

Are You Listening, America? “If the Button is Pushed, There’s No Running Away”

By [Scott Ritter](#)

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*Don't you understand what I'm trying to say?
And can't you feel the fears I'm feeling today?
If the button is pushed, there's no running away,
There'll be no one to save with the world in a grave,
Take a look around you, boy, it's bound to scare you, boy,
And you tell me over and over and over again my friend,
Ah, you don't believe we're on the eve of destruction.*
—Barry McGuire, “[Eve of Destruction](#),” 1965

From 2002 until 2011, Paul Marcarelli, perhaps better known to American audiences as [Verizon’s “test guy,”](#) made a career starring in television commercials, wandering the width and breadth of the United States, holding a phone to his ear and asking the simple question, “Can you hear me now?” Verizon was, and is, in the communications business in which the ability to send a message is only as good as the corresponding ability to receive it.

On Thursday, Vladimir Putin, Russia’s much-maligned president, delivered his [state of the nation address](#) to the Russian Federal Assembly (the Russian national Legislature, consisting of the State Duma, or lower house, and the Russian Council, or upper house). While the first half of his speech dealt with Russian domestic issues—and any American who has bought into Western media perceptions that Russia is a collapsing state, possessing a failed economy, would do well to read this portion of the speech—it was the second half of the presentation that caused the world to sit up and listen.

In this portion of the speech, Putin outlined developments in Russian strategic military capability. The developments collectively signal the obsolescence of America’s strategic nuclear deterrence, both in terms of its present capabilities and—taking into account the \$1.2 trillion [nuclear weapons modernization program](#) President Trump unveiled earlier this year—anything America might pursue in the decades to come.

Some Western observers have [derided Putin’s speech](#) as simple posturing, a manic effort to project Russian power, and with it global credibility, where none exists. Such an interpretation would be incorrect. There should be no doubt among American politicians, military leaders and citizens alike. “Every word has a meaning,” Putin told his audience. The weapons he referred to are real, and Putin meant every word he said.

“Back in 2000,” he said, “the [U.S. announced its withdrawal](#) from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. Russia was categorically against this. We saw the

Soviet-U.S. ABM Treaty signed in 1972 as the cornerstone of the international security system. ... Together with the [Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty](#) [START], the ABM Treaty not only created an atmosphere of trust but also prevented either party from recklessly using nuclear weapons, which would have endangered humankind. ... We did our best to dissuade the Americans from withdrawing from the treaty. All in vain.”

“The U.S. pulled out of the treaty in 2002,” Putin observed. “Even after that, we tried to develop constructive dialogue with the Americans. We proposed working together in this area to ease concerns and maintain the atmosphere of trust. At one point, I thought that a compromise was possible, but this was not to be. All our proposals, absolutely all of them, were rejected. And then we said that we would have to improve our modern strike systems to protect our security. In reply, the U.S. said that it is not creating a global BMD [Ballistic Missile Defense] system against Russia, which is free to do as it pleases, and that the U.S. will presume that our actions are not spearheaded against the U.S.”

Building on his well-known position, delivered in his 2005 state of the nation address, that “the collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical disaster of the century” that created “genuine drama” in which “the epidemic of disintegration infected Russia itself,” Putin said in his 2018 state of the nation address that

“apparently, our partners got the impression that it was impossible in the foreseeable historical perspective for our country to revive its economy, industry, defense industry and armed forces to levels supporting the necessary strategic potential. And if that is the case, there is no point in reckoning with Russia’s opinion, it is necessary to further pursue ultimate unilateral military advantage in order to dictate the terms in every sphere in the future. ...”

“We ourselves are to blame,” Putin said. “All these years, the entire 15 years since the withdrawal of the United States from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, we have consistently tried to reengage the American side in serious discussions, in reaching agreements in the sphere of strategic stability.”

However, Putin observed, the United States “is permitting constant, uncontrolled growth of the number of anti-ballistic missiles, improving their quality, and creating new missile launching areas. If we do not do something, eventually this will result in the complete devaluation of Russia’s nuclear potential. Meaning that all of our missiles could simply be intercepted.”

Putin pointed out that in 2004, he put the world on notice about Russia’s intent to defend itself, telling the press:

“As other countries increase the number and quality of their arms and military potential, Russia will also need to ensure it has new generation weapons and technology. ... [T]his is a very significant statement because no country in the world as of now has such arms in their military arsenal.”

“Why did we do all this?” Putin asked his audience, referring to his 2004 comments. “Why did we talk about it? As you can see, we made no secret of our plans and spoke openly about them, primarily to encourage our partners to hold talks. No, nobody really wanted to talk to us about the core of the problem, and nobody wanted to listen to us. So listen now. ...”

“To those who in the past 15 years have tried to accelerate an arms race and seek unilateral advantage against Russia, have introduced restrictions and sanctions that are illegal from the standpoint of international law aiming to restrain our nation’s development, including in the military area, I will say this: Everything you have tried to prevent through such a policy has already happened. No one has managed to restrain Russia.”

This was a message delivered not just to the Russian Federal Assembly, but to the White House and its temperamental occupant, President Donald Trump, to the halls of Congress, where Russia-baiting has become a full-time occupation, and to the American people, who have been caught up in a wave of anti-Russia hysteria fueled by fantastical claims of a Russian “attack” on American democracy which, when balanced against the potential of thermonuclear annihilation, pales into insignificance. Putin spoke, and one would hope that throughout America the modern-day incarnations of Verizon’s Paul Marcarelli are making their way into the homes of every American citizen and the halls of power where those the American people elect to represent them reside, and calling out,

“Can you hear me now?”

Based upon the reaction to Putin’s speech so far, the answer appears to be “no.” This refusal to accept the fact that there exists today a new reality carries with it the potential for catastrophic miscalculation. In Pat Frank’s 1959 novel, “[Alas, Babylon](#),” an American Navy fighter aircraft flying over the Mediterranean Sea fires a missile that veers off target, striking an ammunition depot near the Syrian city of Latakia, setting off a massive explosion that the Soviet Union uses as an excuse to initiate a retaliatory nuclear strike against the United States.

It doesn’t take a stretch of imagination today to paint a scenario in which American and Russian forces clash over Syria. Indeed, [a recent incident](#)—in which Syrian militia forces, supported by Russian private military contractors, advanced toward Syrian oil and gas fields occupied by U.S.-backed Kurdish fighters, only to be attacked by American fighter bombers, resulting in hundreds of casualties, including scores of Russian dead—underscores the fact that such clashes are no longer theoretical.

Russian and American aircraft patrol the same airspace. American and Russian troops face off on the ground below. American forces are charged with implementing a policy that is diametrically opposed to the one being pursued by their Russian counterparts. So far, clashes have been limited to proxies, but it is only a question of when, not if, American and Russian forces engage in force-on-force combat.

Syria is not the only geographical point of friction between the United States and Russia. Both the Baltic States and Ukraine find American and Russian forces facing off against one another. American ships and reconnaissance aircraft probing the waters and airspace off the [Baltic coast](#) and in the [Black Sea](#) have been aggressively challenged by Russian aircraft, oftentimes flying dangerously close to their American counterparts, prompting then-Secretary of State [John Kerry to declare](#) that the U.S. Navy would be justified in shooting down the Russians in “self-defense.”

The almost cavalier ease with which the idea of Russian-American combat is floated as a possibility by American decision-makers is born out of a misplaced notion of American

military superiority which, while reflecting an accurate estimate of the situation 10 years ago, is no longer the case today. After Russia emerged victorious in its short war with the republic of Georgia in 2008, [many shortfalls in communications, organization and training](#) were revealed that underscored the second-class nature of the Russian military when compared with the United States and NATO. Russia [undertook a crash program](#), restructuring its military units, professionalizing its ranks, and investing in top-of-the line equipment, including modern communications. The Russian military that occupied the Crimea in 2014 was orders of magnitude better than the one that fought Georgia six years prior. The Russian military fighting in Syria today (and facing off against the Americans in the Baltics and Ukraine) is even better.

The United States, in recent years, has transitioned away from almost exclusively training for low-intensity conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan, and is once again [preparing to fight](#) large-scale combined arms engagements against “near-peer” forces whose training and/or equipment is inferior to the American military. Comments [made by U.S. military officers](#) who have recently deployed to the Baltics make it clear that they believe the superiority of American arms serves as a deterrence to Russian regional ambitions. The reality is, even if Russia were to pursue ill-intent against its eastern European neighbors that manifested in military aggression (and there is no indication that this is the case), the notion of American and NATO ground forces serving as a force in deterrence is not sustainable. In fact, in many categories, such as tactical communications, artillery support and armor employment, the Russians outclass their American counterparts. Recent [war games](#) show that Russia would defeat NATO in any conflict in the Baltics.

But the quality of the Russian military is not the point. What is important, at least in the context of a broader discussion on comparative nuclear posture, is that 20 years ago, when Russia was militarily inferior to the United States, the Russian leadership [embraced a policy](#) of nuclear “de-escalation,” which envisioned the early use of tactical nuclear weapons by Russia to offset the conventional military advantages enjoyed by the United States and NATO. Through this policy, Russia sought to leverage its strong capabilities in tactical nuclear weapons by making the cost of regional engagement too high for any potential opponent. The policy of nuclear de-escalation was born during the time of the Chechen crisis, in the late 1990s, when Russia feared the possibility of Western intervention in that conflict. It served as the backbone of Russia’s nuclear posture in both 2008 and 2014, when Russia intervened in Georgia and Ukraine, respectively. And it backed up Russia’s decision to intervene in Syria in 2015.

This Russian nuclear policy was noted in the [2018 U.S. Nuclear Posture Review](#), which said that “Russian strategy and doctrine emphasize the potential coercive and military uses of nuclear weapons. It mistakenly assesses that the threat of nuclear escalation or actual first use of nuclear weapons would serve to ‘de-escalate’ a conflict on terms favorable to Russia. These mistaken perceptions increase the prospect for dangerous miscalculation and escalation.”

No truer words could have been written. And yet, the Trump administration seems in no hurry to undertake any actions vis-à-vis Russia that would reduce the possibility of any such miscalculation and escalation. While noting in the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review that “arms control can contribute to U.S., allied, and partner security by helping to manage strategic competition among states,” the Trump administration went on to declare that “progress in arms control is not an end in and of itself, and depends on the security environment and the participation of willing partners.”

It was as if the entire history of U.S.-Russian arms control referred to by Putin in his state of the nation address never happened.

But it is not just history the Trump administration clouds over. The present and future is likewise shrouded in a cloud of wishful thinking that ignores the progress in Russian strategic capabilities promised by Putin in 2004 and delivered upon in 2018.

“The United States,” the Nuclear Posture Review states, “remains willing to engage in a prudent arms control agenda. We are prepared to consider arms control opportunities that return parties to predictability and transparency, and remain receptive to future arms control negotiations if conditions permit and the potential outcome improves the security of the United States and its allies and partners.”

Noting that “there is no ‘one size fits all’ for deterrence,” the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review states that “the United States will apply a tailored and flexible approach to effectively deter across a spectrum of adversaries, threats, and contexts” in order to “communicate to different potential adversaries that their aggression would carry unacceptable risks and intolerable costs according to their particular calculations of risk and cost.”

While not specifically naming Russia, the Trump administration put Moscow on notice that it “must understand that there are no possible benefits from non-nuclear aggression or limited nuclear escalation. ... [P]otential adversaries must recognize that across the emerging range of threats and contexts: 1) the United States is able to identify them and hold them accountable for acts of aggression, including new forms of aggression; 2) we will defeat non-nuclear strategic attacks; and, 3) any nuclear escalation will fail to achieve their objectives, and will instead result in unacceptable consequences for them.”

The Russian president heard the message the United States was communicating.

“We are greatly concerned by certain provisions of the revised nuclear posture review,” Putin said, “which expand the opportunities for reducing and 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.”

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Scott Ritter spent more than a dozen years in the intelligence field, beginning in 1985 as a ground intelligence officer with the US Marine Corps, where he served with the Marine Corps component of the Rapid Deployment Force at the Brigade and Battalion level.

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