

Vladimir Putin promised new nuclear weapons in his annual address to the federal assembly CREDIT: ANDREY RUDAKOV/BLOOMBERG

By Alec Luhn, MOSCOW
20 FEBRUARY 2019 - 4:42PM

ladimir Putin has said Russia will target the US with new nuclear weapons if it deploys missiles to Europe following the demise of a major arms control treaty.

In an annual speech to the federal assembly, the Russian leader on Wednesday accused Washington of planning to deploy intermediate-range missiles to the continent following its withdrawal from a bilateral agreement banning those weapons.

This would put the missiles within a 10-minute flight from Moscow, creating a serious threat to Russia and compelling it to consider “symmetrical and asymmetrical actions” in response, he said.

“Russia will be forced to create and deploy types of weapons that can be used not only against those territories posing a direct threat to us, but also against those territories where the decision-making centres are,” Mr Putin said, referring to the United States.

Russia and the United States have had hundreds of nuclear missiles pointed at each other since the Cold War, but Mr Putin’s speech also detailed a bevy of new weapons Russia is developing, including hypersonic weapons and a nuclear-powered underwater drone.

His comments marked an escalation in rhetoric from earlier this month, when he announced only a “symmetrical” response to Donald Trump’s suspension of US participation in the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces treaty signed by Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev in 1987.

Besides ceasing to observe the agreement, Russia would create a land-based version of its Kalibr cruise missile, he said at the time.



Donald Trump’s national security adviser John Bolton, far left, is a longstanding opponent of arms control agreements CREDIT: ANDREW HARRIKAP

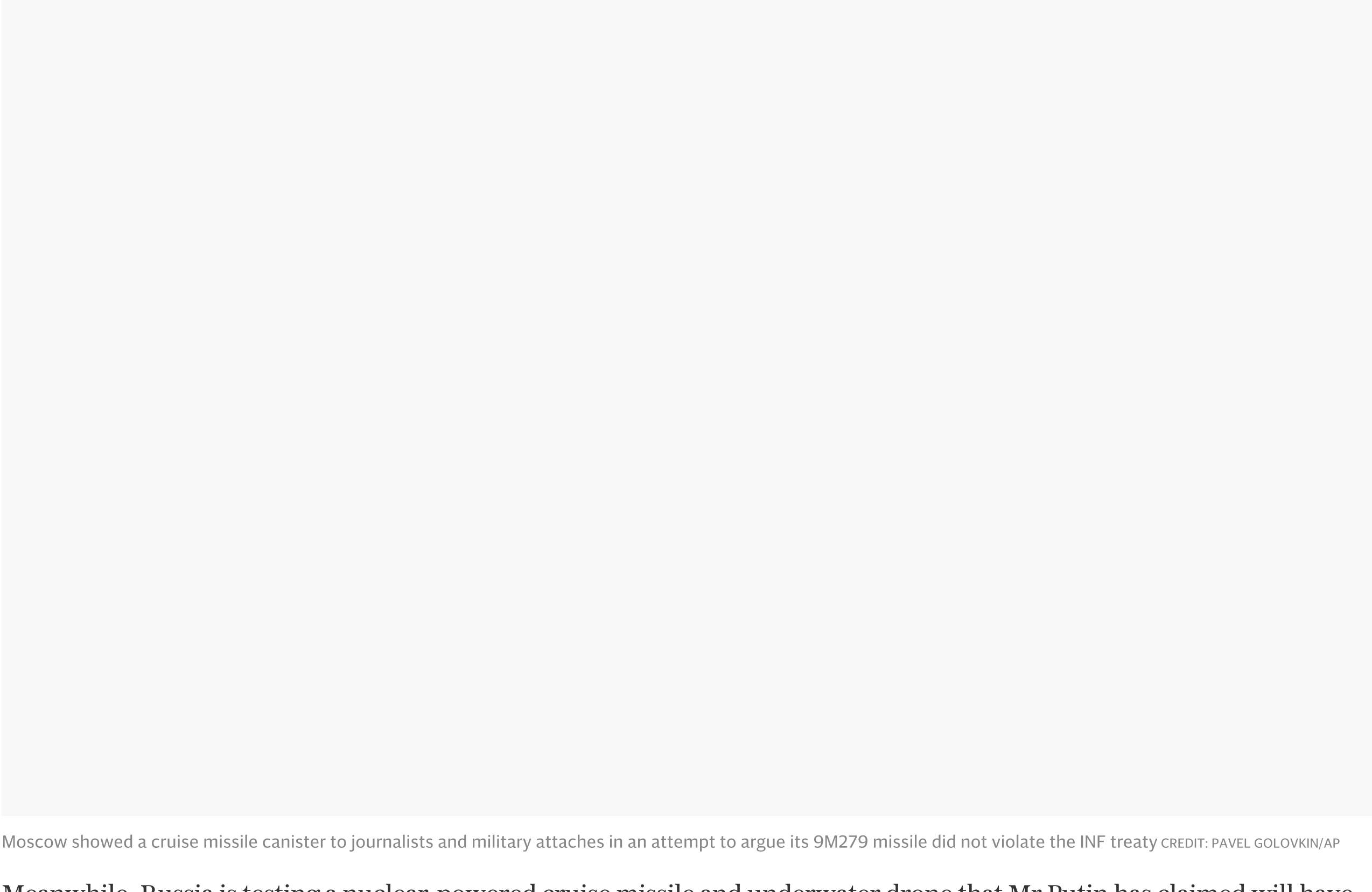
Washington has long argued that Moscow’s 92M79 missile is banned by the INF treaty. But Russia has claimed that US missile defence in Romania and a similar system planned for Poland are in violation of the agreement.

Last month, the authorities even showed journalists and foreign military attaches a cruise missile canister and launcher outside Moscow to try to dispute the US accusations. A leaked US intelligence report later claimed that this equipment had nothing to do with the 92M79.

In Wednesday’s speech, Mr Putin again argued that US missile defence launchers in Romania could pose an offensive threat by firing Tomahawk cruise missiles and claimed that “target missiles” developed for defence shield exercises were intermediate-range missiles in disguise.

The United States needs to “do away with the illusion” that it could “achieve absolute military superiority with the help of global missile defence,” he said, touting several new weapons first announced in his address to the federal assembly last year.

The Avangard system, a hypersonic glider that can carry a nuclear warhead, and Peresvet laser weapon will enter deployment by the end of 2019, he said.



Moscow showed a cruise missile canister to journalists and military attaches in an attempt to argue its 9M279 missile did not violate the INF treaty CREDIT: PAVEL GOLOVNIKAP

Meanwhile, Russia is testing a nuclear-powered cruise missile and underwater drone that Mr Putin has claimed will have unlimited range, as well as a heavy intercontinental ballistic missile.

The drone has been called a “doomsday weapon” because it could potentially destroy swathes of the US seaboard. But Washington said last year that the “unlimited range” cruise missile had crashed during tests.

Seven new submarines and five new long-range warships will be launched, and 16 more such ships will be constructed by 2027, he added.

But Mr Putin tried to walk a fine line between boasting of new weapons development and promising to solve economic problems faced by the population, which took up most of the speech. One in five Russians now live in poverty, and polls show trust in Mr Putin has fallen following an unpopular hike in the pension age.

While claiming the Zircon missile in development could fly at nine times the speed of sound, he noted that it could be deployed on ships and submarines outfitted for the Kalibr and “won’t be expensive for us”.

Mr Putin said Moscow was open to arms control talks and doesn’t want confrontation, but warned that US leaders should “count the range and speed of our perspective weapons systems” before deploying new arms against Russia.

Elsewhere in the speech, the Russian president promised state aid for large families to try to reverse population decline, an effort he dubbed “more children, fewer taxes”.

He also promised to fight poverty and increase access to healthcare and education in far-flung regions.

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