The Dire Significance of Putin's Speech Of February 21, 2023

by David Sant for the Saker blog

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On Tuesday, February 21st President Putin gave a speech that was expected to be very significant. After it was delivered, however, most pundits said he didn't say anything we didn't already know. Most of them focused on his announcement of the withdrawal from the START II treaty. However, he said something far more significant.

An Existential Threat

What Mr. Putin said, when read through the lens of international law, should be chilling to the West.

We would do well to remember that Mr. Putin majored in international law. His speech made a legal case against NATO.

First he listed, by my count, 30 different ways in which the Western nations have attacked Russia. These included the expansion of NATO to Russia's borders, support of terrorists in Russia, economic war, terrorist sabotage of the Nordstream Pipeline, financing of the coup and war in Ukraine, directly assisting Ukraine to attack targets in Russia including Russia's nuclear bombers, and plotting to destroy and partition Russia into pieces.

Nestled in the middle of these was an important statement.

"This means they plan to finish us once and for all. In other words, they plan to grow a local conflict into a global confrontation. This is how we understand it and we will respond accordingly, **because this represents an existential threat to our country**."

Putin's choice of words is extremely significant in light of Russian nuclear doctrine, which states that nuclear weapons could be used by Russia "in response to the use of nuclear and other types of weapons of mass destruction against it or its allies, and also in case of aggression against Russia with the use of conventional weapons when the very existence of the state is threatened."

Among the 30 points of evidence of the American war on Russia, Mr. Putin listed several cases of American use of conventional weapons against Russian territory through Ukraine as the thinly veiled proxy, and stated that this represents an "existential threat to [the Russian State]."

What Mr. Putin has just told us is that the Kremlin now considers nuclear use condition #2 to be true, today.

This statement was accompanied by two related actions. The day before the speech Russia tested a Sarmat II ICBM. And at the end of the speech, Mr. Putin announced that Russia shall immediately withdraw from the START II treaty, which limits the number and range of their nuclear missiles.

These three statements and events together should tell the collective West that Russia has just said "Get off my porch!", and cocked the forty-five.

This doesn't mean that Russia is going to strike the USA tomorrow morning. But, we are definitely now teetering on the cliff's edge of nuclear war.

Nuclear Offense and Defense

Mr. Putin has previously said that nobody can win a nuclear war, and it is a war that should never be fought. However, behind the scenes Russia had been furiously preparing to survive just such a war, which they hope to avoid.

Russia has developed and deployed the S-500 and S-550 air defenses which are primarily designed to shoot down intercontinental ballistic missiles in space before they can release their multiple warheads upon re-entry. Each S-500 battery is capable of simultaneously tracking and destroying 10 ICBMs in the early to mid flight stages.

The S-300 and S-400 batteries armed with the new 77N6-N and 77N6-N1 anti-ballistic missiles are also capable of shooting down ICBM warheads after re-entry at shorter ranges than the S-500.

These systems create an onion of defensive rings around key Russian cities and military bases. In the event of a nuclear exchange the S-500 would target the incoming ICBMs while still in space at a range of 600 kilometers, and outside the borders of Russia; and the S-400 and S-300 batteries would target any deployed warheads that managed to get through. Obviously, preventing as many enemy missiles as possible from being launched would improve the chances of successful defense.

The S-500 was deployed in 2021 to protect Moscow and went into mass production in 2022. So it is very possible that Russia has quietly installed a comprehensive missile defense shield. However, we don't have enough information to know whether it could be perfectly effective against hundreds of ICBMs at once. Given the maximum launch of 640 ICBMs by NATO, a total of sixty-four S-500 batteries would be required in order to intercept them all.

Due to missile reduction treaties since 1990, NATO's nuclear triad consists of about 400 Minuteman III ICBMs, 240 submarine-launched Trident II ICBM's, plus a few hundred B61 nuclear bombs carried by the sixty B1 and B2 heavy bombers in NATO's air force.

If Russia's ICBM defenses could take out 90% of 640 incoming missiles, it could survive a nuclear exchange at the cost of absorbing hits from about 50 warheads that got through. Given the smaller modern warheads in NATO's missile forces, it would do terrible but localized damage. Moscow would probably experience massive damage, but the rest of Russian territory would be fine.

NATO's nuclear offense forces rely on aging Trident II and Minuteman III ICBMs. The majority of these systems are over thirty years old. This means they will probably have a significant failure rate just to launch. Russia's modern air defenses and ECM have been designed to defeat these old technologies.

In balance to the effort to perfect defenses against ICBMs, Mr. Putin announced that Russia's nuclear forces have been 91% modernized. That means that the ICBMs that Russia would fire all have maneuverable hypersonic warheads. US air defenses are currently unable to defend against these.

The spacing of American Minuteman silos was designed for the majority to survive a first strike and launch retaliation. However, Russian maneuverable hypersonic multiple re-entry vehicles nullify this defense if the targeting data is accurate. Russia has to accurately hit 400 ground targets in the first strike to nullify a response.

Thus, if Russia strikes first, it may be able to eliminate the majority of incoming missiles by destroying them on the ground. The 240 submarine launched Trident missiles would be the primary threat to

defend against. Thus a first strike could reduce the number of expected retaliation missiles by 62%.

NATO's aging heavy bomber fleet is unlikely to be able to penetrate Russian air defenses. While these bombers were constantly kept in the air at the peak of the cold war, that is no longer the case.

A first strike would make it unlikely that the bombers and refuelers could get off the ground in time to effectively respond.

Russia currently has a window of superiority in both nuclear offense and defense that NATO is rapidly trying to close. It is not in Russia's interest to allow NATO to close the technology gap in air defense and ICBM offense. The world is now on the threshold of nuclear war. Russia keeps warning the West. The West keeps ignoring the warnings and doubling down. The immovable object is meeting the unstoppable force.

Three important things have changed since the Cold War which have changed the probability of a nuclear exchange.

1. Nuclear proliferation means that MAD can be bypassed if the identity of the first attacker is uncertain to the target. A missile that appears from an unexpected direction may not have been launched by the most obvious suspect.
2. MAD depends on both parties being rational actors. The West ceased to be rational when they destroyed Nordstream.
3. Russia may now have an effective missile defense shield, while NATO does not.

The Russian Method Projected Forward

Just as in December 2021 when Russia asked NATO for security guarantees, Russia follows the letter of the law and procedure. They gave NATO the opportunity to back down or negotiate. When they were

rebuffed, Russia intervened militarily in Ukraine, about 70 days after the initial demand for negotiation with NATO.

Following the same method, in 2023, Russia has just made the legal case that the USA and NATO are at war with Russia and pose an existential threat to Russia's existence.

It seems likely to me that in the coming weeks Russia's ally, China, will offer a peace deal which freezes the Ukraine conflict within the current lines of contact, i.e. Ukraine conceding lost territory to Russia.

If the West rejects the offered peace, which seems fairly likely, then all of the conditions for a nuclear war will be in place. All it will take is a new provocation by NATO to trigger a first strike by Russia. Or worse, if both parties realize this is the case, both will have the incentive to strike first.

In the next 360 days we are in greater danger of a nuclear exchange between Russia and NATO than we have ever before seen. There is a 60 to 90 day window remaining for this outcome to be avoided. Let us pray that God will turn the hearts of the Western leaders away from the suicidal folly they have embraced.