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‘They’re Trying to Catch Up’: Putin’s Defense Speech in Quotes

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President Vladimir Putin reviewed Russia’s latest weapons developments and military exploits in 2019 in a speech at the annual Defense Ministry Board meeting Tuesday.

The meeting took place in a year when the United States withdrew from a key Soviet-era nuclear arms control treaty and announced it was reviewing its involvement in several other key arms treaties. Meanwhile, Russia’s military this year continued to develop a host of new weapons systems announced by Putin in a March 2018 speech.

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Members of Russia’s Security Council, senior officials, lawmakers and military commanders all attended the gathering.

Here are five takeaways from Putin’s speech:

Hypersonic weapons

- "Not a single country possesses hypersonic weapons, let alone inter-continental hypersonic weapons. We already have the Kinzhal hypersonic missile systems in the field, and the Peresvet laser combat systems have already been deployed."
- "We are in the unique situation in our contemporary history in which they're trying to catch up with us."

Modern nukes

- "The share of modernized weapons in our nuclear triad [land-launched missiles, nuclear-armed submarines and strategic bombers] has now reached 82%."
- "The latest ballistic missiles with the Avangard hypersonic glide vehicle (HGV) are being delivered to the Strategic Missile Forces. This is a weapon of the future that can penetrate both existing and any future missile defense systems."
- "Work on other systems is underway, including the Sarmat boosted intercontinental ballistic missile; the Tsirkon ground- and sea-based hypersonic rockets; the Poseidon unmanned underwater vehicle; and the Burevestnik nuclear-armed cruise missile."

Defense spending

- "Even though we spend much less [on defense] than other countries (we rank seventh at this point, and could even slide to ninth), this does not mean that we are ready to compromise our combat readiness."
- "Our equipment must be better than the world's best if we want to come out as the winners. This is not a game of chess where we can sometimes accept a tie."

Syria

- "The Russian military continues to play a key role in securing peace in Syria. The Aerospace Forces and the ships and submarines of the Navy — including those deployed at the Khmeimim airbase and the naval base in Tartus — are guarantors of peace and stability in that country."
- "We have fielded other weapons systems as well and tested them during exercises and in combat conditions in Syria, such as the Kalibr cruise missiles."

U.S. treaties

- "The arms control regime is disintegrating, which is a serious concern. [And] this is not limited to the dismantling of the INF Treaty by the U.S., which used a pretext that is clearly far-fetched and absolutely groundless."
- "Since November 2019, Washington has been creating uncertainty regarding its engagement under the Treaty on Open Skies. The prospects of extending the New START are equally vague. All of this is taking place as the U.S. expands the capability of its global missile defense system. We see this, and we are aware of these developments."

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