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Putin, Battling Ratings Slump, Reviews Victory Day Military Parade

Thousands of troops marched and columns of tanks rumbled across Red Square.

By Reuters

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Russian President Vladimir Putin meets World War Two veterans before the Victory Day parade. **Alexey Druzhinin/TASS**

President Vladimir Putin watched intercontinental nuclear missile launchers roll across Red Square on Thursday as Russia put on its annual show of military might to mark the Soviet Union's World War Two victory over the Nazis.

Battling a ratings slump as Russia grinds through a sixth consecutive year of falling real incomes, Putin looked on as thousands of troops marched past and columns of tanks rumbled across the famous square in a display reminiscent of the Cold War era.

Putin, whose term ends in 2024, reviewed the parade from a tribune packed with Soviet war

veterans, some of whom wore rows of campaign medals and clutched red roses.

"We have done and will do everything necessary to ensure the high level of readiness of our armed forces," Putin said. "We call on all countries to recognize our common responsibility to create a security system that is effective and equal for everyone."

Related article: Victory Day: Remembering the Fallen or Propaganda for Putin?

Russia's ties with the West soured following its annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014, and Moscow has continued to challenge the United States through its staunch support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro.

World leaders have attended in the past, but were conspicuous by their absence on Thursday, something the Kremlin played down. Nursultan Nazarbayev, who resigned as Kazakh president in March after three decades in power, was the only notable foreign guest.

The Kremlin said it had not invited foreign heads of state but next year's 75th anniversary would be marked with greater pomp as a major milestone.

The authorities, backed by state media, use the annual event to boost patriotic feeling at home, something that could help lift Putin's approval rating which, though still high at 66 percent in April, is down from nearly 90 percent five years ago.

The display of raw military power is also designed to show the world and potential buyers of military hardware how a modernization program has changed the face of the Russian military and arms industry.

However, military experts say various problems mean Russia had yet to produce in large numbers some of its newest hardware, such as the T-14 Armata battle tank, despite their Red Square outings.

Related article: Russia Marks Victory Day With Red Square Military Parade

Putin has sharply increased military spending over the nearly 20 years he has dominated Russian politics, handed the Russian military significant policy-making clout, and deployed Russian forces in Ukraine and Syria, stoking tensions with the West.

As commander-in-chief, he has also at times donned military uniform himself and been filmed at the controls of a strategic bomber and on the conning tower of a submarine in photo opportunities designed to boost his man of action image.

Weapons displayed on Red Square included Russia's Yars mobile intercontinental nuclear missile launcher and its advanced S-400 air defense missile system, which Moscow has deployed in Syria to protect its forces.

But this year's parade was notable for the lack of major show-stopping new weapons or pieces of military hardware.

Some politicians in former Soviet republics and satellite states regard the parade as crude sabre-rattling by a resurgent Russia they say poses a threat to Europe's security. Russia dismisses such allegations as nonsense.

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