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A photograph of Vladimir Putin in profile, facing left, standing at a wooden podium. He is wearing a dark suit, a white shirt, and a dark tie with a small pattern. A large, dark, fuzzy microphone is in the foreground, partially obscuring the view. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be a red building. The image is framed by a dark blue border.

# Is Putin's Nuclear Rhetoric Dangerous?

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been accompanied by constant hints from the Kremlin about the possibility of nuclear weapon use. There have been drastic changes in Russian nuclear rhetoric. If in previous years nuclear weapons were regarded as of supreme value, and the main guarantor of sovereignty, of which the West would like to deprive Russia, now the Kremlin threatens nuclear war if the West does not follow Putin's demands on limiting support to Ukraine.

The main question is how the West and, above all, the United States should respond to these attempts at intimidation. Even though the Kremlin's nuclear threats worry the West, it seems that an approach based on ignoring the intimidation currently prevails. NATO leaders believe that nuclear blackmail has not been accompanied by changes to the Russian nuclear posture, since Moscow has had no opportunity to alter the existing strategic balance. Nonetheless, nuclear rhetoric is dangerous even in this situation. In the absence of a tough reaction, the Kremlin is destined to raise the stakes in its nuclear blackmail. It is currently threatening to conduct a "nuclear test". This danger is compounded by the fact that the Russian leadership can often find itself the captive of its own rhetoric. The Kremlin's nuclear rhetoric can be stopped only by taking symmetrical measures and conducting strict deterrence.

### **Suspension of the Start Treaty Is a Threatening Signal to the West**

Following the launch of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, nuclear weapons suddenly became one of the most important topics in relations between Russia and the West. The Kremlin is constantly trying to place issues of strategic stability in the context of its military operations.

Thus, explaining the recent decision to deploy its tactical nuclear weapons on Belarus soil, President of Russia Vladimir Putin blamed the deployment on the decision by the United Kingdom to transfer depleted uranium tank ammunition to Ukraine. Depleted uranium ammunition is not a nuclear weapon and nuclear weapons have therefore been completely artificially introduced into the context of the war against Ukraine.

Contrary to expectations, in his address to the Federal Assembly on 21 February 2023 Vladimir Putin did not say anything specific about the course of military operations in Ukraine. In the absence of obvious military victories on the battlefield, Putin made the key announcement in the address his decision to "suspend" Russia's participation in the Strategic Offensive Arms Treaty, the last existing Russian-US agreement in the field of strategic stability. Signed in 2010, the so-called New START Treaty established ceilings for Russia and the United States of 1,550 deployed warheads and 700 deployed delivery vehicles (land-based missiles, submarine-launched missiles and strategic bombers), and also provided for a multilateral system for verifying implementation of the agreement and providing mutual information on the status of strategic nuclear forces.

Explaining his decision, Putin said that the inspections of nuclear facilities provided for in the treaty, which Washington now insists on, appear absurd in the context of the conflict in Ukraine and the current intention of the West to "inflict a strategic defeat on Russia". At the same time, he accused some "NATO specialists" of having participated in equipping and

modernizing the drones that are attacking Russian strategic aviation bases: “We know that the West is involved in Kyiv’s attempts to strike at our strategic aviation bases. And what, after that they are going to drive around our defence facilities? It sounds like nonsense”.<sup>1</sup> Putin also interpreted the statement by the North Atlantic Council in early February 2023 calling on Russia to fully comply with the Strategic Offensive Arms Reduction Treaty (START) as a demonstration of NATO’s intention to join this Russian-US treaty. NATO has in the past repeatedly expressed its opinion on the conclusion and observance of treaties between the Russian Federation and USA in the field of strategic stability. Never before has Moscow considered such statements an application by the North Atlantic Alliance to participate in such treaties. Now, using this NATO statement as an excuse, Putin declared a need to consider the nuclear capabilities of France and the UK in the treaty. Stressing that “suspension” of the treaty was not yet denunciation, he noted that it was now necessary “to understand how it will take into account the total nuclear potential of the alliance”.

This reverts to the situation of the early 1980s and the Soviet-US negotiations on medium-range missiles. Then, the Soviet Union’s demand to take French and British nuclear forces into account brought the negotiations to an impasse for several years. There is no doubt that this requirement alone, even ignoring the backdrop of the most violent confrontation between Russia and the West, will now bury New START. Putin’s words, that Moscow is only suspending its participation and not withdrawing from the treaty, should not reassure. It must be remembered that, having suspended its participation in the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE Treaty) in 2007, Russia has not sought to return to it. To enhance the shock effect of the suspension of participation in New START, Putin stated that, according to his information (which could not be confirmed from open sources) “some figures in Washington are thinking about testing nuclear weapons”. In the light of this hypothetical information, the president ordered “readiness for testing Russian nuclear weapons if the United States goes to conduct similar tests”.

The Russian Foreign Ministry had enough responsibility to clarify that despite the suspension of participation, Moscow was not about to change the quantitative limits of the agreement. Moreover, the Foreign Ministry even recalled the 1988 agreement on notification of missile launches. When relations between Moscow and Washington are at an all-time low, there is hope that missile tests will not be taken by the other side for a nuclear attack. At the same time, however, Russia has denied the United States the right to conduct inspections and rejected any negotiations on strategic stability. This means that neither party will be sure that the data on the state of the “counter-partner’s” nuclear arsenal complies with the terms of the agreement. It also means that, without reliable information, the military of each side will assess the capabilities and intentions of a potential enemy based on the worst-case scenario. In a situation of fierce confrontation, any incident could be turned into a worldwide catastrophe.

### **Nuclear Weapons as a Political Tool**

Putin’s recent decisions require analysis of how the political role of nuclear weapons has changed from the point of view of the Kremlin. During the Soviet period, nuclear weapons were considered primarily to be a means of achieving military parity with the West. The views of the Soviet military leadership on the nature of a future war have undergone a complex

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70565>



evolution. At first, it was assumed that hostilities would begin with a preventive nuclear strike by the Soviet Union, when it had a much smaller number of nuclear warheads and delivery vehicles than the United States. Later, as the parties approached parity, they assumed that a potential enemy would commit nuclear aggression. In the end, once parity was established in the nuclear balance, and the huge superiority of the Soviet Union in conventional forces was revealed, the view that use of nuclear weapons would be preceded by weeks of conventional warfare prevailed. There is every reason to believe that the statements about non-first use of nuclear weapons were sincere.

The political role of Soviet nuclear weapons was reduced to attempts to prove that the deployment of certain nuclear systems was a purely retaliatory step, even when it came to deliberately aggressive actions such as sending missiles to Cuba (1962) or the deployment of medium-range missiles in Europe in the late 1970s. In addition, from time to time, the Soviet Union came up with a new "peace programme" proposing a radical reduction in the number of nuclear arsenals. The US and NATO ignored these, believing them to be propaganda. The treaties on limitations on strategic offensive weapons concluded in the 1970s sought to fix nuclear parity at the lowest possible level. However, during treaty negotiation and implementation, the Soviet Union did not try to use these agreements to extract political dividends. Nuclear weapons acquired serious political significance only with the arrival of Mikhail Gorbachev in the Kremlin in 1985. The General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union sincerely believed that his willingness to radically reduce nuclear arsenals would drastically change the relationship between the Soviet Union and the West. It almost succeeded at talks in Reykjavik in 1986, when the Soviet and US leaders came close to eliminating all nuclear weapons. Unfortunately, Gorbachev's hopes were not destined to come to fruition, and the START-1 Treaty, which was supposed to lead to a revolutionary change in relations, was signed literally on the eve of the break-up of the Soviet Union.

The political possibilities of nuclear weapons were already obvious to the leaders of the new Russia. The West and, above all, the United States saw the 30,000 nuclear warheads that might be distributed among the different republics of the former Soviet Union – or even spread across the planet, falling into the hands of terrorists – as one of the major security threats. Washington was an ally of Moscow in convincing the heads of the former Soviet republics of the need to transfer all the nuclear weapons located on their territory to Russia. The Budapest Memorandum, according to which Kyiv handed over all of its nuclear weapons in exchange for guarantees on sovereignty and territorial integrity, was signed with Ukraine in 1994.

Throughout the 1990s, the state of Russia's nuclear potential remained one of the main international problems. The country's economy was in collapse. Russian officials, such as then Defence Minister Igor Rodionov, threatened that Moscow might lose control over tens of thousands of warheads and hundreds of tonnes of weapon-grade uranium. Responding to the threat, Washington launched several initiatives to fund the safe maintenance of the Russian nuclear arsenal and nuclear production, primarily through the Cooperative Threat Reduction Program (also known also as the Nunn-Lugar program), to which about \$9 billion was allocated. Another program was to turn Russian weapons-grade highly enriched uranium into low-enriched uranium, to be used as fuel for nuclear power plants. Under this agreement, the United States undertook to purchase this uranium, which it has did for about 20 years. The income on the Russian side amounted to about \$17 billion.

Following the break-up of the Soviet Union, the international community almost immediately recognized Russia as the successor state, which inherited its place on the UN Security Council. The Kremlin attributed this recognition to the fact that Russia was the only former Soviet republic to possess nuclear weapons. In the late 1990s, this approach even received a theoretical justification in the form of the so-called doctrine of expanded nuclear deterrence. This doctrine assumes that the very fact of possessing a powerful nuclear potential plays a decisive role in resolving any international problems in accordance with Russian interests. However, in practice, this doctrine had already failed by 1999, when NATO countries, ignoring Moscow's position, launched the military operation in the former Yugoslavia. It was then that the first president of Russia, Boris Yeltsin, began a meeting of a hastily convened Russian Security Council with the words: "Why aren't they afraid of us?"<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, the fact of possessing the largest nuclear arsenal played a very important symbolic role in Russian domestic politics. In the winter of 1991, immediately after the decisions on the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Yeltsin took demonstrative actions to deprive Mikhail Gorbachev of the "nuclear briefcase", a portable device with which the head of state could order a nuclear strike. In the autumn of 1996, after Yeltsin, who had undergone heart surgery and had still not fully recovered from the anaesthetic, took this suitcase from Viktor Chernomyrdin, it is unlikely that Yeltsin feared that Gorbachev or Chernomyrdin would launch a nuclear war. Simply, the nuclear briefcase had become for him the material symbol of supreme power, acting as both power and a sceptre. At the same time, the possession of nuclear weapons allowed reformers to insist on the possibility of a significant reduction in conventional armed forces, which the country could no longer afford.

### **Expanded Deterrence in a New Way**

The real revival of the doctrine of expanded deterrence occurred under Putin. In the minds of the Russian elite, nuclear weapons seemed to be of the greatest value and possession equated Russia with the United States, the most powerful country in the world. In Putin's mind, it was these weapons that protected the country from inevitable robbery and dismemberment, of which he believed Western countries constantly dreamed.

This approach has already been demonstrated in Putin's explanation for the tragedy in Beslan, where in 2004 Chechen terrorists seized a school in Northern Ossetia and more than 300 hostages were killed during the assault:

We have stopped paying proper attention to issues of defence and security.... (We) demonstrated weakness. And, if you are weak, they beat you. Some want to snatch from us "the tastiest piece of pie", others help them. They do so because, knowing that Russia is one of the world's major nuclear powers, they think that she is a threat to others. So, this threat must be removed. And, of course, terrorism is only an instrument of achieving these goals.<sup>3</sup>

Since 2005, Putin has been regularly reminding his audience in his speeches that Russia has a "miracle weapon" at its disposal:

We are continuing work on developing high-precision weapons and they are being tested. ... These are long-range high-precision missiles and, as I have said before, no one else in the

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2 <https://bookitut.ru/Voennaya-Rossiia.27.html>

3 <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22589>

world has such arms yet and are unlikely to have them before us. They are supersonic systems that can change trajectory and altitude and are practically invulnerable, including to the anti-missile defence systems being developed by certain of our partner countries.<sup>4</sup>

In the early years of Putin's rule, it seemed to many analysts in the West that obsessive reminders of nuclear power were an indelible relic of the Cold War thinking. In fact, it was an early harbinger of a new confrontation. According to this logic, a hypothetical assumption is given out as a reliable fact. Such logic is perfectly demonstrated in one of Putin's most famous speeches — his remarks at the Munich Security Conference in 2007:

Yes, the United States supposedly is not developing offensive weapons.... Although it, of course, is.... But what do we know? We know that the USA has been actively developing, and actually, has already put in place a missile defence system. Yes, today it is not effective, and we do not know for sure if it ever will be effective. But in theory, this is what it is meant to be. Which means, again hypothetically, that a moment could come when a potential threat from our nuclear forces will be completely neutralized. Today's Russian forces, that is. And if this is so, the balance absolutely will be upset, one side will begin feeling completely safe and free to get involved in local and possibly global conflicts.<sup>5</sup>

The interesting thing here is that the view of the military threat is based on two hypothetical suppositions: that the United States *might be* planning to build-up its nuclear arsenal; and that Washington is *apparently* creating a system of antimissile defence to deliver a first strike against Russia. As the years went by, the need to confirm suspicions about the intentions of the West disappeared. As Putin reasoned at a press conference in 2014:

I myself think sometimes: maybe our bear needs to calm down, stop chasing piglets and boars all over the taiga and be content with berries and honey....Perhaps they will leave him alone? No, they won't because they will always strive to chain him up. And once he is chained, they'll pull out his teeth and claws. In today's understanding, these are nuclear deterrence forces. But as soon as this happens and the bear is not needed, they will start grabbing the taiga right away. After all, we have heard it many times from various officials that it is not fair that all of Siberia and its immense riches belongs to Russia alone. What do you mean it's not fair? Was it fair to chop off Texas from Mexico? And when we are working on our own land, that's not fair. Have to give it away. And then, after they pull out the bear's teeth and claws, they will no longer need the bear at all. They'll just make a stuffed bear out of it, and that's it.<sup>6</sup>

The only basis for such suspicions is a specious quote attributed to Madeleine Albright, the former US Secretary of State, although in fact she had never said anything like this.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, this clearly reflects the worldview of the Russian president. He is convinced that military might is a single defining factor in the country's power and influence. He knows very well that Russian conventional forces are not sufficient as an instrument of global influence.

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4 [https://nvo.ng.ru/realty/2020-10-01/7\\_1111\\_efremov.html?ysclid=lf6w5gziht257565113](https://nvo.ng.ru/realty/2020-10-01/7_1111_efremov.html?ysclid=lf6w5gziht257565113)

5 Vystuplenie i diskussiya na Myunhenskoj konferencii po voprosam politiki bezopasnosti. Kremlin.ru February 10, 2007 <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>

6 Bol'shaya press-konferenciya Vladimira Putina. Kremlin.ru December 18, 2014 <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47250>

7 There is a quote, wrongly attributed to Albright, arguing that it is not fair that Russia has sole possession of Siberia with its vast natural resources, and that Siberia needs to be placed under international control. This quote is regularly cited by the secretary of the Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev, Deputy Prime Minister Dmitri Rogozin, Aleksei Pushkov, chair of the International Relations Committee of the State Duma and others.

The nuclear warheads Moscow has at its disposal have become, in Putin's mind, the only factor that makes Russia a leading actor in international relations. The Kremlin believes that nuclear parity strengthens Russia's position on issues that are far removed from those of nuclear deterrence.

Possession of nuclear weapons has become an essential element of Putin's self-identification. For more than 20 years, he has been unable to accept the fact that the United States withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM Treaty). Putin is certain that Washington had already decided to break with strategic parity; that is, to create a situation in which the United States could use its superiority in missile defence to launch a first nuclear strike against Russia and then, with the help of its strategic missile defence, intercept any surviving missiles that Moscow would launch in retaliation. It is difficult to accept that Putin seriously believes that the United States might launch a first nuclear strike if it thought it could do so with impunity. After all, during his time in power he has approved two treaties that led to a reduction in the number of strategic weapons, and consequently reduced Russian capabilities for a retaliatory strike. This is different: the ABM Treaty was a unique international document that stated that there was a state in the world (Russia) capable of destroying the United States. Moreover, by signing this treaty, the United States fixed its readiness to put up with this circumstance. In the view of Russian leaders, this was the most convincing proof that Russia was an equal of the United States. It is significant that on 1 March 2018, having devoted one-third of his Address to the Federal Assembly to the newest types of nuclear weapons, Putin presented all this as a response to the US missile defence system.

### **Time for Blackmail**

However, when Putin began the seizure of Ukraine in 2014, the thesis that Russia was only responding to the nuclear threat from the West appeared weak. The time had come for direct nuclear blackmail. For instance, in the propaganda film *Crimea: The Road to the Homeland*, Putin states that Russia could have put its nuclear forces on high alert during the military operation in Crimea: "We were prepared to do it", Putin says. "I talked to my colleagues (he calls the leaders of Western countries colleagues) and told them that (Crimea) was historically our territory, Russian people live there, they were in danger, we could not leave them behind".<sup>8</sup> In another propaganda film, *The World Order*, Putin states that Russia's Kalibr sea-based cruise missiles prove that Moscow has powerful weapons and that "Russia has the will to use them, if it is in the national interests of our country and the Russian people".<sup>9</sup> In 2017, Putin explained the prospects for launch-on-alert: "Any aggressor should know that retaliation is inevitable, and they will be annihilated. And we as the victims of an aggression, we as martyrs would go to paradise while they will simply perish because they won't even have time to repent their sins".<sup>10</sup>

This direct blackmail gained additional weight from Putin's point of view because Russia was leading the arms race: "For the first time ever – I want to emphasize this – for the first time in the history of nuclear missile weapons, including the Soviet period and modern times, we

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8 Putin: my mogli privesti v boegotovnost' yadernoe oruzhie, zashchishchaya Krym. Vesti.ru. March 15, 2015 <http://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=2427105>

9 Interv'yu Vladimiru Solov'evu. Kremlin.ru. October 12, 2015 <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50482>

10 <https://tass.ru/info/12721339?ysclid=lf79azs8j1883519864>

are not catching up with anyone, but, on the contrary, other leading states have yet to create the weapons that Russia already possesses".<sup>11</sup> Declaring that superiority (in the form of the creation of hypersonic missiles) had already been achieved, Putin immediately began to threaten the United States:

Russia will be forced to create and deploy weapons that can be used not only in the areas we are directly threatened from, but also in areas that contain decision-making centres for the missile systems threatening us.... within the US elite, there are also many people who have excessive faith in their exceptionalism and supremacy over the rest of the world. Of course, it is their right to think what they want. But can they count? Probably they can. So let them calculate the range and speed of our future arms systems. This is all we are asking: just do the maths first and take decisions that create additional serious threats to our country afterwards. It goes without saying that these decisions will prompt Russia to respond in order to ensure its security in a reliable and unconditional manner.<sup>12</sup>

Nuclear threats reached their crescendo after the start of full-scale direct military action against Ukraine. On 27 February, Putin accused senior officials of the leading NATO countries of indulging in aggressive statements directed at Russia. He therefore gave an order to the Minister of Defence and the Chief of the General Staff "to put the Russian Army's deterrence forces on high combat alert".<sup>13</sup> Just six months later, Russian diplomats found it necessary to clarify that Vladimir Putin meant only "reinforce personnel on duty at the command posts".<sup>14</sup>

A few days before Russia annexed several regions of Ukraine, Putin announced a partial mobilization and stated that Russia would use all methods, including nuclear weapons, when its territorial integrity was threatened.<sup>15</sup> Thus, he hinted that Russia could use nuclear weapons to "defend" territories that had just been incorporated into Russia. He also spoke about the growing threat of nuclear war at a meeting with members of the Human Rights Council.<sup>16</sup> However, he insisted that the threat came from the United States and the UK.

The Russian leadership uses any technique to prove that the nuclear threat comes from the West. After the UK deputy defence minister announced that the UK would supply not only tanks to Ukraine, but also depleted uranium shells, Putin immediately reacted: "It seems that the West really has decided to fight Russia to the last Ukrainian – no longer in words, but in deeds. But in this regard, I would like to note that if all this comes to pass, then Russia will have to respond accordingly. What I mean is that the collective West is already starting to use weapons with a nuclear component".<sup>17</sup> Defence Minister Shoigu had already explicitly stated that such actions by the West might lead to a nuclear conflict: "This leads us to seriously think about the further course of developments and about how we can respond".<sup>18</sup> Later, the transfer of depleted uranium shells to Ukraine was used to justify the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus.

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11 <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62582>

12 <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/44032/page/4>

13 <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/27/02/2022/621b77959a79477dcca4c36f?ysclid=I6jfbcoio521734789>

14 <https://ria.ru/20220805/boegotovnost-1807648313.html?ysclid=I6hnpzj1st598516032>

15 <https://lenta.ru/news/2022/09/21/yadder/?ysclid=I68eje7qx3570275479>

16 <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/07/12/2022/6390afa79a79474ec57ca869?ysclid=I68elpnq8t372086789>

17 <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70750>

18 <https://tass.com/politics/1592547>



Russian officials, politicians and experts hurried to follow their leader. A school of thought that had never existed in the Soviet Union began to rapidly gain ground in the country. Its followers believe that nuclear weapons could be used in a future war and that such a war will not mean the death of humanity.

Putin's rhetoric began to spread in doctrinal documents. Thus, the "Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Naval Activities", approved in 2017, explicitly states that "in the context of an escalating military conflict, demonstrating readiness and determination to use non-strategic nuclear weapons is an effective deterrent".<sup>19</sup> The authors were not at all confused by the fact that the provisions on "nuclear de-escalation", that is, the use of non-strategic nuclear weapons to deter, do not agree in any way with the conditions for the use of nuclear weapons recorded in the Military Doctrine.

Moreover, clearly feeling the approval of the Kremlin, Russian officials began to talk in unbridled fashion about the prospects of a nuclear strike. Dmitry Rogozin, for example, then head of Roskosmos, stated that the new Sarmat intercontinental ballistic missile "can demolish half of the coast of some large continent, which we may not like with its aggressive policy".<sup>20</sup> Shoigu threatened that Russian strategic bombers would conduct regular patrols over the Gulf of Mexico. After February 2022, such statements, regularly made by the former president and now Putin's deputy in the Security Council, Dmitry Medvedev, Speaker of the State Duma Vyacheslav Volodin and others, have become more and more common.

For some military experts, the possibility of using nuclear weapons first in a local war has become a commonplace. An article of a purely military-technical nature about how to protect the launch sites for Russian strategic missiles with balloons, for example, states as a matter of course that: "In the open press, experts analyse various options for the first use [of nuclear weapons]. The main feature is the limited nature of the first nuclear impact, which is designed not to harden, but to sober up the aggressor, force him to stop the attack and move on to negotiations. In the absence of the desired reaction, an increasing massing of the use of nuclear weapons is envisaged, both in quantitative terms and in terms of energy release".<sup>21</sup> Such arguments appear moderate compared to the demonstratively obscurantist views expressed by one author on the website of such an authoritative organization as the Russian International Affairs Council: "A world in which local nuclear mushrooms will dissipate and losses will be comparable to the wars of the so-called pre-nuclear era will be different. We will see with interest that nuclear weapons are simply powerful weapons that have their own application schemes and military tasks, and that no "global cooling" and "Earth splits" have occurred. We, like grown-up children, learn that we did not have and do not have weapons capable of "destroying civilization" or "ending humanity". In such a world, it will be impossible to shout that "nuclear weapons will keep us from war".<sup>22</sup>

Thus, the Kremlin's rhetoric regarding nuclear weapons has gone through two obvious stages. In the first, Putin presented the Russian nuclear arsenal as of supreme value, and the

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19 <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/42117/page/2>

20 <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2022/05/19/rogozin-sarmat-mozhet-nessi-polbereg-kontinenta-chto-ne-ponravitsya-rossii.html>

21 <https://vpk-news.ru/articles/32887>

22 [https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/columns/military-and-security/mif-yadernogo-sderzhivaniya/?sphrase\\_id=34533378](https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/columns/military-and-security/mif-yadernogo-sderzhivaniya/?sphrase_id=34533378)

main guarantor of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country. At the same time, he demonstrated a conviction that external forces, primarily the United States, are doing everything possible to deprive Russia of its nuclear power. In the second stage, he moved on to attempts to use nuclear weapons as a tool of direct blackmail, intimidating the outside world with the possibility of use nuclear weapons.

### **Treaties as a Pressure Tool**

Similar metamorphoses have occurred with the approach to nuclear disarmament and security treaties. For the Soviet leadership, the literal and applied meaning of “pure” arms control provided at least minimal security guarantees in conditions of fierce confrontation. Mikhail Gorbachev saw these agreements as a bridge to mutual trust with the West. For Boris Yeltsin, the treaties with the United States were primarily a confirmation of his personal prestige and of the status of Russia as a great power. In the first period of his rule, Putin took roughly the same approach. A Strategic Offensive Capabilities Treaty was signed with the United States in 2003 and the New START Treaty was signed in 2010. However, the further it went, the harder work on new and the execution of concluded agreements became. In Putin’s interpretation, this was a means of manipulation and political pressure, something akin to a carrot and stick approach.

Such an approach has only spurred the degradation of the once extensive treaty system that has taken place in recent years. In a US initiative, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) was destroyed in 2019. Moscow finally withdrew from the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE Treaty) in 2015. The US left the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM Treaty) in 2002. In addition to these cornerstone agreements, others were also destroyed in passing. In 2013 the Nunn-Lugar programme was terminated by Russia. In 2014, the cooperation agreement on the safe storage of weapons-grade fissile materials ceased to operate. In 2016, the same fate befell the agreement on the disposal of weapons-grade plutonium. Finally, in November 2020, after Trump’s election defeat, Washington withdrew from the Open Skies Treaty, stating that “it no longer meets the interests of US security”. The Kremlin hastened to follow, declaring its refusal to comply with the provisions of the agreement.

The fate of the New START Treaty remained uncertain for a long time. Before 2020, Moscow had been delaying the start of negotiations on its extension for a long time, seeking to achieve additional political dividends. In particular, the Kremlin pointedly ignored the Obama administration’s quest, undertaken in the summer of 2016, for an immediate extension of the Treaty to ensure its preservation regardless of the outcome of the presidential election. In a response to the *Washington Post*, the press secretary to the Russian president, Dmitry Peskov, said that there were no proposals on the table. Alexander Grushko, at the time Russia’s representative to NATO, stated that: “We believe that the resource of bilateral negotiations in the field of reducing nuclear strategic offensive weapons has been exhausted”. The subtext was obvious: the Kremlin was not going to renegotiate the most important international agreement with a “lame duck”. It was clear that the Kremlin saw the start of the extension process as a gift for the newly elected US president. It is significant that, according to media reports, Putin started talking about extending the New START Treaty in his very first telephone conversation with US President Donald J. Donald Trump, and received a colder reaction than he expected.

President-elect Biden had to urgently extend the treaty literally in a few days. The Russian parliament had set all imaginable speed records, approving the law on the extension of START for a maximum period of five years in just one day. Although the treaty was saved at the time, doubts immediately arose as to whether it would be able to function under conditions of growing confrontation.

Unfortunately, the worst fears were confirmed by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In August 2022, Moscow unilaterally refused to resume mutual inspections of compliance with START, which had previously been suspended due to the covid pandemic. The start of the war and the subsequent introduction of Western sanctions led to normal air traffic between Russia and the United States being suspended, European countries closed their airspace to the passage of Russian aircraft and there were problems with obtaining transit visas for members of inspection teams and flight crews, as well as difficulties making payments for services during inspections. All this, according to Moscow, made it impossible to conduct inspections on US soil, which served as the basis for the ban on US inspections in Russia. At the same time, however, Moscow continued to talk about its concerns. For more than a year, Russian diplomats expressed doubts about the integrity of US “conversion” of nuclear weapon delivery vehicles. The irony is that the most effective way to remove these Russian concerns is to conduct inspections, which Moscow itself ceased, declaring them impossible.

However, it seemed that the parties were aware of how important it is to ensure mutual information about the state of strategic forces in a period of confrontation. They therefore discussed and made preparations for consultations, during which it would be possible to discuss differences and the future prospects of START. The date, place and agenda for these consultations were discussed at length and in detail. The Russian side rejected Geneva, which had already become familiar as a meeting, considering Switzerland not friendly enough, and Cairo was selected as a result. It was no accident that the negotiations were supposed to take a whole week. Just a few hours before the start of the scheduled start on 29 November, however, the Russian side defiantly refused to participate.

Explaining events, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov was extremely frank: “By and large, the situation was such that we had no other choice, the decision was made at the political level. We are faced with a situation when our American colleagues ... demonstrated not just unwillingness to perceive our signals and consider our priorities, but acted in the opposite way.... There is, of course, the effect of what is happening in Ukraine and around it, I will not deny it. Arms control and dialogue in this area cannot be immune to what is around, and the broader picture – quite difficult, by and large alarming – has affected this”.<sup>23</sup>

Ryabkov said quite clearly that the refusal of consultations was a kind of “political signal”. He also clarified that before starting consultations on strategic weapons, it would be necessary to settle “major issues that dominate our agenda with the United States”, which, it became apparent, “are more important today than some kind of equipment and mechanics of work within the framework of the Strategic Arms Treaty”.

Finally, Maria Zakharova, official representative of the Russian Foreign Ministry, joined all the dots: “You need to have a very peculiar logic to talk to Russia about restraint, transparency and predictability in military matters, while simultaneously helping the Kiev regime to kill

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23 <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5694343>

our military and civilians in Russian regions, providing more and more destructive means of armed struggle and directing to Ukraine, American instructors, advisers and mercenaries". These arguments were later used in Putin's address of 21 February 2023.

Thus, Moscow demanded that the US first make concessions on Ukraine, and only then, as a bonus, would they have the opportunity to discuss the problems of START. It is possible that Moscow would at this time like to use the methods of communication with Washington that were developed during the first Cold War. At that time, negotiations on strategic weapons were a channel that provided direct communication between the Soviet and US leaderships in crisis situations. The Kremlin probably associates consultations on START with hopes for discussions on the war in Ukraine, in which Russia has got stuck. Under current conditions, when mutual trust between Russia and the West has fallen to a level below zero, it is the disarmament negotiations that make it possible if not to restore such trust, then at least to develop some kind of palliative for it.

However, relationships that allow negotiations to discuss sensitive "extraneous" topics do not arise instantly. It takes months for participants to develop mutual respect and then mutual trust. There is no such time available now. According to military logic, which is now guided by the Kremlin, discussions on issues of strategic stability have lost all meaning. It remained only to "punish" the United States by suspending its participation in the treaty.

### **How Dangerous is It?**

It is no secret that throughout the entire time Vladimir Putin has been in power, he has invested huge resources in maintaining nuclear forces and quantitative parity with the United States in strategic weapons. At the end of 2022, he insisted that "the proportion of modern weapons in strategic nuclear forces already exceeds 91%". One-third of Putin's Address to the Federal Assembly in 2018 was devoted to Russia's success in creating fundamentally new weapons. Putin enthusiastically talked about the new heavy Sarmat missile, the Avangard gliding warhead, the Kinzal hypersonic missile, the Burevestnik nuclear-powered cruise missile and the Poseidon underwater drone, as well as the Peresvet laser installation. Later, the Zirkon hypersonic sea-based missile was added to this list.

The real situation is significantly different from the picture Putin paints. There is no reason to believe that modern examples exceed 91% of the strategic nuclear arsenal. According to the New START Treaty, Russia has 700 deployed nuclear delivery vehicles (land-based missiles, submarine launched missiles, strategic bombers). Of these, 40 missiles are SS-18 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), produced in the late 1980s, that have repeatedly exceeded warranty periods. To these should be added the Topol SS-25 ICBM missiles. According to various estimates, there may be between 9 and 45 units, which were produced between 1988 and 1998. Another 49 missiles are placed on "Kalmar" and "Dolphin" type nuclear submarines, which are due to be decommissioned in 2023. Finally, more than 50 strategic bombers were built 30–40 years ago. It seems more likely that the Kremlin suspended participation in New START in order to hide the gradual reduction in the size of Russia's nuclear arsenal.

Russia has obvious problems with replacing expired delivery vehicles with new ones. The main problem here is the new "heavy" rocket Sarmat. The day after his 2023 address was announced, Vladimir Putin stated that the first launchers for the Sarmat missile system were already on combat duty. It is these missiles that are intended to replace the outdated SS-



18. Back in 2016, the Russian media, citing senior officials as sources, reported that the Sarmat rocket was almost ready. For the past seven years, military and political leaders have repeatedly announced successful tests of this missile or that such tests are about to take place, after which it will immediately be put into combat duty. Thus far, however, only one test has ever been conducted.

Citing White House officials, CNN reported that on the eve of the announcement in Putin's 2023 Address, Moscow warned the United States, as required by the New START Treaty, about an upcoming Sarmat test, and that this test ended in failure. If so, then it is quite reasonable to assume that the announcement to suspend participation in New START was an inadequate replacement for a planned loud announcement of a successful test of the Sarmat.

At the same time, it should be recognized that the Kremlin has enough nuclear weapons at its disposal to carry out its nuclear deterrence tasks. These are seven submarines of the fourth generation "Borey" and "Borey-A", each of which has 16 SS-NX-30 "Bulava" SLBMs with six warheads. There are also 149 SS-29 Yars ground-based missiles, each of which can carry up to four warheads,. Such potential is enough to inflict so-called unacceptable damage on an aggressor if it carries out a nuclear attack. From the Kremlin's point of view, however, this is not impressive enough to use nuclear weapons as a political weapon.

The "exotic" types of weapons that delight Vladimir Putin so much do not, according to experts, affect the strategic balance in any way. They are redundant. The Avangard combat units, which are said to be able to manoeuvre in space when approaching a target, were created during the Soviet period to overcome a missile defence system that was created 40 years ago under the "Star Wars" programme. The current US missile defence is obviously not designed to intercept Russian warheads. Currently, the United States has 44 interceptors capable of destroying Russian strategic warheads. It is assumed that they will be destroyed in space in the mid-section of their flight by a kinetic strike. According to experts, it will take between two and five US anti-ballistic missiles to intercept one Russian warhead. Thus, in the most favourable situation, about 25 Russian warheads would be intercepted, of which Russia has 1550. The balance will not change if plans are implemented to increase US missile defence potential to 60 or even 100 interceptors.

The hypersonic aircraft Kinzhal missile and the anti-ship Zircon are not strategic due to their limited range. Nor do they give Russia military superiority, since their use with nuclear warheads would not ensure victory, but would inevitably lead to a general nuclear war. The same can be said for the most exotic weapons – the Poseidon underwater drone and the Burevestnik cruise missile. According to the Kremlin, these have nuclear power plants which allows them to stay underwater or in the air indefinitely. The Soviet Union abandoned attempts to create such a weapon back in the 1960s, not least because of its destabilizing nature which did not allow for arms control. However, its destabilizing nature has now become important for Putin. Attempts to achieve political goals using nuclear weapons as a tool of pressure will not succeed if the "counter-partners" consider a particular leader to be a mentally sane person who lacks supernatural ideas, for the sake of which he is ready to burn the planet. For quite a long time, Putin had just such a reputation. Having sought to start a new Cold War in the absence of the necessary resources, however, he has begun to consistently struggle with this reputation. As time goes on, his approach to the role of nuclear weapons has begun to resemble that of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, who

made his own unpredictability a political tool. This is dangerous if only because a nuclear conflict can grow out of any accidental incident in a military confrontation. As the war against Ukraine shows, Russian leaders often become victims of their own propaganda, and can make deeply erroneous decisions as a result. Endless repetition of the false thesis about the West's intention to make a pre-emptive strike could lead to misinterpretations of signals from the early warning system about a missile attack, and start a nuclear war.

For quite a long time, the US has reacted in rather a restrained way to Putin's nuclear rhetoric. Only on 7 October 2022 did US President Joe Biden find it necessary to state: "For the first time since the Cuban Missile Crisis, we have a direct threat of the use of nuclear weapons, if in fact things continue down the path they've been going". Shortly before this statement, however, US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said that, despite Moscow's nuclear hints, the US had seen no signs that Russia was immediately preparing to use a nuclear weapon. A month later, a White House official said that Central Intelligence Agency Director William Burns had warned Sergei Naryshkin, head of Russia's SVR foreign intelligence service, about the consequences of any use of nuclear weapons: "He is conveying a message on the consequences of the use of nuclear weapons by Russia, and the risks of escalation to strategic stability". After that, the nuclear rhetoric subsided for a while. It resumed following Putin's address to the Federal Assembly on 21 February 2023, however, but still the US reaction was fairly calm. After all, the strategic balance has not changed. Nonetheless, Putin's threats have begun to undermine strategic stability. In a situation where blackmail has ceased to bring results, and there are no other means of achieving goals, Putin raises the stakes every time. His current threat to resume "nuclear tests" is in fact discussion of a demonstration nuclear explosion.

The only possible response in this situation seems to be implementation by the West of a strict policy of deterrence, similar to that carried out by the administration of Ronald Reagan in the early 1980s. Then, in response to every threat from the Soviet Union, a similar threat from the United States followed. It is appropriate to recall that the response to the deployment of medium-range missiles by the Soviet Union was the deployment of weapons of a similar class in Western Europe. As a result, vital centres of the Soviet Union were put under threat of attack, which forced the Kremlin to resume negotiations. At the same time, it should be borne in mind that such "tough deterrence" is not a panacea. Carrying out such a policy would mean a new nuclear arms race, but there does not seem to be any alternative.

## Conclusions

- The Kremlin's nuclear rhetoric has changed decisively since the beginning of the war against Ukraine. If before Putin claimed that nuclear weapons were the main guarantee of the country's sovereignty, since 2014 he has begun to threaten the use of nuclear weapons in order to deter West from unwanted actions and to safeguard Russia's position as an equal of the United States on the world stage.
- The West has reacted with restraint to these threats. It proceeds from the fact that despite the intimidation, Moscow has no ability to change the strategic balance in its favour. At the same time, however, Putin has no other levers of influence on the West. In a situation where his threats are ignored, he raises the stakes. In addition, the war against Ukraine has shown that the Kremlin can be influenced by its own propaganda.
- The escalation of nuclear rhetoric and the rise of nuclear threats can only be stopped by "tough deterrence", similar to that practiced by the United States in the early 1980s.



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