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Russia Plans New ICBMs, Nuclear Subs

Russia's defense minister lays out ambitious plans for new weapons

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(AP)

(AP) Russia's defense minister on Wednesday laid out an ambitious plan for building new intercontinental ballistic missiles, nuclear submarines and possibly aircraft carriers, and set the goal of exceeding the Soviet army in combat readiness.

Sergei Ivanov's statements appeared aimed at raising his profile at home ahead of the 2008 election in which he is widely seen as a potential contender to succeed President Vladimir Putin. But they also seemed to reflect a growing chill in Russian-U.S. relations and the Kremlin's concern about U.S. missile defense plans.

Ivanov told parliament the military would get 17 new ballistic missiles this year - a drastic increase over the average of four deployed annually in recent years. The purchases are part of a weapons modernization program for 2007-2015 worth about \$190 billion.

The plan envisages the deployment of 34 new silo-based Topol-M missiles and control units, as well as an additional 50 such missiles mounted on mobile launchers by 2015; Russia so far has deployed more than 40 silo-based Topol-Ms.

Putin and other officials have described the Topol-M as a bulwark of Russia's nuclear might for years to come, and said it can penetrate any prospective missile defenses. Last week, Putin dismissed U.S. claims that missile defense sites Washington hopes to establish in Poland and the Czech Republic were intended to counter threats from Iran, and said Russia would respond by developing more efficient weapons systems.

In 2002, Putin and President Bush signed a treaty obliging both sides to cut their strategic nuclear weapons by about two-thirds by 2012, down to 1,700 to 2,200 missiles. But Russian-U.S. ties have since worsened steadily over disagreements on Iraq and other global crises, and U.S. concerns about an increasingly authoritarian streak in Russia's domestic policy.

"The Russian leadership believes that a nuclear parity with the United States is vitally important because it allows it to conduct an equal dialogue on other issues," said an independent military analyst, Alexander Golts.

A rising tide of oil revenues has enabled Russia to boost defense spending following a squeeze on the military in the 1990s. "The question now is whether the industries are capable of producing what the military needs," Ivanov said.

Analysts warn that building any sizable numbers of new weapons would pose a daunting challenge to the defense plants that received virtually no government orders for a decade following the 1991 Soviet collapse.

"Links to subcontractors have been broken, and the defense plants now need to rebuild them to produce weapons," Golts said.

Alexander Pikayev, a senior analyst at the Moscow-based Institute for World Economy and International Relations, said the military had failed to set the right priorities for weapons procurement in the past.

Russia's defense budget, which stood at \$8.1 billion in 2001, nearly quadrupled to \$31 billion this year, Ivanov said. While this year's military spending is Russia's largest since the 1991 Soviet collapse, it is still about 20 times less than the U.S. defense budget.

Ivanov said the military now has enough money to intensify combat training.

"Combat readiness of the army and the navy is currently the highest in the post-Soviet history," he said, adding the task now is to "exceed Soviet-era levels."

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Ivanov said the military now has about 1.13 million servicemen, compared with 1.34 million in 2001. By 2015, the military plans to have about 1 million servicemen as Russia continues to reduce its bloated armed forces. "We can't go below that," he said.

The Kremlin has rejected liberals' calls to abolish the draft, saying Russia needs a large number of conscripts to protect its huge territory.

Ivanov said the weapons modernization program would allow the military to replace 45 percent of existing arsenals with modern weapons systems by 2015.

As part of the plan, the navy will commission 31 new ships, including eight nuclear submarines carrying intercontinental ballistic missiles, Ivanov said.

He played down recent failed launches of the Bulava missile being developed to equip these submarines. The Bulava, developed by the same design bureau that built the Topol-M, failed in three consecutive launches late last year.

"If we already had commissioned this missile and had failures, that would have been a nightmare," Ivanov said, adding that launch failures were "within the norm" in the testing phase.

He also said the government would decide in 2009-2010 whether to start the construction of a new shipyard for building aircraft carriers. Russia now only has one Soviet-built medium-sized aircraft carrier capable of carrying about 30 jets and helicopters.

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