

Missile-gate: U.S. Intel Misses Russia's Big Advances in Nuclear Parity

Russian President Vladimir Putin's announcement on Thursday of major technological advances in nuclear weapons delivery systems appears to have caught the U.S. intelligence community unawares, reports Gilbert Doctorow.

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President Vladimir Putin's two-hour long address yesterday to the Federal Assembly, a joint session of both houses of Russia's bicameral legislature – plus large numbers of Russia's cultural, business and other elites – constituted his platform for the upcoming presidential election on March 18. This, in lieu of participation in the televised debates on all federal television channels in which other seven candidates are busy these days.

But as is the case with many of Vladimir Putin's major presentations, the speech yesterday was addressed to a far broader audience than the Russian electorate. Many of the estimated 700 journalists invited to attend were foreign correspondents. Indeed, one might reasonably argue that the speech was directed abroad, precisely to the United States.

The final third of the address, devoted to defense and presenting for the first time several major new and technically unparalleled offensive nuclear weapons systems, established Russia's claim to full nuclear parity with the United States, overturning the country's withdrawal from superpower status dating from the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1992. Some Russian commentators, in a burst of national pride, claimed that the power of the Soviet Union had now been restored and the wrongs of the 1990s were finally undone.

In its own way, this speech was as important, perhaps more important than Putin's talk to the Munich Security Conference in February 2007 at which he set out in length Russia's grievances with U.S. global hegemony installed in the 1990s and the utter disregard for or denial of Russia's national interests. That speech was a turning point in U.S.-Russian relations which headed us to the deep confrontation of today. Yesterday's speech suggested not the onset of a new arms race, but its conclusion, with outright Russian victory and U.S. defeat.

Putin's address was a "shock and awe" event. I leave to others, more competent than I in military technology to comment on the specific capabilities of the various systems rolled out yesterday. Whether short range or unlimited range, whether ground launched or air launched, whether ballistic missiles or cruise missiles, whether flying through the atmosphere or navigating silently and at high speed the very depths of the oceans, these various systems are said to be invincible to any known or prospective air defense such as the United States has invested in heavily since it unilaterally left the ABM Treaty and set out on a course that would upend strategic parity.

Since 2002, U.S. policy has aimed at enabling a first strike knocking out Russian ICBMs and then rendering useless Russia's residual nuclear forces which could be shot out of the air. Russia's new highly maneuverable and ultra-high speed (Mach 10 and Mach 20) missiles and underwater nuclear drone render illusory any scenario based on non-devastating response to the US homeland following a US strike on Russia. In passing, the new systems also render useless and turn into sitting duck targets the entire US navy, with its aircraft carrier formations.

U.S. and Western media response to Putin's address was varied. The *Financial Times* tried its best at neutral reporting, and midway through its feature article gave a paragraph each to two of Russia's most authoritative politicians with special expertise in relations with the West: Konstantin Kosachev and Alexei Pushkov, both former chairmen of the Duma's Committee on Foreign Affairs.

However, their reporters and editorial supervisors were out of their depth, unable to reach a consistent view on what the Kremlin is doing. On the one hand Putin's statements about Russia's "unstoppable" nuclear weapons are reduced to "claims," suggesting a certain skepticism; on the other hand, the consequence is to "fuel concern about a new arms race with the U.S." They cannot fathom that the race is over.

The *Washington Post* was fairly quick to post a lengthy article in its online edition yesterday. An unusually large part consisted of quotes from Putin's speech. The editorial line tells it all in the title assigned: "Putin claims Russia is developing nuclear arms capable of avoiding missile defenses." I would put the accent on "claims" and "is developing." The reporter and newspaper management seem not to have gotten the point: that one of these systems is already deployed in the Russia's Southern Military District and that others are going into serial production. These systems are not a wish list, they are hard facts.

Putin claims Russia is developing nuclear arms capable of avoiding missile defenses



Russian President Vladimir Putin announced March 1 Russia had successfully tested new nuclear-powered weapons that could avoid any missile defense systems. (Reuters)

Screengrab from [The Washington Post](#) website

The *New York Times* was characteristically slow in posting articles on a development which caught its staff and management totally unprepared. In the space of a couple of hours, it put up two articles in succession dealing with the defense section of Vladimir Putin's address. In both, but more particularly in the article co-authored by reporters Neil MacFarquhar and David E. Sanger, the stress is on "bluff."

It is blithely assumed that Putin was just delivering a campaign speech to rouse "the patriotic passions of Russians" and so consolidate his forthcoming electoral victory. The writers take solace in the notion that "deception lies at the heart of current Russian military doctrine," so that "questions arose about whether these weapons existed."

These speculations, especially in the *New York Times* tell us one thing: that our media willfully ignore the plain facts about Vladimir Putin. First, that he has always done what he has said. Second, that he is by nature very cautious and methodical. The word "carefully" (?????????) is a constant element in his speech vocabulary. In this context, the notion of "bluff" in a matter that would put Russian national security at risk and possibly cost tens of millions of Russian lives if the bluff were called – such a notion is utter nonsense.

I would like to believe that the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington will not be so giddy or superficial in judging what they heard yesterday from Mr. Putin. If that is so, they will be urgently recommending to their President to enter into very broad negotiations with the Russians over arms control. And they will be going back to their staffs to completely revise their recommendations with respect to the military hardware and installations which the

United States is financing in 2019 and beyond. Our present budget, including the trillion or so being appropriated for upgrading nuclear warheads and producing more low-yield weapons is a waste of taxpayer money.

However, still more importantly, the implications of Vladimir Putin's address yesterday are that U.S. intelligence has been asleep at the wheel for the past 14 years if not longer. It is a national scandal for the country to lose an arms race it was not even aware was occurring. Heads should roll, and the process should begin with proper hearings on Capitol Hill. For reasons that will be clear from what follows, among the first witnesses called upon to testify should be former Vice President Dick Cheney and former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.

In the past such a revelation of a vast security gap with the country's main geopolitical and military competitor would lead to political recriminations and finger pointing. What came up yesterday is far bigger than the "missile gap" of the late 1950s that brought Jack Kennedy to the White House in a campaign to restore vigor to American political culture and wake it from the somnolent Eisenhower years with their complacency about security matters and much else.

Moreover, the roll-out yesterday of new Russian weaponry that changes the world power balance was just one in a chain of remarkable Russian achievements over the past four years that caught US leadership entirely by surprise. The explanation has till now been the alleged unpredictability of Vladimir Putin, even if absolutely nothing he did could not have been foreseen by someone paying close attention.

One prime example was the Russian capture of Crimea in February-March 2014 without a shot being fired or a single fatality in circumstances where the 20,000 Russian troops based in their leased Sevastopol enclave confronted 20,000 Ukrainian forces on the peninsula. Western media spoke of a Russian "invasion" which amounted to nothing more than the Russian troops leaving their barracks. The Russians had used nothing more exotic than psychological warfare, old-fashioned "psy-ops" as it is called in the States executed to perfection by pros, all dating from the time of Von Clausewitz.

Then the Pentagon was caught with its pants down in September 2015 when Putin at the United Nations General Assembly announced the dispatch of Russian warplanes to Syria for a campaign against ISIS and to support Assad that would begin the next day. Why did we suspect nothing? Was it because Russia was known to be too poor to execute such a challenging mission abroad to precise objectives and timelines?

In the same war theater, the Russians again "surprised" Americans by setting up a joint military intelligence center in Baghdad with Iraq and Iran. And it further "surprised" NATO by flying bombing missions to the Syrian theater over Iran and Iraqi airspace after being denied flight rights in the Balkans. With thousands of military and diplomatic staff based in Iraq, how is it that the United States knew nothing about the Russian agreements with Iraqi leadership in advance?

My point is that the confusion over how to interpret Putin's announcement of Russia's new defense capability is a systemic failure of U.S. intelligence. The next obvious question is why? Where is the CIA? Where are the intel bosses when they are not investigating Trump?

The answer is not to be found in just one or two elements, for sure. Nor is it a failure that

developed recently. There is a good measure of blinding complacency about Russia as a “failed state” that has cut across the whole US political establishment since the 1990s when the Russia was flat on its back. One simply could not imagine the Kremlin rising to the challenge of its missions in Crimea, in Syria, in development of the world’s most sophisticated high-tech armaments.

And it is not only blindness to things Russian. It is a fundamental failure to grasp that state power anywhere is not dependent only on GDP and demographic trends but also on grit, patriotic determination and the intelligence of thousands of researchers, engineers and production personnel.

This conceptual poverty infects some of our most brilliant Realpolitik political scientists in the academic community who in principle should be open to understanding the world as it is, not the world as we wish it to be. Somehow we seem to have forgotten the lesson of David and Goliath. Somehow we have forgotten the Israeli numbers of 4 or 5 million standing up militarily to 100 million Arabs. It was unimaginable to us that Russia would be the David to our Goliath.

But there are more objective reasons for the utter failure of US intelligence to grasp the scale and seriousness of the Russian challenge to US global hegemony. Specifically, we must consider the gutting of our Russian intelligence capabilities in the days, months, years following 9/11.

There are those who will say, with reason, that the decline of US intelligence capabilities on Russia began already in the second administration of Ronald Reagan, when the Cold War came to an end and the expertise of Cold Warriors seemed no longer relevant. Surely numbers of Russia experts were allowed to decline by attrition.

And yet, when 9/11 struck, many of those in higher positions in the CIA had come to the Agency as Russia experts. It was the CIA’s lack of skills in the languages and area knowledge of the Middle East that was glaring in the aftermath of the Al-Qaeda attack on the Twin Towers that guided the reshaping of priorities for intelligence. Clearly this deficiency and the necessary re-profiling of expertise could not augur well for the continued employment of holdovers from the Soviet desk.

But a still greater factor in the sharp decline in Russian expertise within US intelligence agencies was the shift from dependence on civil service employees to use of outside service providers, i.e., outsourcing of intelligence work. This was totally in line with the preferences of the U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney, who introduced outsourcing in a generalized way to deal with the new challenges of the War On Terror.

The same phenomenon affected the U.S. military, especially beginning in 2003 following the invasion of Iraq. Operational security tasks of the U.S. military were outsourced to companies providing mercenaries like Blackwater. And normal procurement arrangements for materiel were short-circuited by the Vice President for the sake of quick satisfaction of urgent field requirements: hence the procurement of non-traditional but much needed fleets of armored troop transport and the like.

Several articles in Consortium News and elsewhere in recent months have called attention to the phenomenon of intel outsourcing. However, what was happening, why and to what effect was already clearly known a decade ago and promised nothing good.

In a sense, the commonality of all these changes in supply of intelligence, equipment and military force has been a quick-fix mentality and direct political intervention into processes that had been insulated in the civil service with its bureaucratic procedures. Political intervention means ultimately *politicizing* methods and outcomes. Outsourced intelligence is more likely to meet the demands of the paymaster than to have some intellectual integrity and broad perspective of its own.

To better understand the phenomenon, I refer the reader to an outstanding and well documented article dating from March 2007 that was published by the European Strategic Intelligence Security Center (ESISC) entitled “Outsourcing Intelligence: The Example of the United States.”

The author, ESISC Research Associate Raphael Ramos, tells us that at the time 70% of the budget of the American intelligence community was spent via contracts with private companies. At the time he wrote, outsourcing was said to be greatest among the agencies reporting to the Defense Department. The CIA was then said to have one-third of its staff coming from private companies.

Besides the changing priorities for foreign intelligence resulting from the end of the Cold War and the onset of the War on Terror, another factor in the changing structure of US intelligence was technologically driven. This relates to the modern communications technologies, with many start-ups appearing in the specialized fields of Signals Intelligence and Imagery Intelligence. The NSA availed itself of these new service providers to become a pioneer in outsourcing intelligence.

Other Pentagon agencies which followed the same course were the National Reconnaissance Office, responsible for space based systems of intelligence and the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, charged with producing geographic intelligence from satellites. Add to that the changing intel practices coming from the development of the internet, which prioritized open source intelligence. OSINT could flourish in the private sector because it does not require special security clearances. This soon accounted for between 35% and 90% of intelligence procurement.

As noted above, outsourcing enabled the intelligence community to modernize, gain skills quickly and try to meet urgent new needs. However, judging by the results of intelligence with respect to Putin’s Russia it seems that the outsourcing model has not delivered the goods. The country has been flying blind while taking outlandish and unsupportable positions to bully the world as if we enjoyed full spectrum dominance and Russia did not exist.

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