

Putin on National Defense: Threats or a Bid to Negotiate on Arms Control?

By [Dr. Gilbert Doctorow](#)

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As he stated at the outset, Vladimir Putin's annual state of the nation address today before a joint session of the nation's bicameral legislature was devoted preponderantly to domestic policy. He was expanding on the practical implications for the Russian population of the policy priorities for his current six-year term that he set out in decrees of May 2018. These have in the meantime taken the form of national projects organized around support to families to encourage childbearing and stabilize the national demographics; housing construction and financing; roads, ports and other transport infrastructure development; improved health services; upgrading public education; encouragement to business innovation and export; and the like.

This material was delivered with a human touch, drawing on many experiences of contact with people from all walks of life that the President has gathered in specially organized meetings focused on these national projects at various cities around his vast country. He cited in particular his time in Kazan last week talking about housing.

For most political observers outside of Russia, myself included, the domestic policy story was marginal to our interests, though we did sit up and pay close attention to his brief remarks on one achievement illustrating the strides the country is making in state of the art applied sciences. This was his description of the breakthrough represented by the design and production of the hypersonic Avangard missile system. He likened it to the launch into orbit of the first Sputnik and he promised spill-over of the science into the civilian economy.

Otherwise, we foreigners had to wait until the very end of his speech to hear what brought us to watch this annual ritual in the first place. The raisins in our cake came when the President finally turned to international affairs. And there, after a rather cursory summary of Russia's foreign policy priorities, his discourse shifted to defense issues raised by the recently announced American withdrawal from the Intermediate- Nuclear Force (INF) Treaty. Indeed, notwithstanding the mention a few moments before of the key importance of bilateral ties with China and also with India, Putin's focus on Washington and the way the whole Russian defense industry is directed to meeting threats from the USA, highlights the centrality of that one country in Russian thinking. Thus, Putin allowed himself to mock Europe as US "satellites." Further to the point, he went on to use folksy language that Nikita Khrushchev would surely have approved to describe the Europeans as so many little piglets oinking their assent to Washington's allegations of Russian INF violations. The audience in the hall turned to smiles and applauded enthusiastically.

Western mainstream media have been quick to note the direct threat by Putin in his speech to respond to any US placement of nuclear armed cruise missiles in Europe by targeting not

only the European host countries of such installations but the decision-making centers authorizing their use, meaning Washington. By its new hypersonic weapon systems, Russia would be able to reach targeted American cities within the same 10 – 12 minutes that the Americans would enjoy by lobbing their slower cruise missiles at Moscow from perches in Poland and Romania.

This is tough talk over basic issues that suggest not so much a revisiting of the US-Russian Cold War confrontation over European based Pershings versus Soviet medium range SS20s targeting Western Europe in the 1980s, as a revisiting of the issues underlying the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. At that time, US missiles secretly based in Turkey brought a mirror image response from Russia (the Soviet Union) in the form of missiles positioned just off the American coast and having comparable flying times to hit the American heartland.

Surely, as I have remarked in recent essays, the highly polished Putin is no Khrushchev, and he is careful to avoid appearing to issue threats. But the toughness is there under the velvet glove in speeches like today's.

To allow readers to draw their own conclusions, I offer below my translation of the complete text of the speech relating to the United States.

Excerpt – the final 12 minutes devoted to foreign and defense policy of a speech that ran approximately 90 minutes.

The most acute and discussed issue today in Russian-American relations is the unilateral withdrawal of the USA from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. Therefore, I am simply compelled to dwell on this in some detail. Yes, to be sure, from the moment of the conclusion of this Treaty in 1987 there have been serious changes in the world. Many countries have developed and continue to develop this form of weapons, whereas Russia and the USA do not. We voluntarily have restricted ourselves in this matter. Such a situation, of course, can raise questions; that is understandable. That is what our American partners should have said, honestly, and without using fabricated accusations against Russia to justify their unilateral withdrawal from the Treaty. It would have been better if, as in 2002, when they left the ABM Treaty, they had been open and honest about it. Whether this is a good or bad thing is another matter. I believe it is bad. But they did so and that's it. Here they should have acted honestly. How are they themselves acting in fact? They are violating everything and then seek justification and designate guilty parties. And still more, they mobilize their satellites: they are very cautious, but still like piglets they oink their assent on this question. At first, they began development and application of medium range missiles, seeking to divert attention by calling them "target missiles" for their missile defense system. Then they began installing in Europe the MK-41 multipurpose launchers which make it possible to perform combat use of the medium range Tomahawk cruise missiles.

I am talking about this and taking your time with it only because we are compelled to respond to the accusations which we hear directed against us. But having done everything that I have just said, the USA openly disregarded and demonstratively ignored the whole set of provisions stipulated by articles 4 and 6 of the INF Treaty. In particular, according to point 1, article 4 of the Treaty, (and I quote) "each of the parties liquidates its medium range missiles and launch installations for such missiles so that neither of the parties has such missiles and such launchers." In article 6, point 1, we see (I am reading word for word): "after this Treaty comes into force and thereafter neither of the

parties will produce any medium range missiles or carry out flight tests of such missiles, nor produce any stages of such missiles or any launch installations of such missiles." End of citation.

By launching medium range target-missiles and by installing in Romania and Poland launchers suitable for use with Tomahawk cruise missiles, the USA directly and crudely violated these requirements of the Treaty. Well, they did this already long ago. In Romania these launch installations are already standing, and nothing, or seemingly nothing is happening. Strange, you might say. We see nothing strange. But people should see this and understand.

How do we evaluate the situation in this regard. I have already said and want to repeat: Russia does not intend – and this is very important, I repeat it especially – Russia does not intend to be the first to locate such missiles in Europe. If they really will be produced and placed on the European Continent, and the USA has such plans, in any case we have not heard contrary statements, then this will greatly exacerbate the situation in the sphere of international security; it will create serious threats for Russia. After all, the flying time to Moscow of certain categories of such missiles can amount to 10 – 12 minutes. This is a very serious threat for us. In this case, we will be compelled, and I want to underline, precisely compelled, to take mirror-image and asymmetrical actions. What does this mean?

I will say right now directly and openly what I am talking about so that no one will rebuke us later, and so that everything is clear in advance. Russia will be forced to create and deploy forms of weapons which can be used not only with respect to those territories from which the respective direct threat arises, but also with respect to those territories where are located the centers for taking decisions about using the missile complexes threatening us.

What is important in this connection: here there is a lot that is new. By their tactical and technical characteristics, including flight time to the indicated management centers, these weapons will fully match the threats which are being directed against Russia.

We know how to do this and we will carry out these plans immediately, as soon as the respective threats to us become real. I do not think that the international situation today is such that it needs additional and irresponsible exacerbation. We do not want this

What do I want to add here? Our American colleagues have already tried to achieve absolute military superiority with the help of their global missile defense system. They must put such illusions aside. The response from our side will always be powerful and effective.

Work on the promising models and systems of arms about which I spoke in my Address a year ago is continuing – at an even pace, without interruptions, according to plan. We have begun serial production of the Avangard complex about which I already spoke today. This year, as was planned, the first regiment of the Strategic Missile Troops will be supplied with it. We are in production and carrying out the cycle of tests on the heavy, intercontinental missile Sarmat which has unprecedented power. The Peresvet laser installations and air force complexes equipped with the hypersonic Kinzhal missiles have confirmed their unique specifications in test and battle duty; the personnel have gained experience operating them. In December of this year all the Peresvety units delivered to the Armed Forces will be put on combat duty. We are continuing work to extend the infrastructure for hosting MiG-31 planes equipped with Kinzhal missiles. The tests are going well on our unlimited range cruise missile powered by the Burevestnik nuclear engine, as well as on the Poseidon, our underwater drone with unlimited range.

In this connection, I want to make a very important remark. We didn't talk about this previously, but today I can say this: already in the spring of this year we will put out to sea our first atomic submarine carrying this drone complex. The work is proceeding according to plan.

Today, I consider it possible also to officially inform you about still one more promising new unit. Remember that last time I said: there is something additional to talk about, but it is a bit early. Now, calmly we will tell you what we have held in the vaults. It is one more promising innovation, work on which is going successfully, with completion certain to occur within the planned timeline. Namely, I want to speak about the hypersonic Zircon missile, having a speed in flight of around Mach 9 and a range greater than one thousand kilometers, capable of destroying targets both on land and at sea. Its use is foreseen on naval carriers, serial produced surface ships and submarines, including those already produced or under construction and fitted with the high precision Kalibr missile complexes. That is to say, all of this will not incur extra costs for us.

In this connection, I want to emphasize that for the defense of the national interests of Russia, we will turn over to the Russian Navy two - three years earlier than scheduled seven new multifunctional submarines, and in the near future we will begin construction of five surface ships for global service, while a further 16 ships of this class will be introduced into the fleet by 2027.

In closing out the subject of the unilateral withdrawal of the USA from the INF Treaty, I would like to say the following. In the past few years, the USA has been conducting towards Russia a policy which one could hardly call friendly. They ignore the lawful interests of Russia. They are constantly organizing various kinds of anti-Russian campaigns which are absolutely unprovoked, and I emphasize this, from our side. They introduce more and more new sanctions which are illegal from the standpoint of international law. They are dismantling unilaterally practically all the treaties and legal basis of international security that developed over recent decades, and at the same time they just about call Russia the main threat to the USA.

I will say directly that this is untrue. Russia wants to have full-bodied, equitable and friendly relations with the USA. Russia is not threatening anyone. All of our actions in the sphere of security bear an exclusively reactive, meaning defensive character. We are not interested in a confrontation and do not want it, least of all with such a global power as the United States of America. But it would appear that our partners are not noticing how and with what speed the world is changing, where it is headed. They continue their destructive and clearly erroneous policy. It hardly corresponds to the interests of the USA itself. But that is not for us to decide.

We see that we are dealing with businesslike, very talented people. However, among the ruling class there are many of those who are excessively captivated by the idea of their exceptionalism and their superiority over the rest of the world. It stands to reason that they have the right to think so if they wish. But do they know how to count? Surely they do. Let them calculate the range and speed of our upcoming weapons systems. We only ask one thing: let them first do their calculations, and only after that take decisions which can create serious threats for our country, understandably leading to actions in response from the Russian side to reliably ensure our security.

Moreover, I already spoke about this and want to repeat it: we are ready for negotiations on disarmament, but we will no longer knock at a closed door. We will wait until our partners mature, come to understand the need for equitable dialogue on this subject.

We will continue to develop our Armed Forces, to raise the intensity and quality

of combat preparation, including our taking into account our experience from the anti-terrorist operation in Syria. And this was received by practically all the commanders of the major units of our Ground Troops, our special operations forces and military police, navy crews, army, tactical operations, strategic and military transport aviation.

I want to emphasize the following: for steady and long-term development we need peace. All of our work to raise our defense capability has only one objective: it is directed towards ensuring the security of the country and of our citizens, so that no one will not only not think about committing aggression against Russia but will not try to use the methods of forcible pressure against our country.

Here's the full video of President Putin's state of the nation address.

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Gilbert Doctorow is a Brussels-based political analyst. His latest book [Does Russia Have a Future?](#) was published in August 2017.

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