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Putin Suspends Russia's Participation in Key Nuclear Pact With U.S.

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President Vladimir Putin said Tuesday that Russia was suspending participation in New START, its last nuclear arms limitation treaty with the United States.

The announcement, made ahead of the one-year anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, follows months of veiled threats by the Russian leader that have stirred fears of nuclear war in Europe.

In a speech where he blamed Kyiv's Western allies for Russia's invasion, Putin also accused the United States of testing new advanced nuclear weapons and NATO of openly seeking to attack Russia's nuclear facilities.

"In this context, I have to say today that Russia is suspending its participation in the strategic arms treaty," Putin said at his first state-of-the-nation address since invading Ukraine on Feb. 24, 2022.

“Before we get back to discussing the treaty, we need to understand [...] how we’ll take into account the strategic arsenals, that is the combined strike capacities, of such NATO countries as France and the U.K.”

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New START, which Moscow and Washington signed in 2010 and have since extended to 2026, caps the number of deployed strategic nuclear warheads held by the world's two largest nuclear powers at 1,550 each.

Russia suspended U.S. on-site inspections under New START in August 2022 at the height of its “special military operation” in Ukraine. It had placed its strategic forces on "high alert" shortly after invading Ukraine.

Putin on Tuesday ordered the Defense Ministry and the state nuclear agency Rosatom to stand by for nuclear weapons tests.

“We won’t be the first to conduct them. But if the U.S. does, then so will we,” the Russian leader warned hours before U.S. President Joe Biden was scheduled to give a speech marking the anniversary of Russia’s war in Ukraine.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken called the decision to suspend New START participation was "deeply unfortunate and irresponsible," but stressed the U.S. remained willing to talk about the issue.

"We remain ready to talk about strategic arms limitations at any time with Russia, irrespective of anything else going on in the world or in our relationship," Blinken said.

NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg also criticized Putin's move, saying "the whole arms control architecture has been dismantled" in Europe.

Alexander Gabuev, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, called Putin's statement a futile attempt to intimidate the U.S.

"The Kremlin decided in vain to scare the Americans by suspending New START. They will not back down, and their military-industrial complex is able to play the arms race much better than the Russian one," Gabuev wrote.

AFP contributed reporting.

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