



# Putin is a Very Real Nuclear Threat

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Perhaps President Putin actually told President Trump that he did not meddle in last year's election even though the overwhelming weight of evidence demonstrates intervention.

But whatever Putin just said, his Chief of the General Staff General Valery Gerasimov recently publicly conceded that Russia had broken the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty signed in 1987.

Specifically, Gerasimov said, "We have formed command bodies and special units to plan the use of long-range precision-guided munitions and prepare flight assignments for all types of cruise missiles. — This has enabled us to set up full-scale units of vehicles capable of delivering precision-guided missiles to targets located up to 4,000 kilometers away."

These remarks are of the utmost importance in confirming the violation of the treaty. For any objective observer, they should go far towards convincing our European allies who had been loath to believe the Obama and Trump administration's argument that Moscow had violated the treaty. Gerasimov's own admission should corroborate the evidence hitherto presented by the U.S. and confirm that it is credible.

But beyond hopefully convincing our allies of Moscow's inherent duplicity these revelations force us to consider seriously the role nuclear weapons play in Europe if not elsewhere. These statements also obligate us to consider the issues of funding for missile defense and modernization of our nuclear deterrence on the basis of real assessments — not polemical assertions — based upon a kind of civil theology bereft of empirical validation.

Moscow's statements and deployments show us that nuclear weapons are indeed useful far beyond threatening other nuclear weapons. They also highlight the growing importance of maintaining a robust conventional deterrent in Europe that can deter Moscow from launching a conventional war that it might then have to save by striking first with nuclear weapons.

The scale and scope of Russia's buildup of conventional and nuclear missiles also underscore its abiding faith in using these weapons to intimidate NATO allies into surrender and the corresponding need to provide credible reassurance of our fidelity to our alliance commitments.

Gerasimov's revelations and Russian deployments also suggest just how critical missile defenses are to Europe even though past administrations deployed them there against Iran.

Clearly, in Europe Russia dwarfs Iran as a clear and present danger and its past record shows just how little faith it puts in its own treaties and international agreements. Finally, Russia's policies along with China's, not to mention North Korean and Iranian programs, underscore the need for maintaining a credible and modernized nuclear deterrent. Of course, this won't end the debate as to what that means in practice for each leg of the triad. But the idea that nuclear weapons have no appreciable strategic role in modern warfare other than to threaten other nuclear weapons appears to have been invalidated by both North Korea and Russia, if not China and Iran.

It is noteworthy that both Beijing and Moscow are not only building multiple new nuclear weapons and that Russia is extending older ones. They also are undertaking simultaneous large-scale conventional modernization. NATO, if accepts Russia's war on the European continent is an ever-present reality and therefore must be a similar reality for it, can clearly afford to modernize both conventional and nuclear deterrents.

These revelations also call into question the idea of better relations with Russia. Undoubtedly, in principle better relations would benefit everyone. But what is the basis for negotiating new agreements with Russia if it violates all the old ones and acts like it is at war with the West? What then is the actual, not rhetorical, basis for improving bilateral relations when there can be no trust between the two states?

In addition, these revelations put the burden of proof upon those calling for renewed discussions of arms control with Russia. Here too, we must ask what is the basis for new treaties when Moscow violates the old ones?

Lastly, it is clear that for at least a decade Moscow has violated major arms control treaties with impunity and thus added to its nuclear capacity by several orders of magnitude while we have done little or nothing to call Moscow out or enhance our own capabilities.

Perhaps Putin actually believes that he did not meddle in our election though that is quite unlikely. But for our strategic planners to believe that Russia is not acting as if it is in a war with us and to refrain from forging a strategic response to those actions would be a new form of what General H.R. McMaster elsewhere called a dereliction of duty.

*Stephen Blank, Ph.D., is a senior fellow at the American Foreign Policy Council. He is the author of numerous foreign policy-related articles, white papers and monographs, specifically focused on the geopolitics and geostrategy of the former Soviet Union, Russia and Eurasia. He is a former MacArthur fellow at the U.S. Army War College.*