

Expanded Meeting of the Defence Ministry Board

Vladimir Putin took part in the annual expanded meeting of the Defence Ministry Board at the National Defence Control Centre.

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Apart from the Armed Forces leadership, representatives of bodies of state power and public organisations, the meeting was attended by command officials from military districts, fleets and flotillas, military formations and units, as well as cadets and students of the Russian Defence Ministry's higher education institutions, who have been invited to attend for the first time.

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President of Russia Vladimir Putin: Good afternoon, comrade officers,

Let us get down to work.

We have always prioritised and still prioritise the development of the Armed Forces and efforts to strengthen Russia's defence capability, and we will continue to do this in the future.

Today, at the annual expanded meeting of the Defence Ministry Board, we will discuss what has been accomplished in the field of military development throughout 2021, what results have been achieved in the main areas, and, of course, we will chart future tasks. This is what we always do at the Board's annual meetings.

I would like to note right away that, just like 2020, the outgoing year has been something extraordinary, mostly due to the continued coronavirus pandemic. You and I realise this. And it is of paramount importance that the Armed Forces efficiently and smoothly accomplish all of their tasks in this challenging context.

For example, work continued on the modernisation of the Army and Navy on a grand scale. Consequently, the share of modern weapons exceeded 71 percent in the troops and 89 percent in the strategic nuclear forces.

We continued to actively develop cutting-edge weapons systems. Some of them, namely the Avangard and Kinzhal systems, have been put on combat duty.

The Navy accomplished a wide range of tasks. Russian ships and submarines constantly patrolled all important sectors of the world's oceans. A combined naval grouping and long-range aviation units successfully accomplished combat-training tasks in the Baltic and Northern seas and in remote areas of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. A group of submarines and other ships did the same in the Arctic Ocean, operating in difficult ice conditions.

I also want to note a further increase in the level of troops' combat training. The results of the Zapad 2021 joint strategic exercises have shown this convincingly as the participants successfully practiced accomplishing the tasks of ensuring the security of the Union State of Russia and Belarus.

Our military members in Syria acted honourably, as befits Russian soldiers. Their presence and assistance to the civilian population in solving humanitarian problems is making a tangible contribution to strengthening stability in that republic.

Our peacekeepers have been helping to maintain stability in Nagorno-Karabakh for over a year now. Largely thanks to their efforts, the humanitarian situation has improved in the region; several districts have been demined, the social infrastructure has been restored, and historical and cultural landmarks have been preserved. I would like to thank the personnel performing peacekeeping tasks for their professionalism, endurance and perseverance.

Military doctors deserve the highest praise for their hard work in difficult conditions, for their invaluable help to the civilian population: more than 30,500 patients have been treated at the Defence Ministry's medical facilities, almost half of them civilians.

Military doctors have helped the civilian population in nine regions fight the coronavirus; they have even helped with the rehabilitation of patients who have suffered moderate or severe cases of the coronavirus infection and continue doing it.

People continue to undergo rehabilitation treatment at 32 Defence Ministry health centres. Thank you.

I would like to emphasise that the army itself has taken the necessary measures to combat the spread of the coronavirus in its ranks. Almost 100 percent of military personnel have been vaccinated. This made it possible to stem the tide of infection and protect service members' health, thereby ensuring high combat readiness among army units and divisions. True, the army has suffered from the coronavirus; there have been severe cases and losses – non-combat casualties. But overall, the Armed Forces have dealt with this problem successfully.

The military construction force has been operating with high efficiency. I am referring to more than building a significant amount of infrastructure for the army and navy on time. The military builders have also helped to ensure uninterrupted water supply to Crimea and Sevastopol. They have also helped build multifunctional medical centres and other socially significant facilities in many regions.

Comrade officers,

Relying on the solid foundation and a powerful research and technology achievements of the past few years, we must definitely continue to improve and strengthen our Armed Forces, which is exactly what we will do.

The military political situation in the world remains complicated, with increased conflict potential and new seats of tension in several regions. In particular, the growth of the US and NATO military forces in direct proximity to the Russian border and major military drills, including unscheduled ones, are a cause for concern.

It is extremely alarming that elements of the US global defence system are being deployed near Russia. The Mk 41 launchers, which are located in Romania and are to be deployed in Poland, are adapted for launching the Tomahawk strike missiles. If this infrastructure continues to move forward, and if US and NATO missile systems are deployed in Ukraine, their flight time to Moscow will be only 7–10 minutes, or even five minutes for hypersonic systems. This is a huge challenge for us, for our security.

In this context, as you are aware, I invited the US President to start talks on the drafting of concrete agreements. Incidentally, during our conversation he actually proposed

appointing senior officials to oversee this sphere. It was in response to his proposal that we drafted our proposals on precluding the further eastward expansion of NATO and the deployment of offensive strike systems in the countries bordering on Russia. As you are aware, we have sent the drafts of relevant agreements to our American colleagues and the NATO leadership.

We need long-term legally binding guarantees. Well, we know very well that even legal guarantees cannot be completely fail-safe, because the United States easily pulls out of any international treaty that has ceased to be interesting to it for some reason, sometimes offering explanations and sometimes not, as was the case with the ABM and the Open Skies treaties – nothing at all.

However, we need at least something, at least a legally binding agreement rather than just verbal assurances. We know the worth of such verbal assurances, fine words and promises. Take the recent past, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when we were told that our concerns about NATO's potential expansion eastwards were absolutely groundless. And then we saw five waves of the bloc's eastward expansion. Do you remember how it happened? All of you are adults. It happened at a time when Russia's relations with the United States and main member states of NATO were cloudless, if not completely allied.

I have already said this in public and will remind you of this again: American specialists were permanently present at the nuclear arms facilities of the Russian Federation. They went to their office there every day, had desks and an American flag. Wasn't this enough? What else is required? US advisors worked in the Russian Government, career CIA officers gave their advice. What else did they want? What was the point of supporting separatism in the North Caucasus, with the help of even ISIS – well, if not ISIS, there were other terrorist groups. They obviously supported terrorists. What for? What was the point of expanding NATO and withdrawing from the ABM Treaty?

They are to blame for what is happening in Europe now, for the escalation of tensions there. Russia had to respond at every step, and the situation was continuously going from bad to worse. It was deteriorating all the time. And here we are today, in a situation when we are forced to resolve it: After all, we cannot allow the scenario I mentioned. Is anyone unable to grasp this? This should be clear.

Sometimes I wonder: Why did they do all this in the then conditions? This is unclear. I think the reason lies in the euphoria from the victory in the so-called Cold War

or the so-called victory in the Cold War. This was due to their wrong assessment of the situation at that time, due to their unprofessional, wrong analysis of probable scenarios. There are simply no other reasons.

I would like to emphasise again: we are not demanding any special exclusive terms for ourselves. Russia stands for equal and indivisible security in the whole of Eurasia.

Naturally, as I have already noted, if our Western colleagues continue their obviously aggressive line, we will take appropriate military-technical reciprocal measures and will have a tough response to their unfriendly steps. And, I would like to stress that we are fully entitled to these actions that are designed to ensure Russia's security and independence.

As we know well, they are operating thousands of kilometres away from their national territory under different pretexts, including the need to ensure their own security. When international law and the UN Charter get in their way, they declare them obsolete and unnecessary. However, when something meets their interests, they immediately refer to the norms of international law, the UN Charter, international humanitarian law and so on. These manipulations are annoying.

In this connection, as I have already said, it is important to continue planned, steady, systemic development of the Armed Forces, including in line with their priorities, set forth in the latest version of the National Security Strategy and the Concept for Building and Developing the Armed Forces through to 2030.

Next year, we will have to focus on the following main tasks.

First, it is necessary to continue the planned and well-balanced procurement of modern weapons and equipment for military units and to devote special attention to deliveries of high-precision systems, cutting-edge reconnaissance, navigation, communications and control systems.

Second, combat and tactical training programmes should prioritise efforts to master modern weaponry, as well as new forms and methods of combat operations. In this connection, combat training programmes should be modified, so that they can be taken into account during exercises next year, including the Vostok 2022 strategic command post exercise.

Third, all-out success in many spheres now directly depends on well-thought-out and rapid decision-making. In the military sphere, during combat operations, decisions are made in minutes or even seconds. It is therefore necessary to develop systems to support the decision-making process by commanders at all levels, especially at the tactical level, and to introduce elements of artificial intelligence into these systems.

Fourth, it goes without saying that effective operational algorithms should be established at all levels, and advanced automatic systems should also be introduced. At the same time, we can see that modern military conflicts do not take place under pre-set patterns. As before, commanders play a key role in these conflicts. A lot depends on their knowledge, experience, personal qualities, and those who make truly unconventional decisions win battles. Consequently, during operational and combat training, it is necessary to train versatile commanders who possess knowledge in all fields. They should be listed in the personnel pool of top military commanders, and it is necessary to keep an eye on them even now, to guide them and to provide them with opportunities for subsequent promotion.

And, finally, here is the fifth aspect. Given the complicated international situation, it is necessary to develop military and military-technical cooperation with states that are members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation and to pay special attention to strengthening the defence capability of the Russia-Belarus Union State.

Colleagues,

One of our absolute priorities is to increase the level of social guarantees for the military personnel. Defenders of the Motherland perform special tasks which are often highly complicated, demanding and perilous. We will make sure that they are duly rewarded for their service.

As in the previous years, the military allowance must be equivalent and even higher than the wages in the leading industries. We agreed on this with the Government several years ago.

For your information, we have managed to maintain this correlation. According to forecasts, the average wage across the economy as of the end of the year will be

55,000 rubles and the average wage in the leading industries (oil, finance and transport) will be 63,200 rubles. According to my data (the Finance Ministry's numbers are slightly higher), the Defence Ministry's average military allowance for lieutenants in 2021 is 81,200 rubles. The figure may differ as all lieutenants are different and serve differently – but the average level of compensation is 81,200 rubles while the leading industries show 63,200 rubles.

The Government must adjust the allowance for inflation and, of course, increase military pensions, in a timely manner and to the extent that will ensure that this correlation is maintained.

We continue to provide military personnel with permanent housing as planned. This year, 4,350 servicepeople purchased new flats using housing subsidies. In the course of the next three years, some 9,000 servicepeople will receive the subsidies. We plan to allocate around 113 billion rubles for this purpose from the federal budget.

The accumulative mortgage system continues to work effectively. Thanks to this programme, 15,000 military personnel have fulfilled their right to housing in 2021. Another 34,000 will obtain new housing in 2022–2024.

Service housing is provided at the same rate. Some 35,000 servicepeople will have obtained it by the end of the year, which is 14 percent higher than our plan.

We will continue to focus very closely on these and other issues concerning military personnel's social security.

Finally, I would like to thank the leadership and staff of the Defence Ministry for their honest service and good performance. I am confident that you will continue to demonstrate professionalism and competence and use your best efforts to achieve high results. I wish you further success in your service for the benefit of Russia and our people.

Thank you.

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Vladimir Putin: On an informal note, I would like to add a few words to what

the Minister said and what I said in my opening remarks. Everyone is discussing this and, of course, primarily the Armed Forces. I am referring to our documents, our draft treaties and agreements on ensuring strategic stability that we sent to the leadership of the United States and NATO.

We already see that some of our detractors are interpreting them as Russia's ultimatum. Is it an ultimatum or not? Of course, not.

As a reminder: everything that our partners – let us call them that – the United States has been doing in previous years, supposedly ensuring its interests and security thousands of kilometres away from their national territory – they have been doing these tough things, the boldest things, without UN Security Council authorisation.

What was the pretext to bomb Yugoslavia? Was it authorised by the Security Council, or what? Where is Yugoslavia and where is the United States? They destroyed the country. Indeed, there was an internal conflict, they had their own problems, but who gave them the right to conduct airstrikes against a European capital? No one did. They just chose to do so, and their satellites were running behind them yelping along. So much for international law.

Under what pretext did they go into Iraq? It was Iraq developing weapons of mass destruction. They went in, destroyed the country, created a hotbed of international terrorism, and then it turned out that they made a mistake: "The intelligence failed us." Wow! They destroyed a country. The intelligence failed – that is all they had to say to justify their actions. It turned out there were no weapons of mass destruction there. On the contrary, everything had been destroyed as agreed.

How did they go into Syria? With Security Council authorisation? No. They do as they please. However, what they are doing, or trying or planning to do in Ukraine, is not happening thousands of kilometres away from our national border. It is on the doorstep of our house. They must understand that we simply have nowhere further to retreat to.

There are experts here, sitting with us, I stay in constant contact with them. The United States does not possess hypersonic weapons yet, but we know when they will have it. It cannot be hidden. Everything goes on record, successful or unsuccessful tests alike. We have a sense of when it might happen. They will supply hypersonic weapons to Ukraine and then use them as cover – that does not mean that they will start using

them tomorrow, because we already have Tsircon and they do not – to arm extremists from a neighbouring state and incite them against certain regions of the Russian Federation, such as Crimea, when they think circumstances are favourable.

Do they really think we do not see these threats? Or do they think that we will just stand idly watching threats to Russia emerge? This is the problem: we simply have no room to retreat. That is the question.

Armed conflicts and bloodshed are absolutely not our choice. We do not want to see events go that way. We want to use political and diplomatic means to resolve problems but we want to at least have clearly formulated legal guarantees. This is what our proposals are all about. We set them down on paper and sent them to Brussels and Washington, and we hope to receive a clear and comprehensive response to these proposals.

There are certain signals that our partners appear to be willing to work on that. However, there is also a danger that they will attempt to drown our proposals in words, or in a swamp, in order to take advantage of this pause and do whatever they want to do.

To make it clear to everyone: we are aware of this, and this turn of events, these developments, will not work for us. We look forward to constructive and meaningful talks with a visible outcome – and within a definite timeframe – that would ensure equal security for all.

This is what we will strive to achieve, but we can do so only if the Armed Forces are developing properly. In recent years, we have been able to manage this, and we have achieved a good level of combat readiness. I mentioned this, and the Minister has just reported about it. We are moving forward at a decent pace – the kind of pace that we need.

There are matters that need more attention, such as the production side, which we deal with on an ongoing basis. As you may be aware, we meet in Sochi twice a year. Why Sochi? It is not because of the good weather, but because everyone is going there, and we tune out distractions such as routine matters and focus on the defence industry and the development of the Armed Forces. These meetings are quite meaningful and effective.

To reiterate, there are many questions, but we are on top of them. I very much hope that we will continue to keep up this pace as we move forward in our efforts to ensure the security of Russia and its citizens.

Thank you very much. Happy New Year!

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