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## **WHY VLADIMIR PUTIN'S 'INVINCIBLE' MISSILE CLAIM COMES AT A BAD TIME**

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Standing before a fiery video simulation of nuclear warheads raining down on the state of Florida, Russian President Vladimir Putin declared Moscow ready to deliver a swift response to American military aggression. He also revealed an arsenal of four new nuclear weapons that are under development and designed to render American defenses useless.

The saber-rattling speech to hundreds of top Russian officials and legislators amounts to a direct response to President Trump's calls to modernize and rebuild the U.S. nuclear arsenal in the State of the Union address in January.

The escalatory rhetoric, reminiscent of the Cold War, comes as the two nations currently face off in several volatile hot spots where the risk of miscalculation could result in direct conflict with unforeseeable consequences. U.S. and Russian forces operate in close proximity at several flashpoints in places like Syria and across eastern Europe by flying warplanes, sailing battleships, and training proxy forces on the ground.

There is an ever increasing opportunity for things to go sideways, said Philip Breedlove, retired U.S. Air Force general who commanded all NATO forces in Europe until May 2016. We live in a time now that is much more complicated than the Cold War. There are more risks of friction and potential contact. And yet, all in all, our ability to communicate with the Russians has diminished rather than increased.

During the Cold War, a series of treaties between the U.S. and Soviet Union were designed to avoid miscalculation and keep communication channels open — even though Washington and Moscow were sworn adversaries. Many of those treaties (The Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, Prevention of Incidents On and Over the High Seas, Agreement on the Prevention of Dangerous Military Activities) no longer exist.

Communication between the U.S. and Russia has been further limited since American intelligence agencies uncovered that the Kremlin engaged in a multi-pronged campaign to meddle in 2016 U.S. presidential elections. In addition, Congress passed a provision of the National Defense Authorization Act in late 2014 — and renewed since then — which restricts the Pentagon's ability to work with Russia. The law was passed in response to Moscow's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its continued involvement in the Ukrainian civil war.

Maintaining communications to avoid accidental confrontations between American and Russian

forces is critical, so they don't spiral out of control, said James Stavridis, retired U.S. Navy admiral who also commanded all NATO forces and is now dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. He points to mounting tensions over Ukraine, Syria, and cyber intrusion.

The risk for miscalculation between U.S. and Russian forces is higher than at any time since the height of the Cold War, he said. Operationally, the stakes are extraordinarily high anytime two massively armed, nuclear-capable states have combat forces in the same battle space \* A mistake that flares into a significant loss of life could easily create the conditions for an escalating exchange of ordnance in any of those regions.

Perhaps nowhere is the U.S.-Russia breakdown more dangerous than in the chaos in Syria, where the two nations are on opposite sides of the bloody war. American warplanes have carried out thousands of airstrikes against ISIS militants as part of a coalition that has included NATO and Arab states aircraft. Russian bombers conduct strikes to support the government of President Bashar Assad. Both nations also have hundreds of troops and military contractors on the ground to support their partners.

While there have been dozens of close-calls and confrontations in the crowded airspace above, the U.S. and Russia converse daily on how to avoid such clashes. The talks, which occur over a phone line and a Google email account, have grown in importance as ISIS has been defeated and the remaining forces converge on the same towns.

Currently, the U.S. operates on the western side of the Euphrates River, which cuts through eastern Syria, while Russia works on the east. There have been issues with the arrangement. On Dec. 13, for example, two U.S. F-22 stealth fighters intercepted and flew alongside two Russian SU-25 attack planes for 40 minutes. The planes nearly collided at one point while zipping above Syria at hundreds of miles per hour.

On Feb. 7, American drones, fighter jets, and aerial gunships obliterated a force of 300 armed men with tanks that fired artillery at a base in the oil-rich Deir Ezzor region held by U.S. and mainly Kurdish forces. When the dust settled, about 100 fighters, including Russian military contractors, were killed. Three days later, a MQ-9 Reaper drone dropped a bomb on an advancing Russian-made T-72 tank from the same hostile force, but stopped firing on the forces once they headed back east.

Reports on how many Russians were killed and wounded in the incidents vary widely, but the independent Russian newspaper Novaya Gazeta reported that 13 Russians were killed and 15 wounded, citing anonymous sources. The Pentagon has not commented on the make-up of the force that they struck except to say it was pro-regime. The Russian government, though, has publicly admitted that Russians died in the incident, but proclaimed they were mercenaries and not under Moscow's control.

Lt. Gen. Jeffrey Harrigian, U.S. Air Force commander in the Middle East, told a teleconference with media at the Pentagon that Russia was told about the strike prior, during and after the airstrike.

Russia's use of contractors offers government leadership deniability, but also complicates the picture.

Michael O'Hanlon, a military analyst at the nonpartisan Brookings Institution in Washington, said he

doesn't expect impending war with Russia, but the mounting risks is unacceptable.

If these various close calls even make the risks of conflict 5%, that's too high among nuclear-armed superpowers that don't have any good reason to fight each other, he said. I worry that the chances of war are too high given the overall course we're on and the nature of the relationship today.

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