



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Putin's new nuclear threat - a challenge for the West, but also for China



After a break of several months, the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, is reactivating the issue of nuclear weapons in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, that is, as he understands it: Russia's conflict with the West.

Many in the audience consisting of state leaders, government and parliament, had difficulties following his 100-minute speech in the Kremlin on Tuesday, and some were even struggling to stay awake. Until the very end.

Putin saved the only important news for the final point, that Russia is suspending its participation in the New START nuclear arms treaty.

"I'm forced to announce today that Russia is suspending its participation in the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty. I repeat: Russia does not withdraw from the agreement, no, but suspends its participation", Putin said.

"Before returning to the discussion of this issue, we must understand for ourselves what such countries of the North Atlantic alliance as France and Great Britain represent and how we will take into account their strategic arsenals, that is, the combined strike potential of the Alliance".

New START doesn't work anymore

Putin only announced what has already been happening: that his government does not allow US inspectors access to the Russian nuclear arsenal, although it is obliged to do so under the New START treaty, which is valid until 2026.

The US State Department informed Congress about this just a few weeks ago. Putin's statement before members of parliament and government was a kind of official answer to the US, as a co-signatory of New START, explaining why inspectors are not allowed access to the Russian arsenal.

New START is the last nuclear treaty between

the US and Russia still in force. It concerns the control of strategic (not tactical) nuclear weapons and provides for the limitation of both arsenals to a maximum of 1,550 strategic nuclear warheads.

Putin's statement is worrying. Although he did not threaten to increase the number of nuclear warheads by suspending participation in the treaty, there is no longer a mechanism that will be able independently to confirm this.

Russia has thus left the contractual system of mutual control, so the answer to the question of whether Russia adheres to the limit of 1,550 strategic nuclear warheads or perhaps has more, relies only on the words and promises of its president.

This does not provide any guarantee of calm, bearing in mind that the Kremlin and its leader persistently assured the world a year ago that they would not attack Ukraine, until the moment when they did.

Putin's goal is to make the West talk to him

US State Secretary Antony Blinken called Putin's decision "deeply unfortunate and irresponsible".

"The US would be watching carefully to see what Russia actually does", Blinken told reporters while travelling to Athens.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said that he regrets Russia's decision, because it means that "the whole arms control architecture has been dismantled".

However, both Secretary Blinken and NATO's leader added something that Putin might have expected as a positive effect of his decision to suspend participation in the New START treaty.

Mr. Stoltenberg called on Russia to reconsider its decision and respect existing agreements. Secretary Blinken said that the US is "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”.

The Russian president wants to have the most influential Western structures as interlocutors in the context of the aggression against Ukraine. He does not consider the Ukrainians and the government in Kyiv to be the real opponent, even in Ukraine, but the West and its leaders, and he repeated this in his speech in the Kremlin.

That is why suspending participation in the last active nuclear programme seems like an attempt to lure the most influential people in the West, primarily the US and NATO, to talk to him.

If they refuse to discuss Ukraine, then they will discuss the control of strategic nuclear warheads, might be the logic that guided the Russian leader in leaving New START.

Putin desperately needs confirmation from the West that he is their main interlocutor.

Since he cannot accomplish this as an isolated warlord of aggression against Ukraine, exiting the last active nuclear treaty might offer him a detour to achieve the same goal.

After the first reactions of Secretaries Blinken and Stoltenberg, Putin might feel encouraged that he is on the right track.

Will China condemn the Kremlin again?

Putting nuclear uncertainty back on the table of would not only alarm actors in the West.

Putin has moved in this direction, even though he knows full well that China strongly opposed his previous nuclear threats in the summer and fall of last year.

The Kremlin stopped mentioning nuclear retaliation after the joint statement of Chinese President Xi Jinping and US President Joe

Biden in Bali last November.

The leaders of China and the US then condemned Russia's nuclear threats against Ukraine and stated that "nuclear war should never be fought and can never be won."

Putin, however, is bringing nuclear warheads back into play. His desire to take the invasion of Ukraine out of the "bilateral" context and raise it to the global level is clear, seeking confirmation that he is a global, and not a regional, actor.

But when he tried to do it once, using the nuclear threat, he received a rebuke not only from the West, but also from China, which he views as the only remaining important stronghold.

China's response to Putin's suspension of participation in the New START treaty will therefore be decisive in unravelling this latest threatening manoeuvre by the Russian leader.