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Putin Lauds Thieves of U.S. Nuke Intel

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Vladimir Putin praised Cold War-era scientists for stealing U.S. nuclear secrets so that the United States would not be the world's sole atomic power.

His comments Wednesday were directed to military commanders and reflected his vision of Russia as a counterweight to U.S. power.

Spies with suitcases full of data helped the Soviet Union build its atomic bomb, he told military commanders.

"You know, when the States already had nuclear weapons and the Soviet Union was only building them, we got a significant amount of information through Soviet foreign intelligence channels," Putin said, Itar-Tass reported.

"They were carrying the information away not on microfilm but literally in suitcases. Suitcases!"

Putin's remarks referred to the dawn of the Cold War more than half a century ago, but they echoed a message he has made loud and clear more recently — that the United States needs to

be restrained, and Russia is the country to do it.

It has been known for decades that there were spies among the scientists who worked on the Manhattan Project, the U.S. atomic bomb design operation.

Putin, a former Soviet spy himself, suggested that those who helped Moscow build its bomb acted out of concern for humanity.

“It was the cream of the scientific world that was gathered in America, and I personally have gotten the impression that they consciously gave us information on the atom bomb,” Putin said. “They did this consciously because the atomic bomb had been used on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and scientists from mankind’s intellectual elite at the time understood what unilateral possession of such a weapon might lead to.”

A need for Russia to act as a counterweight to U.S. power has been a continuous theme of Putin’s time in office since he became president in 2000.

He stepped down in 2008 to become prime minister but is poised to reclaim the presidency in an election on March 4.

Last year, he criticized the United States for helping Libyan rebels oust Moammar Gadhafi.

Lately, he has suggested that Washington has similar designs on Syria, where Russia has vetoed UN action.

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