

Putin Nukes Trump

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On October 27, 2017, the Kremlin announced that “Vladimir Putin took part in Strategic Nuclear Forces’ training.”^[1] Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov declared, “During the training, its participants practiced interaction between the RVSN [Russian Strategic Rocket Forces], nuclear submarines of the Northern and Pacific Fleets and long-range aviation of the Russian Aerospace Forces.”^[2] He emphasized the fact that Putin personally gave the launch order.^[3] The Russian Defense Ministry gave some details about the exercise. It stated:

Units of Strategic Missile Forces control centres, crews of nuclear missile submarines of the Northern and Pacific Fleets as well as long-range strategic bombers of the Russian Aerospace Forces carried out training missions.

Crews of Tu-160, Tu-95MS, and Tu-22M3 aircraft took off from the Ukrainka, Engels, and Shaikovka airfields and fired cruise missiles at ground targets located at the Kura (Kamchatka), Pemboy (Komi), and Terekta (Kazakhstan).

Strategic Missile Forces fired a Topol missile from the Plesetsk State Test Cosmodrome at the Kura range.

A Pacific Fleet submarine fired two ballistic missiles from the Okhotsk Sea at the Chizha range, Arkhangelsk region. A Northern Fleet submarine fired a ballistic missile at the Kura range.^[4]

The most striking thing about the exercise was that it was announced *at all* and that President Putin was characterized as “overseeing” it and ordering the missile launches. This exercise was conducted in a sensitive period in U.S.-Russian relations. Russia did not have to announce the exercise. It has previously staged major strategic nuclear exercises without announcing them.^[5] The U.S. was then involved in the Nuclear Posture Review as it is currently. Russia clearly does not have any interest in increasing awareness of the Russian nuclear threat. Moreover, President Trump does not take kindly to foreign leaders threatening the nuclear destruction of the United States and its allies. Russia has long alternated between making overt nuclear threats and professing its peaceful intentions and carrying out propaganda attacks on the U.S. for allegedly doing what Russia is actually doing. Even when it seeks to downplay the nuclear emphasis of its strategy, it cannot consistently do so because nuclear forces and nuclear threats are the core element of its national security policy. Indeed, in November 2017, Deputy Defense Minister Yuri Borisov stated, “The first priority, of course, is given to the development

of nuclear deterrence systems as the main branch of armed forces that guarantees the security of our country in any kind of conflict.”^[6]

An interesting aspect of this exercise is that, unlike previous exercises, it did not include the usual escalation scenario. Putin is presented as ordering the strategic nuclear missile launches but without any political context. Because of the types of missiles involved, the salvo launch, the emphasis on the coordination of ICBM and SLBM attacks, and the range of the missile flights, particularly those of the Pacific Fleet missiles, this exercise clearly was a simulated large-scale nuclear attack on the U.S. and its allies. It is always possible that there were unannounced parts of the exercise, but more likely it was a continuation of the September Zapad 2017 theater exercise, which apparently had all the missing nuclear escalation aspects of the typical Russian large strategic nuclear exercise. Zapad 2017 had an announced air defense component and announced live launches of Iskander-M and R-500 nuclear-capable missiles. Moreover, on the last day of the exercise, there was a Russian nuclear ICBM launch and reported nuclear bomber attacks and simulated nuclear SLBM launches.^[7] This could have been “de-escalation of a conflict” by a limited nuclear strike which has been part of Russia’s military doctrine since the rise of Putin.^[8]

An additional very interesting aspect of the October strategic nuclear exercise was the use of the Backfire bomber (Tu-22M3) and the launch of cruise missiles at ground targets in the “Terekta (Kazakhstan)” target range. This is apparently two firsts for the large strategic nuclear exercises. Launching a nuclear missile into Kazakhstan was certainly not necessary and a clearly politically motivated message sent by a regime increasingly oriented toward imperialism. Former Soviet states generally do not want to be involved in Russian nuclear exercises. Backfire has been typically used in large theater war exercises and in Long-Range Aviation exercises. Participation in these exercises does not raise the issue of a strategic nuclear capability, which Backfire is not supposed to have.

Strategic capabilities for the Backfire were prohibited by previous arms control treaties but are allowed and poorly limited by the New START Treaty. In the earlier START Treaty, the Soviet Union committed that:

The Tu-22M airplane is a medium bomber and is not a strategic offensive arm. At the same time, taking into account the need to remove all concerns standing in the way of the agreements, the Soviet side declares that it will not give the Tu-22M airplane the capability of operating at intercontinental distances in any manner, including by in-flight refueling.^[9]

This language does not appear in the New START Treaty, although Backfire bombers still can’t carry nuclear cruise missiles with a range in excess of 600-km without them being declared heavy bombers.

While Russia released videos of all the bomber types used in the October exercise on take-off, the video of the Backfire take-off showed no details. This may have been intentionally designed to deny information concerning what type of missiles the Backfire was carrying, which likely would have been carried externally. If it were a long-range nuclear ALCM, the Backfire would be an undeclared heavy bomber under the New START Treaty and Russia would be in violation

of the Treaty. After the New START Treaty eliminated the prohibition on Backfire in-flight refueling capability, Russia reportedly installed such a capability on the Backfire.^[10] Some of the Russian Backfire attacks on Syria reportedly involved in-flight refueling.^[11] In October 2017, the Russian Defense Ministry announced that the Tu-95 Bear and the “Tu-22M3 long-range bombers” would participate in an exercise in which, “The flight personnel will practise (sic!) engaging ground targets as well as in-air refueling.”^[12] According to just retired Commander of the Russian Air Force, Colonel General Viktor Bondarev, the range of the Backfire is 6,000-km.^[13] With in-flight refueling, it clearly has strategic range.

Russia is also in the process of upgrading the Tu-22M3, the most modern version of the aircraft. According to Tupolev Aircraft Company CEO Alexander Konyukhov, “The first heavily upgraded Tu-22M3 will take to the skies in 2018,” which according to a source quoted by TASS, will have “modern long-range precision weapons.”^[14] The Tu-22M3M is reportedly being given improved engines (which should increase its range), and a much longer-range cruise missile is being developed for the bomber.^[15]

In November 2017, military journalist [Dave Majumdar](#) wrote, “...the Tu-22M3M will be armed with [an] upgraded X-32 [Kh-32] supersonic anti-ship missile, a modernized version of the X-22 (NATO AS-4 Kitchen). The massive 13,000lbs weapon has a speed of about Mach 4.5 while flying at altitudes of 130,000ft over [a range of about 620 miles](#). It can be armed with a 1,102lbs conventional warhead or a nuclear warhead if needed. The Tu-22M3M will be able to carry three such weapons.”^[16] His source for this statement was a 2016 article in the Russian state media by Colonel (ret.) Nikolai Litovkin, a hard line but very well connected Russian journalist.^[17] In November 2017, state-run *Sputnik News* reported, “The Kh-32 has an operational range of 600-1,000 kilometers and can reach speeds of 4,000-5,000 kph.”^[18] There are a number of earlier press reports that repeat the range number (expressed as 1,000-km) and say it has a nuclear capability.^[19] If these reports are correct, the Russian Tu-22M3M is an undeclared heavy bomber in violation of the New START Treaty. This is because the New START range definition of a heavy bomber reads:

The term “heavy bomber” means a bomber of a type, any one of which satisfies either of the following criteria:

- (a) Its range is greater than 8000 kilometers, or
- (b) It is equipped for long-range nuclear ALCMs.^[20]

The New START Treaty states, “The term ‘long-range ALCM’ means an ALCM with a range in excess of 600 kilometers” and “the term ‘long-range nuclear ALCM’ means a long-range ALCM that is nuclear-armed.”^[21] Under the New START Treaty, a heavy bomber counts as one warhead against the 1,550 deployed warhead limit and one delivery vehicle against the deployed delivery vehicle limit of 700 and the deployed and non-deployed delivery vehicle limit of 800. Failure to make an accurate declaration is a Treaty violation.

As demonstrated in the October Russian strategic nuclear exercise, arms control treaty violations have military consequences. They are made worse by badly negotiated treaties like New START. If we ignore these violations, as we have frequently done in the past, arms control has a negative national security impact. While Russian arms control violations are common, we have not

reacted to them since 1986 when President Reagan terminated U.S. observance of the SALT I Interim Agreement and the SALT II Treaty. As the Trump administration undertakes its Nuclear Posture Review, it is imperative that Russian violations of arms control treaties be addressed in a meaningful and expeditious manner.

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Notes:

[1] “Vladimir Putin took part in Strategic Nuclear Forces’ training,” *Kremlin.ru*, October 27, 2017, available at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/55929>.

[2] “Putin fires 4 ballistic missiles during exercise training control of Russian strategic nuclear forces – Peskov,” *Interfax*, October 27, 2017, available at <https://dialog.proquest.com/professional/docview/1956385935?accountid=155509>. Russia & CIS General Newswire.

[3] Ibid.

[4] “Russian Armed Forces held Strategic Nuclear Forces control training,” Defense Ministry of the Russian Federation, October 26, 2017, available at http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12148494 @egNews.

[5] “[Three ballistic missiles launched in one day](http://russianforces.org/blog/2016/10/three_ballistic_missiles_launc.shtml),” *Russian Forces.org*, October 12, 2016, available at http://russianforces.org/blog/2016/10/three_ballistic_missiles_launc.shtml.

[6] “Russian New Arms Procurement Program Prioritizes Nuclear Deterrence – Borisov,” *Sputnik*, November 23, 2017, available at <https://dialog.proquest.com/professional/docview/1967436344?accountid=155509>.

[7] Mark B. Schneider, “Zapad-2017: A Major Russian War Against NATO, Again,” *Real Clear Defense*, October 6, 2017, available at https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2017/10/06/zapad-2017_a_major_russian_war_against_nato_again_112441.html.

[8] “S ARMED SERVICES HEARING ON WORLDWIDE THREATS,” *Political Transcript Wire*, May 23, 2017, available at <http://dialog.proquest.com/professional/docview/1902238886?accountid=155509>.: Robert Work and James Winnefeld, Testimony before the Committee on Armed Services, U.S. House of Representatives, June 25, 2015, p. 4, available at <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/AS/AS00/20150625/103669/HHRG-114-AS00-Wstate-WorkR-20150625.pdf>; U.S. National Intelligence Council, *GLOBAL TRENDS, PARADOX OF PROGRESS*, NIC 2017-001 (Washington D.C. National Intelligence Council, January 2017), p. 36, available at <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/nic/GT-Full-Report.pdf>.

[9] The START Treaty, Associated Documents, U.S. Department of State, 1991, available at <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/27390.pdf>.

[10] “Tu-22M3,” *Deagel.com*, July 25, 2017, available at http://www.deagel.com/Combat-Aircraft/Tu-22M3_a000_322001.aspx.

- [11] Babat Taghvaei, "Russian 'Backfires' in Iran," *Combat Aircraft*, October 2016, p. 17.
- [12] "Tu-22M3 aircraft landed at Anadyr airfield in course of long-range aviation exercise," Defense Ministry of the Russian Federation, October 5, 2017, available at http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12144713@egNews.
- [13] "Corridors of Power; Modernized Tu-22M3 to be customized to carry Kh-32 supersonic missiles - MP Bondarev," *Interfax*, November 17, 2017, available at <https://dialog.proquest.com/professional/docview/1965683404?accountid=155509>.
- [14] "Russia to upgrade Tu-22M3 strategic bombers in 2018," *TASS*, November 17, 2017, available at <http://tass.com/defense/976261>.
- [15] *Ibid.*
- [16] [Dave Majumdar](#), "Russia's Supersonic Bombers: Now Locked and Loaded with New Supersonic Missiles," *Real Clear Defense*, November 18, 2017, available at <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/russias-supersonic-bombers-now-locked-loaded-new-supersonic-23268>.
- [17] Nikolai Litovkin, "New Russian cruise missiles to hit targets from the stratosphere," *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, August 30, 2016, available at https://www.rbth.com/defence/2016/08/30/new-russian-cruise-missiles-to-hit-targets-from-the-stratosphere_625441.
- [18] "Locked and Loaded: Russia's Tu-22M3 Bombers to Boast Advanced Cruise Missiles," *Sputnik News*, November 17, 2017, available at <https://sputniknews.com/military/201711171059192743-tu-22-bomber-new-missiles/>.
- [19] "Tu-22M3 launching a Kh-32 cruise missile," June 27, 2013, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UtsWTuZQhvQ>; David Cenciotti, "New image of a Russian Tu-22M Backfire with cruise missile emerges," *The Aviationist.com*, December 16 2013, available at <http://theaviationist.com/2013/12/16/tu-22-cruise-missiles/>; "Russia's Backfire Bomber Is Back!", *War is Boring*, June 13, 2014, available at <https://warisboring.com/russias-backfire-bomber-is-back-2618703120b7#.yt12goy29>; Alexander Fedor, "Flexible Strategic Fist," *Oborona.ru*, December 12, 2015, available at <http://www.oborona.ru/includes/periodics/armedforces/2015/1214/145317358/detail.shtml>. (In Russian.)
- [20] The New START Treaty, Protocol, Part One, Definition 23, available at <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/140047.pdf>.
- [21] *Ibid.*, Definitions 41 and 42.