

Putin to U.S.: I'm ready for another Cuban Missile-style crisis if you want one

MOSCOW (Reuters) – Russian President Vladimir Putin said Russia is militarily ready for a Cuban Missile-style crisis if the United States wanted one and threatened to place hypersonic nuclear missiles on ships or submarines near U.S. territorial waters.

The Cuban Missile Crisis erupted in 1962 when Moscow responded to a U.S. missile deployment in Turkey by sending ballistic missiles to Cuba, sparking a standoff that brought the world to the brink of nuclear war.

More than five decades on, tensions are rising again over Russian fears that the United States might deploy intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Europe, as a landmark Cold War-era arms-control treaty unravels.

Putin's comments, made to Russian media late on Wednesday, follow his warning that Moscow will match any U.S. move to deploy new missiles closer to Russia by stationing its own missiles closer to the United States or by deploying faster missiles or both.

Putin detailed his warning for the first time, saying Russia could deploy hypersonic missiles on ships and submarines which could lurk outside U.S. territorial waters if Washington now moved to deploy intermediate-range nuclear weapons in Europe.

“(We’re talking about) naval delivery vehicles: submarines or surface ships. And we can put them, given the speed and range (of our missiles)... in neutral waters. Plus they are not stationary, they move and they will have to find them,” Putin said, according to a Kremlin transcript.

“You work it out: Mach nine (the speed of the missiles) and over 1,000 km (their range).”

TREATY VIOLATIONS

The State Department dismissed Putin's earlier warning as propaganda, saying it was designed to divert attention from what Washington alleges are Moscow's violations of the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.

It referred queries about Putin's latest remarks to the Pentagon, which did not immediately respond.

The INF pact bans Russia and the United States from stationing short- and intermediate-range land-based missiles in Europe. Washington announced on Feb. 1 it will withdraw from the treaty in six months unless Moscow ends its alleged violations.

Analyst Kingston Reif of the Arms Control Association think tank said Putin may be seeking to signal that Russia can keep up with the United States, to distract from its internal problems or to deflect blame for the parlous state of the INF treaty.

"He may also be trying to send the message that, look, neither side should want this world (of a new arms race) so we should sit down and resume discussions," Reif said.

Putin has said he does not want an arms race but would have no choice but to act if Washington deployed new missiles in Europe, some of which he says could strike Moscow within 10 to 12 minutes.

The United States does not currently have ground-based intermediate-range nuclear missiles that it could place in Europe but could develop and deploy them if the INF treaty collapses.

Putin said his naval response to such a move would mean Russia could strike the United States faster than U.S. missiles deployed in Europe could hit Moscow because the flight time would be shorter.

"It (the calculation) would not be in their favor, at least as things stand today. That's for sure," said Putin.

Relations between Moscow and Washington were strained, he added, but the tensions were not comparable to those of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

“They (the tensions) are not a reason to ratchet up confrontation to the levels of the Cuban Missile Crisis in the 1960s. In any case that’s not what we want,” said Putin. “If someone wants that, well OK they are welcome. I have set out today what that would mean. Let them count (the missile flight times).”

Separately, Washington said on Thursday that it was carrying out an observation flight over Russia under the Open Skies Treaty, the first one since 2017.

In a statement, the Pentagon said an unarmed OC-135B aircraft was being used and Russia was aware of the flight.

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