

Is Vladimir Putin bluffing or should we be worried about his new 'miracle weapons'?

By Matthew Sussex

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VIDEO: Vladimir Putin says Russia has tested an array of new strategic nuclear weapons. (ABC News)

"Nobody listened to Russia," said Vladimir Putin at his annual state of the nation speech on Thursday. "Well, listen up now."

The source of Putin's confidence was some major and potentially disturbing announcements about Russia's military power. Like the US President's State of the Union addresses, these speeches are usually intended for domestic consumption: to list the achievements of the government, to bolster morale, and to encourage the citizenry to rally behind the flag.

Putin certainly doesn't need to worry about the upcoming presidential election this year. In fact, he hasn't even bothered campaigning. In 2017 he overtook the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev to become the second-longest serving Russian ruler behind Josef Stalin. He controls the media, is intolerant of dissent and has no real political rivals. Putin is also genuinely popular, and is regarded by Russians as a political moderate.

A leader in need of good news

However Putin does need good news stories for a Russian public concerned about corruption, the economy, government services and standards of living.

Typically he has relied on his foreign policy successes to sell the message of a muscular and confident Russia. Whether in Crimea, Ukraine, or Iran and the Middle East, relating great triumphs has become central to Putin's public messaging.



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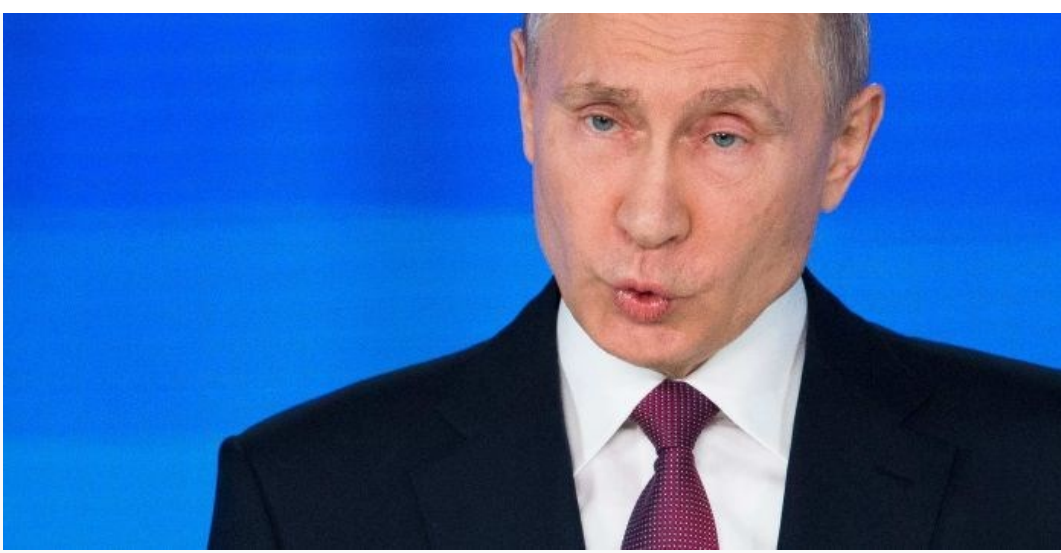


PHOTO: Putin set a slew of ambitious economic goals, vowing to boost living standards, improve health care and education and build modern infrastructure in a state-of-the-nation address. (AP: Alexander Zemlianichenko)

This time, though, Putin's remarks were aimed just as much at international audiences as local ones. He unveiled a suite of new weapons that included "invincible" nuclear-powered cruise missiles (shown flying around the world before ominously approaching Florida), and hard-to-detect drone submarines that could destroy an enemy's ports without giving any warning time to react.

So how concerned should we be about Putin's new miracle weapons?

If true, the biggest potential game-changer is the intercontinental missile. Cruise missiles are small and agile, which makes them very hard to detect and intercept. But they are limited in range due to their size.

If Russia's defence scientists have succeeded in producing a miniaturised nuclear propulsion system for cruise missiles — which can carry payloads of nuclear weapons — it is a major development.

Russia's poor missile record

For decades Moscow has chafed against US-led missile defence technology, claiming that it makes the world more unstable: not only by undermining Russia's nuclear deterrent, but giving the US and its allies a shield behind which they could strike with impunity.

By shifting the balance from verifiable deterrence towards surprise, this new system could change the strategic calculus considerably.

But we should also be sceptical about Putin's claims, at least in the short term.

It is one thing to prove a concept (which in this case was first mooted more than 50 years ago), and another thing entirely to ensure it works reliably, let alone deploy it.

Russian missile tests have had a poor track record recently, with the unfortunate habit of blowing up on their launch pads. And the Kremlin's enthusiasm for maskirovka — military arts by deception — has become embedded in Russian strategic thinking in every field, from information warfare and cyber operations to conventional military doctrine.

The upshot? We can't be sure this isn't just an elaborate bluff or exaggeration on Putin's part.

The US relationship worsening

That said, Putin's speech further ups the ante on the US, which announced in its 2018 Nuclear Posture Review that it would modernise its nuclear arsenal. And as much as Donald Trump has sought to cast Putin as a potential ally, in reality the relationship has soured further.

In recent years Russia has reoccupied Crimea and effectively cut Ukraine in half, embarked on a massive military modernisation program, deepened the humanitarian emergency in Syria, actively sought to militarise the Arctic, undermined European centrist parties through the refugee crisis, strengthened its strategic relationship with China, and undertaken massive disinformation campaigns in the US and EU.

It has also permanently deployed short-range nuclear missiles in Kaliningrad (which covers the Baltics, Poland and Germany) and sought to

Step aside Vladimir Putin



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reintegrate tactical nuclear weapons into its military doctrine.

elections — winning over a new generation that's turning its back on Mr Putin.

Putin's nuclear posturing is especially important. It signals that Russian military planners consider nukes as weapons to be used on battlefields, not just psychological tools to deter others. This compounds the Kremlin's brinkmanship about the potential for conflict with the West, since its "escalate to de-escalate" doctrine implies it might respond with nuclear weapons in any conventional war.

A sign of Putin's weakness?

There is also a good case to be made that Putin's posturing is actually a sign of weakness.

If he has to resort to brandishing his nuclear arsenal rather than demonstrate solid outcomes for his people, it is a marker of how poorly Russian society is travelling.

Indeed, over the course of his speech Putin had to address some of those concerns, promising to raise life expectancy from 73 to 80 years, doubling health care spending, increase pensions and bring 14 million Russians out of poverty over the next six years.

Time will tell if he is successful, but it will be tough to accomplish.

One thing is certain, though. Nuclear politics is firmly back on the agenda in the troubled Russia-West relationship.

Putin wants others to listen up, and he will achieve that with his new weapons. But what matters more is how we respond.

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