



RUSSIA'S NEW ANTI MISSILE DEFENSE SYSTEMS

By
Ghazala Yasmin Jalil
Research Fellow

Edited by
Najam Rafique

March 19, 2018

(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Russia has revealed an array of new nuclear capable weapons systems primarily designed to defeat US missile defense systems. Russian President Vladimir Putin revealed details of the systems during his annual State of the Union address on March 1, 2018. His address came just weeks before Russian presidential election is due which he is expected to win comfortably to a fourth presidential term.

The message he delivered during his speech seemed to be twofold: to the West - do not push us; and to the Russian people that voting for President Putin would be voting for national security.

The weapons that the Russian President revealed included a new prototype missile that "can reach any point in the world" and a supersonic weapon that cannot be tracked by missile defense systems.¹ He also showed the audience a video of how the prototype missile would work. The video showed what appeared like missiles raining down on the US state of Florida. Another system he described was a, "low-flying, difficult-to-spot cruise missile ... with a practically unlimited range and an unpredictable flight path, which can bypass lines of interception and is invincible in the face of all existing and future systems of both missile defense and air defense."² He also spoke of a system that Russia's missile forces will soon have that would be, "capable of destroying intercontinental targets

¹ "Putin reveals new Russian missile that can 'reach any point in the world'" *CNBC*, March 1, 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/03/01/putin-new-russia-missile-nuclear.html>

² "Russia's Putin unveils 'invincible' nuclear weapons," *BBC News*, March 1, 2018 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43239331>

with hypersonic speed and high-precision, able to maneuver both in terms of its course and altitude. He claimed that there are no systems like that in the world.³

President Putin further revealed that Russia had adopted 300 new models of weaponry providing the armed forces with 18 new Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBM), and two submarine-based ballistic missiles. He added that the country had commissioned three new nuclear submarines and also increased the number of its high-precision long-range missiles. He also said that Russia is developing new underwater drones that are un-manned, noiseless submarines that move at ultra-deep levels and at high speed and can carry nuclear warheads. He claimed that these underwater drones were 100 times smaller than a conventional submarine and there is no defence system that can cope with these.⁴

The Russian President clearly stated that these weapons developments were in response to the US missile defense systems. In 2002, the US withdrew from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty between the US and Soviet Union which prohibited the two countries from deploying defenses against strategic ballistic missiles. The US has since placed missile defense systems in Poland and Romania which is practically Russia's backyard. Putin asserted that, "The US global missile defense system also includes five cruisers and 30 destroyers, which, as far as we know, have been deployed to regions in close proximity to Russia's borders."⁵ Russia has repeatedly complained against placement of missile defense systems at its doorstep, which it considers as eastward NATO expansion. But the US has maintained that they are not meant against Russia, but against missiles from rogue states like Iran and North Korea.

Putin asserted that since the mainstay of Russian nuclear forces consisted of ballistic missiles, a US missile defense system undermined its nuclear deterrence. The array of weaponry revealed, therefore, is designed to defeat and bypass US missile defense system.

Putin's address is a strong message meant for the US that the country is a formidable military and nuclear force that is ready to defend itself. Putin insisted that Russia had no plans to attack anybody or to take anything away from anybody, but wanted the weapon development to act as a warning. He categorically stated, "It is not a bluff."⁶ The message is clear- Russia is ready to use nuclear weapons and defend itself if attacked. President Putin asserted that, "Russia's growing military

³ "Putin reveals new Russian missile that can 'reach any point in the world'" *CNBC*, March 1, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/03/01/putin-new-russia-missile-nuclear.html>

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly, March 1, 2018, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56957>

⁶ Ibid

power is a solid guarantee of global peace as this power preserves and will preserve strategic parity and the balance of forces in the world."⁷

President Putin's address comes in the wake of US Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) that was revealed in February 2018. The NPR essentially claimed that the nature of threats the US faces has changed including reference to China and Russia who have, "added new types of nuclear capabilities to their arsenals, increased the salience of nuclear forces in their strategies and plans, and engaged in increasingly aggressive behavior."⁸ It envisaged extensive modernization of all three element of US nuclear forces - land-based ballistic missiles, submarine-launched missiles, and air-delivered weapons to have, "more flexible capabilities to give tailored deterrence."⁹ The NPR enhances the role of its non-strategic nuclear weapons and would modify its existing Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missile (SLBM) to provide a low-yield option and will pursue a modern nuclear-armed Submarine-Launched Cruise Missile. The NPR's emphasis on low yield nuclear weapons sends a signal of possible use of nuclear weapon. This is an alarming possibility, one that has the potential to lead to an all out war between the two super powers.

Both the NPR and Russian President's address comes in the backdrop of increasingly tense relations between the US and Russia that are reminiscent of Cold War. This new Cold War is punctuated by military face offs in Syria, on Russia's western border and in Ukraine. The US posture towards Russia has been especially hawkish since US President Donald Trump came to office.

With his latest address, President Putin has sent a clear message to the US - that Russia will not tolerate any aggression from the US. It has the weapons to defend itself and it will not hesitate to use them. It has laid out an array of weaponry that it claims can defeat any US missile defense systems and more. It has, thus, restored the credibility of its nuclear deterrent. However, the massive nuclear modernization programs of both the countries are not a positive development. It threatens to fuel a new nuclear arms race. Their moves to develop low yield nuclear weapons heightens the potential of nuclear use, and subsequently, the threat of a nuclear war. The US and Russia possess nearly 14000 nuclear arsenal¹⁰ between them which are enough to destroy the entire world several times over. Development of new generation of weapons would be costly and counterproductive. Also, the US must realize that placement of missile defense systems at Russia's

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Nuclear Posture Review, February 2018, <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF>, Page. V

⁹ "Nuclear Posture Review: US wants smaller nukes to counter Russia," *BBC News*, February 2, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-42925375>

¹⁰ Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, "Status of World Nuclear Forces," *Federation of American Scientists*, <https://fas.org/issues/nuclear-weapons/status-world-nuclear-forces/>

doorstep threatens the latter's security and negatively impacts deterrence. The US must abandon its deployment of missile defense components in Russia's neighborhood. The ultimate goal of US and Russia must be to improve relations and eventually move towards nuclear reduction.