

Putin Claims Strategic Parity, Respect

Vladimir Putin's announcement of new weapons systems to achieve nuclear parity was the result of the erosion of arms control regimes, such as the ill-advised U.S. withdrawal from the ABM treaty in 2002, Ray McGovern explains.

By Ray McGovern

Russian President Vladimir Putin's State-of-the-Nation speech Thursday represents a liminal event in the East-West strategic balance – and an ominous one.

That the strategic equation is precarious today comes through clearly in Putin's words. The U.S. and Russia have walked backwards over the threshold of sanity first crossed in the right direction by their predecessors in 1972 with the signing of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty.

Amid the "balance of terror" that reigned pre-1972, sensible statesmen on both sides concluded and implemented the ABM treaty which, in effect, guaranteed "mutual assured destruction" – the (altogether fitting) acronym was MAD – if either side attempted a nuclear attack on the other. MAD might not sound much better than "balance of terror," but the ABM treaty introduced a significant degree of stability for 30 years.

The treaty itself was the result of painstaking negotiation with considerable understanding and good faith shown by both sides. The formidable task challenging us intelligence specialists was to be able to assure President Nixon that, if he decided to trust, we could monitor Soviet adherence and promptly report any violations. (Incidentally, the Soviets did cheat. In mid-1983 we detected a huge early warning radar installation at Krasnoyarsk in Siberia – a clear violation of the ABM treaty. President Reagan called them on it, and the Soviets eventually tore it down.)

During the U.S.-Soviet negotiations on the ABM treaty, a third of the CIA Soviet Foreign Policy Branch, which I led at the time, was involved in various supporting roles. I was in Moscow on May 26, 1972 for the treaty signing by President Richard Nixon and Soviet Communist Party General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev. I recall not being able to suppress an audible sigh of relief. MAD, I believed, would surely be preferable to the highly precarious strategic situation that preceded it. It was.

Cornerstone of Stability

In his speech on March 1, President Putin included an accurate tutorial on what

happened after three decades, noting that Moscow was “categorically against” the U.S. decision in 2002 to withdraw from the ABM treaty. He described the treaty as “the cornerstone of the international security system.”

Putin explained that under the treaty, “the parties had the right to deploy ballistic missile defense systems in only one of its regions. Russia deployed these systems around Moscow, and the U.S. around its Grand Forks land-based ICBM base [in North Dakota].” (He did not mention the aborted attempt to deploy a second installation at Krasnoyarsk.)

The Russian President explained: “The ABM treaty not only created an atmosphere of trust, but also prevented either party from recklessly using nuclear weapons ... because the limited number of ballistic missile defense systems made the potential aggressor vulnerable to a response strike.”

Putin was saying, in effect, that no matter how bad – even mad – the MAD concept may seem, it played a huge stabilizing role. He added that the U.S. rejected all Russian proposals toward constructive dialogue on the post-ABM treaty situation, and grossly underestimated Russia’s ability to respond. The Russian President then gave chapter and verse, cum video clips, on an array of new Russian weaponry which, he claimed, rendered missile defense systems “useless.” The show-and-tell segment of Putin’s speech has been widely reported.

***New York Times* Skeptical**

David Sanger, the *New York Times*’ go-to guy on key issues, who is among the best in the trade on reporting as “flat facts” things like WMD in Iraq and “Russian meddling,” wrote the lede on Putin’s speech in Friday’s *NY Times* together with Neil MacFarquhar. The meme this time is not flat fact, but skepticism: “Do these weapons really exist? Or is Putin bluffing?”

In support of their skepticism, Sanger and MacFarquhar blithely report that “analysts writing on Facebook and elsewhere leaned toward the bluff theory.” So, QED!

And echoing former National Intelligence Director James Clapper’s insight that Russians are “typically, almost genetically driven to co-opt, penetrate, gain favor, whatever,” Sanger and MacFarquhar remind NYT readers that “deception lies at the heart of current Russian military doctrine.”

The two NYT journalists did get one thing right at the very end of their article; namely, “For years, Mr. Putin has chafed at the perceived disrespect showed to him and Russia by the United States. ‘Nobody listened to Russia,’ he said near the end of his speech, to huge applause. ‘Well, listen now.’”

Russians, like all proud and gifted people, resent attempts to demean or marginalize them. Putin may have seen his speech, in part, as a blistering response to former President Barack Obama's dismissive comments that "Russia doesn't make anything" and is no more than "a regional power."

Door Still Open to Talks

It is to be hoped that the Marine generals running U.S. defense policy, rather than calling Putin's bluff, will now encourage President Donald Trump to take up Putin's latest offer to "sit down at the negotiating table" and "work together ... to ensure global security" – taking into account that "strategic parity" is now a reality.

Referring to what he called "our duty to inform our partners" about Russia's claimed ability to render ABM systems "useless," Putin added: "When the time comes, foreign and defense ministry experts will have many opportunities to discuss all these matters with them, if of course our partners so desire."

Putin also said, "We are greatly concerned by certain provisions of the revised Nuclear Posture Review," which envisages a nuclear response to "conventional arms attacks and even to a cyber threat."

He described Russia's military doctrine, as "very clear and specific": "Russia reserves the right to use nuclear weapons solely in response to a nuclear attack, or an attack with other weapons of mass destruction against the country or its allies, or an act of aggression against us with the use of conventional weapons that threatens the very existence of the state."

With burgeoning threats against Iran and Syria, it is to be hoped that someone in Washington thinks to ask Putin which countries he includes among Russia's allies.

White Lies Nobody Believes

Dana White, Pentagon spokeswoman, told reporters Thursday, "Our missile defense has never been about" Russia. Now, as Harry Truman would have put it, the Russians "weren't born yesterday." Putin has been extremely derisive toward those promoting the bromide that ABM installations in and around Europe are designed to defend against missiles from Iran – or North Korea.

In an unusually candid remark on missile defense on April 17, 2014, the day before Crimea was annexed, Putin told a national TV audience: "*Missile defense ... is no less, and probably even more important, than NATO's eastward expansion. Incidentally, our decision on Crimea was partially prompted by this.*" (Emphasis added)

To take some liberties with Shakespeare, “The fault is not in our stars, but in our Star Wars.” Ever since President Ronald Reagan was sold on the notion that a “Star Wars” ABM system could provide the U.S. with complete protection from missile attack, exceptional opportunities to restrain – or even put an end to – the nuclear arms race have been squandered. Victory has gone to the arms profiteers – those whom Pope Francis described to Congress as the “blood drenched arms merchants.”

The ABM project has been called, with justification, the world’s largest corporate welfare program. Jonathan Marshall today explains quite well what should scare us – still more billions likely to be thrown at the makers of systems that, most serious scientists and engineers agree, can always be defeated, and comparatively cheaply, way or another.

Three Decade-Old Conundrum

During the mid-80s, I had a front-row seat watching President Ronald Reagan blow what appeared to be a golden chance for a comprehensive peace. I had spent most of my CIA career focusing on Soviet foreign policy and was able to tell the senior U.S. officials I was briefing that Mikhail Gorbachev, in my view, was the real deal. Even so, I was hardly prepared for how far Gorbachev was willing to go toward disarmament. At the 1986 summit with President Ronald Reagan in Reykjavik, Iceland, Gorbachev proposed that all nuclear weapons be eliminated within ten years.

Reagan reportedly almost rose to the occasion, but was counseled to reject Gorbachev’s condition that any research on anti-ballistic missiles be confined to laboratories for that decade. “Star Wars,” the largest and most wasteful defense-industry program in recent memory, won the day.

I know the characters who, for whatever reason, danced to the tune of “Star Wars,” Reagan’s benighted, wistful wish for an airtight defense against strategic missiles.

The naysayers to peace included ideologues like CIA Director William Casey and Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, windsocks like CIA Deputy Director Robert Gates and one of his proteges, Fritz Ermarth, a viscerally anti-Russian functionary and former Northrop Corporation employee, during Reykjavik.

According to author Jim Mann, several years after Reykjavik, Ermarth reflected on how he had been wrong in being overly suspicious of Gorbachev and how the intuition of Ronald Reagan and Secretary of State George Shultz had been more perceptive.

What Now?

By all appearances, President Putin is as interested in stemming the strategic arms race as was Gorbachev. On Thursday, Putin talked about this particular moment being liminal – he called it “a turning point for the entire world.” Will there be anyone in Washington at the other end of the phone, if Moscow calls? If, in effect, the military-industrial-congressional-intelligence-media complex answers, ABM developers will continue to fatten their purses and squander our children’s future.

It may be time to recall the admonition of President Dwight D. Eisenhower in a speech he gave 65 years ago:

Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. ...

We pay for a single destroyer with new homes that could have housed more than 8,000 people. ... This is not a way of life at all, in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron. [...] Is there no other way the world may live?

‘Nuff said.

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