

Putin: Russian Strategic Bomber Patrols Are Response to U.S. Intransigence

November 17, 2014

The  **Moscow Times**

President Vladimir Putin said a recent flurry of Russian strategic bomber patrols near NATO airspace was a response to U.S. insistence on flying nuclear bombers along Russia's borders.

Amid rising international tensions over the conflict in eastern Ukraine, Putin also stressed that Russia's bombers have not violated foreign airspace: "Our exercises are exclusively conducted in international waters and international airspace," Putin said in an interview with Germany's ARD television on Sunday, according to a transcript on the Kremlin's website.

In late October, NATO officials flagged an unusual number of sorties by Russia's giant Tu-95 strategic bombers following provocative flight routes over the Atlantic Ocean and North Sea.

While the alliance has reported Russian fighters violating the airspace of several member nations in the Baltic region and Eastern Europe in recent months, it has not accused Russian bombers of entering NATO territory.

Putin said the expansion of Russia's bomber patrols is a return to a Cold War norm that

the U.S. never abandoned.

The Soviet Union regularly deployed their Tu-95 bombers during the Cold War in a bid to achieve parity with the U.S.'s far-larger fleet of B-52 bombers, but essentially grounded its air force when the Soviet Union collapsed.

"Meanwhile, our U.S. partners continued to fly their nuclear aircraft along their previous routes, including to areas close to our borders. Therefore several years ago, seeing no positive developments and no one ready to meet us halfway, we resumed strategic air patrols to remote areas," Putin said.

Russia first renewed strategic nuclear bomber patrols and exercises in 2007, but has ramped up activity in recent months as relations with the West have soured over Ukraine.

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