

# Vladimir Putin calls for more weapons to stop America doing 'whatever it wants'

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From The Times  
December 30, 2009

## A Topol-M missile in Red Square

A Topol-M missile in Red Square. Vladimir Putin called for more Russian offensive weapons to punch through America's new missile defence shield

Russia needs more weapons to punch through America's new missile defence shield, Vladimir Putin said yesterday in blunt remarks that will complicate efforts to cut the nuclear arsenals of the former Cold War rivals.

The Russian Prime Minister, reasserting himself as the country's real ruler, said that Moscow should press ahead with a new generation of weapons to stop the Americans doing "whatever they want".

"To preserve the balance we must develop offensive weapons systems, not missile defence systems as the United States is doing," he said during a visit to the naval port of Vladivostok on the Pacific coast.

Until now, it had seemed that Washington and Moscow were edging towards a successor to the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (Start), despite failing to meet the original target of December 5.

Asked why the talks had failed to reach agreement on a new deal, Mr Putin said: "What is the problem? The problem is that our American partners are building an anti-missile shield and we are not building one."

The Prime Minister was believed to be voicing the deeply held views of hardliners in the Russian military machine, but his forthright statement may also be linked to growing signs that he is preparing to announce his intention to seek a new presidential term in 2012.

International arms treaties are the remit of the president. Mr Putin, in staking out his position, was wading into the domain of Dmitri Medvedev, his chosen successor in the Kremlin after he stood down last year.

It has always been widely believed that Mr Putin was allowing President Medvedev merely to keep his seat warm while he was taking a break, as laid down by the Constitution. His return to the presidential office would signal a harder line.

President Obama's reversal in July of plans to station the American missile defence shield close to Russia's borders in Central Europe — and his vow to reset relations with Moscow — were warmly welcomed by Mr Medvedev. The thaw was expected to pave the way for an agreement on a new nuclear arms reduction package.

Now Mr Putin suggests that the American concessions are not enough. "If we are not developing an anti-missile shield then there is a danger that our partners, by creating such an umbrella, will feel completely secure and thus can allow themselves to do what they want, disrupting the balance, and aggressiveness will rise immediately," Mr Putin said.

He made it clear that Washington should share its missile defence plans — based on sea and land-based interceptors in Europe — with Moscow if it wanted to ease Russian concerns. "Let the Americans hand over all their information on missile defence and we are ready to hand over all the information on offensive weapons," he said.

Mr Putin's intervention was seen by observers as an attempt to extract more American concessions on the defence shield while also allowing him to demonstrate that he remains the paramount voice in Russian politics.

"This is not his sphere but Putin is showing he is not weaker than Medvedev," the defence analyst Aleksandr Konovalov said. Some will see it as the latest issue on which differences are emerging between the two players in the leadership of Russia.

Mr Putin continues to steal the limelight, as illustrated by his high-profile tour around the Far East of Russia at a time when most of the country is winding down for 11 days of holiday at the start of the new year and Orthodox Christmas. Recently he was filmed flooring members of the Russian national judo team.

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article6970921.ece>

The Start treaty was signed shortly before the collapse of the Soviet Union 18 years ago. It led to significant cuts in Russian and American arsenals but expired on December 5. Both countries agreed to extend it while talks on a replacement treaty continue.