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- Politics
- Law reports
- Obituaries
- Picture galleries
- How about that

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- Arts
- Blogs
- Comment
- Crossword
- Dating
- Digital Life
- Earth
- Expat
- Family
- Fantasy Games
- Fashion
- Features
- Food & Drink
- Football
- Gardening
- Health
- Horoscopes
- My Telegraph
- Obituaries
- Promotions
- Science
- Sudoku
- Telegraph e-paper
- Telegraph magazine
- Telegraph offers
- Telegraph PM
- Weather
- Your Money
- Your view

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- RSS feeds
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Putin touts new nuclear weapons against US

By Adrian Blomfield in Moscow
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President Vladimir Putin has announced plans to build a new generation of nuclear weapons after accusing the United States of harbouring an "erotic" desire to invade Russia and steal its natural resources.

Delivering one of his most belligerent anti-Western tirades, Mr Putin also suggested that America and its allies had concocted a fake assassination plot to prevent him from visiting Iran this week.

Casting himself as a pugnacious but benign defender of national sovereignty, the president told his people during a live television phone-in that only Russia's military prowess had prevented the country from suffering Iraq's fate.

But he delivered a relatively conciliatory message on America's plans to station a missile defence shield in Europe - proposals which Russia hotly opposes.

The subject of Western plots was first raised by Alexander, a mechanic in the Siberian city of Novosibirsk. Was it right, Alexander wanted to know, that certain American politicians considered Russia's refusal to share its natural resources "unfair" — claims he bizarrely attributed to Madeleine Albright, the former US secretary of state.

"I know that such ideas are brewing in the heads of some politicians," Mr Putin replied. "I think it is a sort of political eroticism which maybe gives some pleasure but will hardly lead anywhere.



President Putin has plans to bolster the country's nuclear arsenal

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"The best examples of that are the events in Iraq, a small country that could hardly defend itself but which possesses massive oil reserves. Thank God Russia is not Iraq.

"It is strong enough to protect its interests within the national territory and, by the way, in other regions of the world. What we are doing to increase our defence capability is the correct choice and we will continue to do that."

On the subject of missile defence, however, Mr Putin was more measured. "The latest contacts with our American colleagues show that they have indeed given some thought to the proposals we made and they are looking for a solution to the problems and for ways to

ease our concerns," he said.

Nearly eight years into his presidency, Mr Putin has grown steadily more assured and nationalistic in his public performances and the annual phone-in is clearly an event in which he revels.

As questioners fretted about Western machinations and Russia's uncertain future when Mr Putin steps down next Spring, the president was always on hand, like a cross between an emperor and a deity, to grant petitions, answer prayers and dispense advice and encouragement.

Not once was an unsettling or controversial question asked — a fact that drew scorn from the Kremlin's dwindling band of critics. "It was unbearably boring and openly narcissistic," said Yevgeny Kiselyov, a political commentator.

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"It was all staged from beginning to end. If he is a president and not the Tsar, why don't we hear the opinion of those who don't vote for him?"

Russia's already rapid rearmament would be stepped up even further, Mr Putin promised. Ambitious plans to bolster the country's nuclear arsenal — as well as its conventional military hardware — were well underway.

They include new missile systems, modernised nuclear bombers and submarines. "We have plans that are not only great, but grandiose," he boasted.

To drive home this message, the broadcast was interrupted to show a test launch of Russia's newest intercontinental ballistic missile.

"The anti-western rhetoric is aimed at voters, philistines who like to believe that Russia is surrounded by enemies intent on keeping the country on its knees," Mr Kiselyov said.

"For them, Putin is the only man who can defend us from these vicious enemies."

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