

This copy is for your personal non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies of Toronto Star content for distribution to colleagues, clients or customers, or inquire about permissions/licensing, please go to: www.TorontoStarReprints.com

WORLD

ANALYSIS

Right out of the KGB playbook: What to make of Putin suspending nuclear pact with U.S.

The Russian president painted the West as the culprits in the Ukraine conflict and cast his own country as the victim of an existential struggle in a state-of-the-nation address Tuesday.

By **Steve McKinley** Staff Reporter

Tue., Feb. 21, 2023 | ⌚ 5 min. read

🕒 Article was updated 16 hrs ago

JOIN THE CONVERSATION

Seasoned [Russia](#)-watchers are dealing with a faint sense of déjà vu after Russian President Vladimir Putin's declaration that his country will suspend its participation in a [nuclear arms control pact](#) with the U.S.

Putin's announcement, coupled with a warning that Russia might again start testing nuclear weapons — though only if Moscow decided the U.S. had done so first — echoed threats he made about the possibility of the involvement of nuclear weapons near the beginning of his [invasion of Ukraine](#), threats that, in the short-term, delayed military aid from Western countries to Ukraine.

Putin made the announcement at the tail end of a state-of-the-nation address Tuesday, as the one-year anniversary of his invasion of Ukraine looms this Friday.

The Russian president painted the West as the culprits in the Ukraine conflict and cast his own country as the victim of an existential struggle.

"I am compelled to announce today that Russia is suspending its participation in the Strategic Offensive Arms Treaty," said Putin, in Russian. "I repeat, it does not withdraw from the treaty, no, it suspends its participation."

That strikes Russia watchers as somewhat disingenuous; according to the U.S., Moscow has, for the past few years, already balked at living up to its treaty obligations.

The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) to which Putin referred — signed by the U.S. and Russia in 2010 and renewed in 2021 — addresses the proliferation of the two nations' long-range strategic nuclear weapons. It has suffered a rocky path of late.

It achieved its initial expectations, with both nations reducing their nuclear arsenals to agreed-upon limits by the 2018 deadline. According to U.S. State Department figures, the U.S. currently has 1,420 nuclear warheads and 659 strategic launch platforms, and Russia has 1,549 warheads and 540 deployed launchers.

Catch up in three minutes every morning with the Star's free newsletter.

Start getting
First Up

Inspections in Russia were postponed because of the COVID pandemic, and the U.S. maintains that Russia refused to allow them to resume in fall 2022. For the past few years, the U.S. has been attempting to make up for that shortfall by monitoring the Russian arsenal in other ways — through satellites and signal intelligence.

Putin, in Tuesday's speech, claimed the U.S. was refusing his inspectors as well, before announcing that Russia would suspend its participation in the treaty. He also said that, though Russia would not resume nuclear weapons tests first, it would do so if the U.S. began tests.

"This doesn't change much about the reality of the program in the last few years. It finalizes the de facto state of it," said Matthew Schmidt, director of the International Affairs program at the University of New Haven. "The reality of the program is that the Russians have been using delay tactics or just not co-operating for one excuse after another.

"It doesn't radically change today anything from yesterday."

Instead, said Schmidt, Putin's announcement should be viewed as a continuation of his nuclear threats near the outset of the [Ukraine war](#) — largely bluster, but not to be dismissed outright.

"The message to the West is the same sort of scare tactics," he said. "He's talking about nuclear weapons. That means he might use nuclear weapons. He's talking about how the West is boxing him in, which means he wants the West to know that he's feeling boxed in, because his strategy is to use the West's fear that he's going to overreact as a way to get the West to back off in its support of Ukraine."

Putin may or may not actually feel that way, but he's nevertheless playing on the fears of the West — particularly western Europe, said Schmidt.

That's taking a page right out of the KGB playbook, said Aurel Braun, professor of International Relations and Political Science at the University of Toronto, and an associate of the Davis Center at Harvard.

The KGB developed a concept called reflexive control, a psychological tool for manipulating its enemies, said Braun. Fundamentally, it uses the predilections of an enemy against them.

"If there is a particularly strong fear of nuclear conflict, and it would be that in (western Europe), you play on that fear as much as possible because then that is amplified," said Braun. "He has done that and is coming back to it."

Putin's early nuclear threats were partially successful; they gave Western countries some pause before they began sending [military aid to Ukraine](#).

But ultimately, those countries called his bluff, and the skies remained free of nuclear weapons.

Now with the tide of war turning against him and military aid flowing freely into Ukraine, he's hoping that a different version of the same threat will have similar effect, said Braun.

In this case, Putin used a more subtle approach in that he said he is "suspending participation" in the treaty, rather than ending it. But the language he used in saying that was an old-school kickback to the Cold War, said Braun.

"It was a really vicious speech that he made. It was right out of the Soviet lexicon, and it was all an accusation against the West, as was the case of the Soviet Union, when they invaded Czechoslovakia or when they invaded Hungary," he said. "(The Soviets) were not committing any kind of aggression. They were on the defensive. They were provoked. They were the victims."

Still, the threat of Putin using nuclear weapons — though higher than it was before the war in Ukraine began — is generally considered very low by Western intelligence agencies, said Schmidt.

"It's still not particularly high. It's non-trivial. We need to pay attention to it," he said. "But they've decided essentially that they have a deterrent regime in place that they're comfortable with."

Evidence of that confidence comes in the form of U.S. President Joe Biden's visit to Kyiv on Monday, he said, in that the U.S. president would take the provocative action — from the Russian point of view — of standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Putin's enemy in the capital of Ukraine as air raid sirens blared, sending the message that U.S. and Western support for Ukraine would remain unflinching.

Biden, in a speech from Warsaw later Tuesday, did not directly address Putin's announcement.

But U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken described Moscow's decision as "really unfortunate and very irresponsible."

"We'll be watching carefully to see what Russia actually does," he said while visiting Greece.

carry atomic weapons.

With files from The Associated Press



Steve McKinley is a Halifax-based reporter for the Star. Follow him on Twitter: [@smckinley1](#)

Read more about: [Ukraine](#), [Nova Scotia](#), [Russia](#)

SHARE:

Copyright owned or licensed by Toronto Star Newspapers Limited. All rights reserved. Reproduction or distribution of this content is expressly prohibited without the prior written consent of Toronto Star Newspapers Limited and/or its licensors. To order copies of Toronto Star articles, please go to: www.TorontoStarReprints.com

Catch up in three minutes every morning with the Star's free newsletter.