

Russia Should Lay Off the Saber Rattling (Op-Ed)

By [Alexander Golts](#)

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A new Defense Ministry exhibition center near Moscow opened to great fanfare last week. Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu announced that the center will offer a permanent venue displaying the Russian defense industry's latest weapons. Shoigu even went so far as to call it a "military supermarket" where foreign buyers could shop for whatever suits their fancy.

Of course, the opening offered the perfect opportunity for President Vladimir Putin to give his long-awaited response to the aggressive West. To believe the reports on Russia's state-controlled television, the West is constantly threatening peace-loving Russia — from promising to deploy medium-range missiles in Europe and building fifth-generation fighter aircraft to placing heavy U.S. military equipment and troops next to Russia's western border.

Putin lived up to those expectations, remarking ominously: "More than 40 new intercontinental ballistic missiles able to overcome even the most technically advanced anti-missile defense systems will be added to the makeup of the nuclear arsenal this year."

Washington must be trembling.

All the more considering that in a meeting the same day with Finnish President Sauli Niinisto, Putin made an even more direct threat: "If somebody threatens any of our territories, that means we will need to aim our armed forces, our modern weaponry toward the territories from which that threat originates."

It is worth noting that NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg took those threats seriously. He called Putin's statements groundless "nuclear saber rattling," and also "unjustified" and "dangerous" behavior.

However, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland said that Putin's recent declaration that Russia would add 40 new intercontinental ballistic missiles to its arsenal was mere posturing aimed at the Russian people. According to Reuters reports, Nuland pointed out that "Those kinds of announcements when made publicly like that obviously have a rattling effect. When we look at what is actually happening inside Russia, it is far less dramatic," she said.

Nuland emphasized that Washington expects Moscow to comply with its obligations under arms control agreements and will permit verification of all its actions.

She was right on the mark. In fact, Putin also said in the same statement that orders for the strategic missile forces had fallen by as much as 20 percent, although six months ago at the opening ceremony of another gargantuan project, the National Defense Management Center, Putin said that Russia would build as many as 50 ICBMs. However, as we see now, that did not happen.

In fact, it is quite possible that Russia will not build 50, or even 40 missiles. Recall that in December 2014, three different senior officials speaking during a single three-hour period quoted three completely different figures for the number of missiles Russia had built.

Putin claimed that the military had created three new missile regiments — meaning not fewer than 20 missiles — Shoigu referred to 16 new missiles, while Deputy Defense Minister Yuriy Borisov reported the deployment of five new missiles. It turns out that government press officers did not even take the trouble to coordinate the lie that the officials told the public. And this time, Putin's speechwriters did not even bother to check to see which number of missiles Putin had mentioned the last time he spoke.

With such a track record, the effect is less than impressive when the commander in chief claims that "Obviously, an efficient defense industry is an important resource for the growth of the entire economy. Moreover, it is the defense industry that should set the bar in many technological and production aspects and remain the driving force for the development of innovations, including dual-purpose and civilian ones."

Instead, such statements indicate that Russian leaders' views on innovation and technological progress are a throwback to the 1970s. By contrast, the West now understands that it is the civil, not the military sector that drives economic growth.

Unfortunately, the only thing that Russia's civilian industry can learn from its military-industrial complex is how to accompany its bold lies with even louder fireworks and pomp.

Thus, military chiefs would do well to conduct a thorough inventory of their "military supermarket" as soon as it opens for business.

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