

NATIONAL REVIEW

The Real Significance of That Russian Nuclear Torpedo

Was Putin's briefing inadvertently leaked? Or was it a deliberate threat?

By Robert Joseph, Franklin Miller & Keith B. Payne — December 10, 2015

On November 12, Russian president Vladimir Putin staged a televised meeting with his senior defense team, during which a briefing slide of a purported nuclear-tipped torpedo was displayed. As described then and subsequently in Russian commentary, the torpedo would have a range of 6,200 miles, and the explosive yield of its nuclear warhead could be equivalent to as much as a staggering 100 million tons of TNT. Its stated purpose would be to destroy “key economic assets in coastal areas and to cause guaranteed devastating damage by creating wide areas of radioactive contamination.”

Russian sources claimed that this was an inadvertent leak of classified information. It seems clear from the video, however, that this was a deliberate act meant to send a stark message.

A number of Western analysts were quick to denounce as “unbelievable” the descriptions both of the torpedo and of its mission as conveyed in the briefing slide. Those same analysts have also, over the past several years, dismissed the by now regrettably familiar nuclear saber-rattling by Putin and his senior officials as intended only for domestic consumption in Russia. The reality, however, is far more ominous.

The Kremlin's unbroken spate of nuclear threats has come in concert with a series of Russian military exercises reportedly featuring the first use of nuclear weapons and a highly robust program to field a host of new, specialized Russian nuclear weapons. These developments are backed by an apparent Russian military doctrine stating that Moscow will “deescalate” a conventional conflict by using nuclear weapons first,

thereby forcing the adversary to concede defeat. The adversary in Russian military exercises appears to be the U.S. and NATO.

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Putin and his colleagues may actually believe what they say. While Western governments view the military use of nuclear weapons as “unthinkable,” the Kremlin appears to believe they are very usable. Russian planners appear to have developed a sophisticated strategy in which asymmetric warfare, space and cyber operations, and conventional military capabilities are integrated with planning for actual nuclear use. On December 8, President Putin said that the Russian cruise missiles now being used in Syria can be equipped with nuclear warheads, but that he hoped that nuclear weapons would not be necessary.

The general lack of Western response to the Kremlin’s blatant threats of nuclear war likely encourages Putin and his colleagues both to exploit continued threats for political gain and to believe that they can in fact achieve their goals by resorting to the use of nuclear weapons in a future confrontation with the West.

The United States and its allies must respond to this campaign of nuclear intimidation. We suggest four complementary steps.

First, we need to invest considerably more resources in studying Russia’s nuclear developments, both its doctrine and its capabilities. The U.S. intelligence community appears, since the end of the Cold War, to have virtually divested itself of the capacity to understand Russian nuclear-weapons policy, programs, and war planning. Yet deterrence depends fundamentally on understanding a potential adversary’s thinking and planning. The intellectual resources necessary to perform this vital task must be reconstituted. Failure to do so will increase the prospect for miscalculations and the failure of deterrence.

Second, we need to understand how developments in Russian doctrine and capabilities affect our own long-standing assumptions about the role of nuclear weapons and the capabilities we require to deter foes and assure threatened allies. Russian thinking on nuclear use is very different today from what it was in the Cold War days, and much more threatening than Western post–Cold War assumptions

about benign relations with Russia. If we are to deter effectively, it is essential that we adjust our thinking and forces to the reality of Russia's contemporary nuclear strategy and capabilities.

Third, we need to make clear to Putin that any use of a nuclear weapon will be self-destructive for Moscow. We need to return, at very senior levels and in a definitive manner, to the type of declaratory policy crafted and used by Republican and Democratic presidents for decades. Reagan's defense secretary, Caspar Weinberger, said, for example:

We, for our part, are under no illusions about the consequences of a nuclear war: We believe there would be no winners in such a war. But this recognition on our part is not sufficient to ensure effective deterrence or to prevent the outbreak of war: It is essential that the Soviet leadership understands this as well. We must make certain that the Soviet leadership, in calculating the risks of aggression, recognizes that because of our retaliatory capability there can be no circumstance where the initiation of a nuclear war at any level or of any duration would make sense.

Fourth, we need to place renewed emphasis on rebuilding our own nuclear forces, which have suffered decades of neglect and now require considerable attention. The Navy is on track with its twin efforts to build a new strategic submarine and to extend the life of the corresponding Trident II missile; these efforts must be fully funded in the years ahead. Some Air Force programs, however, appear to be lagging, with regular slips in the plans to replace the Minuteman ICBM force and its antiquated infrastructure, to replace the air-launched cruise missile, and to equip the F-35 to carry the B61 bomb. This pattern of delay must not continue; it surely sends the wrong message to Moscow at this point.

Russian nuclear threats must be countered, and a nuclear war must be deterred and never fought. It is time we take the prudent steps necessary to dissuade Putin from his current dangerous course.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: This article has been amended since its initial posting.