



PUTIN'S PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS: 'SHOWS OFF' RUSSIA'S MILITARY CAPABILITIES



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Winston Churchill once stated that *'Russia is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma'*. But the Presidential Address by Vladimir Putin no longer gives the impression that its actions or intentions are cryptic anymore. Russian President Vladimir Putin delivered the Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly¹ on 01 March 2018 which was attended by Federation Council members, State Duma deputies, members of the Government, leaders of the Constitutional Court and Supreme Court, governors, speakers of the legislatures of the constituent entities of the Russian Federation, the leaders of traditional religions, public figures, including the heads of regional civic chambers, as well as the leaders of major media outlets.

In his address, President Putin presented significant agendas, achievements and future ambitious programmes that are directed by him for Russia. The address comes at a pivotal moment as the choices and actions that Russia has made since the past decade have proven Russia's ability to rise as a force to reckon with. The address is also crucial as it has set into motion President Putin's quest for a fourth term as Russian president in the 2018 upcoming elections.

For the most part, President Putin was proud to highlight how Russia has 'recovered' from the debacle of the Soviet collapse. Some of the key aspects of Russia's revival include cyber tactics, military capabilities, agricultural production, economic space and capability to overcome strategic uncertainty. At the same time, Putin also admitted that Russia faces major challenges in domestic indicators such as poverty, unemployment, demographic crisis, depleting standard of living and many other challenges. But the task ahead for the future new Government, according to the President, was to draft 'special programmes' that are able to respond to the diverse needs of various generations, including families with children, retirees and people with disabilities. Particular attention needs to be

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paid to the social and infrastructural development of rural areas. Putin's address presented to the people of Russia a hope that Russia today is ready to move ahead in international affairs with confidence.

The main highlight of the address was that significant part of his address was dedicated to Russia's military capabilities and preparedness – a caution that the West cannot ignore. Today, Russia's economy, industry, defence industry and Armed Forces have risen to the levels of supporting the necessary strategic potential to defend Russia from the 'provocateur'- the US. The contribution of defence industrial complex in enhancing Russia's military capabilities with cutting edge technology poses a great threat to Western interests, especially in Russia's near abroad. To counter NATO's military expansion, President Putin stated that 'a great deal has been done to improve Russian Army and the Navy. The Armed Forces now have 3.7 times more modern weapons. Over 300 new units of equipment were put into service. The strategic missile troops received 80 new intercontinental ballistic missiles, 102 submarine-launched ballistic missiles and three Borei nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines. Twelve missile regiments have received the new Yars intercontinental ballistic missile. The number of long-range high-precision weapons carriers has increased by 12 times, while the number of guided cruise missiles increased by over 30 times. The Army, the Aerospace Forces and the Navy have grown significantly stronger as well alongside newest planes, submarines, anti-aircraft weapons, as well as land-based, airborne and sea-based guided missile systems. All of them are cutting-edge, high-tech weapons. A solid radar field to warn of a missile attack was created along Russia's perimeter.'

Russia also did not step back from criticising the US for its unilateral withdrawal from Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2002. Placement of new missile systems in Western Europe – Romania and Poland are in close proximity to Russian borders – has resulted in Russia developing its own counter measures. For instance, Russia has developed a highly effective system to overcome missile defences that are installed in some of the member states of NATO-. Russia is working on testing a new missile system with a heavy intercontinental ballistic missile called Sarmat which is to replace Voevoda system made in the USSR. *Sarmat is to be equipped with a broad range of powerful nuclear warheads, including hypersonic, and the most modern means of evading missile defence. The high degree of protection of missile launchers and significant energy capabilities the system offers will make it possible to use it in any conditions.*

With countries placing high value on nuclear weapons capabilities as a major deterrent factor, President Putin did not hold back in highlighting Russia's nuclear capabilities. Russia had successfully

launched its latest nuclear-powered missile in 2017. Russia is also confident to build a new type of weapon, a strategic nuclear weapons system with a nuclear-powered missile. These new types of weapons are said to have almost an unlimited range, unpredictable trajectory and ability to bypass interception boundaries. It is claimed that these new types of weapons would be invincible against all existing and prospective missile defence and counter-air defence systems. In December 2017, an innovative nuclear power unit for this unmanned underwater vehicle completed a test cycle that lasted many years.

Clearly, it was an attempt for the world to take notice of how far Russia has come especially in posing a major challenge to United States interests and its hostile policies towards Russia. Russia has time and again displayed its own way of protesting against North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's expansion and US dominance. Through the Presidential address, Putin has expressed Russia's unrelenting focus towards developing latest weapons, defence systems including nuclear missiles, and calling on NATO to cease its eastward expansion. In the words of Putin, to *American and European partners who are NATO members: we will make the necessary efforts to neutralise the threats posed by the deployment of the US global missile defence system*, thus sending a note of caution to the US and its allies.

Since the end of the Cold War era, Russia has struggled to find its place to pair with the West in co-designing the post Cold War international system. Russia has often been perceived as the 'rule breaker' of the international norms set by the West. Russia on its part has aspired to establish a parallel international system where it is the 'rule maker' and not the mere 'rule follower' of the West. The ideological clash between the two superpower blocs – Soviet Union and the US – during the Cold War period is worth mentioning in this context.

The biggest strategic pay off of the Soviet collapse was the conformity to the US led international system by former Republics and allies of the Soviet Union. NATO's expansion came with the membership of Central and Eastern European countries namely Hungary, Czech Republic, Poland, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Latvia and Estonia. At the same time, Russia has managed to halt further expansion of the US led NATO with disputed states such as Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia (2008) and the accession of Crimea in Ukraine (2014). However, Russia would not like to see the expansion of NATO further and in its attempt has managed to keep some disputed regions to be frozen conflicts as in the case of Transnistria in eastern Moldova, Republic of Artsakh in Azerbaijan and Donbass region in eastern Ukraine.

Russia's rise today like a 'phoenix from the ashes' post Soviet debacle has led the US to conclude that Russia will remain an eternal and foremost threat to US' interests in international relations, mainly because both countries are permanent members of United Nations Security Council, possess advanced weapons capabilities (including cyber tactics), hold largest nuclear arsenal and share the legacy of superpower rivalry. All in all, the hostility between Russia and the US continues to be a dominating debate in the efforts for revamping traditional bilateralism between the two countries. While Russia and the US have focused on strengthening their deterrence and counter measures, challenging each other through military capabilities, the biggest challenge however is how to evade a direct military confrontation. Unfortunately, throughout the rivalry between the two countries, the important aspect has been military power and weapons technology rather than focus on confidence building measures. Hence, the most crucial step to evade direct confrontation between the two countries is to focus on the diplomatic space to 'reset' the bilateral relations between the two countries.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Keywords: Putin's Presidential Address, military capabilities, nuclear, NATO-Russia, military agenda.

Notes

¹ Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly, President of Russia, 01 March 2018. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56957> accessed on 02 March 2018.