of the latest US nuclear posture review, which greatly expanded the range of scenarios in which the United States says it would use nuclear weapons, and envisioned the development of a series of short-range battlefield nuclear weapons, putting the US in violation of international treaties.

In his speech, Putin declared, "We are greatly concerned by certain provisions of the revised nuclear posture review, which... reduce the threshold for the use of nuclear arms. Behind closed doors, one may say anything to calm down anyone, but we read what is written. And what is written is that this strategy can be put into action in response to conventional arms attacks and even to a cyber-threat."

The US document represents a course reversal from the nuclear posture review released in 2010, which reduced the role of nuclear weapons in Washington's military arsenal.

While cautioning that Russia reserves the right to use nuclear weapons only in response to attacks "that threaten the very existence of the state," Putin made clear that Russia would respond overwhelmingly to any nuclear attack by the US.

"Any use of nuclear weapons against Russia or its allies, weapons of short, medium or any range at all, will be considered as a nuclear attack on this country. Retaliation will be immediate, with all the attendant consequences," Putin declared.

The White House responded to Putin's speech with its own declaration that it will not be outmatched by Russian weaponry, declaring, "US defense capabilities

are and will remain second to none," and "President Trump" is "determined to protect our homeland and preserve peace through strength."

Responding to efforts by the United States to prevent the emergence of Russia as a regional power, Putin declared, "And to those who in the past 15 years have tried to accelerate an arms race and seek unilateral advantage against Russia... I will say this: everything you have tried to prevent through such a policy has already happened. No one has managed to restrain Russia."

Putin's statements come amid a series of warnings that the entire arms control system that kept the United States and Russia out of open military conflict since the Second World War is on the verge of breaking down.

Commenting on the tensions between Moscow and Washington at the Munich Security conference, Bloomberg warned of the breakdown of "decades-old arms control agreements that have helped to keep a strategic balance and prevent the risk of accidental war."

It cited statements by Dmitri Trenin, head of the Carnegie Moscow Center, who said, "In the U.S., the animus is so tremendous that punishing Russia is the thing to do... I see the demise of the entire arms control regime."

At the Munich Security conference, at which the major European powers took an ambivalent attitude toward the US, German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel warned that "The most likely theater for nuclear conflicts would once again be here, in the center of Europe."

It also cited former Kremlin foreign policy adviser Sergei Karaganov, who said the situation is on track to become "much more dangerous" than even during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962.

Putin's speech followed the conclusion of the UN Conference on Disarmament, in Geneva, Switzerland, in which Secretary-General António Guterres declared, "We must work together towards our common goal: a world free of nuclear weapons."

But Putin's comments, and the US nuclear posture review that proceeded them, make clear how empty such phrases have become. It is becoming increasingly clear that the entire trajectory of geopolitical developments throughout the world is one of military escalation, culminating ultimately in the use of nuclear

weapons.

Putin's decision to make such bellicose threats express an element of desperation in the face of the increasingly obvious fact that there are substantial sections of the US military that are preparing for a military conflict with Russia.

Within that context, Putin is making clear that, under his watch, there will be no repeat of the 1941 Nazi invasion of Soviet Russia, for which the country was totally unprepared. It is not unrealistic to believe that Putin himself is under immense pressure from his own military establishment to push back against the United States.

As Putin put it, "I hope that everything that was said today would make any potential aggressor think twice, since unfriendly steps against Russia such as deploying missile defences and bringing NATO infrastructure closer to the Russian border become ineffective in military terms and entail unjustified costs, making them useless for those promoting these initiatives."

But the attempt to counter the aggressive threats by the United States with nuclear saber-rattling will not secure Russia, and the policy of national defense as elaborated by Putin can lead only to a catastrophe.

Imperialism has its own agenda. The dissolution of the Soviet Union set into motion a process of the transformation of post-Soviet Russia into a virtual colony of the United States and Europe's imperialist powers. No concession that Putin makes, short of one that accepts the complete subordination of Russia to American dictates, will be acceptable. In fact, Putin's statement that Russia's development of nuclear weapons will make the imperialist powers "listen" is both reckless and naïve.

A quarter century after the dissolution of the USSR and the end of the Cold War, humanity is once again on the brink of nuclear annihilation. There is only one alternative to this madness: the mobilization and unification of the working classes of the whole world on the basis of a socialist program in order to end the capitalist system that is the cause of war.



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