

Russia's Strategic Bomber Fleet on Global Intimidation Drive

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Russia is expanding strategic bomber flights around the globe in a bid to intimidate other nations and assert its geopolitical influence.

As tensions rise with the West over Ukraine, Russian bombers forced NATO to scramble jets to intercept Russian military aircraft over 400 times last year — more than twice as often as in 2013, according to Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg.

The flights have infringed on Air Defense Identification Zones — a buffer where foreign aircraft are asked to identify themselves for national security reasons — across Europe and North America, sparking media frenzies as Russia's actions are interpreted in the most ominous terms.

Such behavior is likely to increase, if the words of senior Russian defense officials are to be taken at face value. The Defense Ministry has doubled down on its rhetoric and pledged to expand Russian strategic bomber flights well beyond Russia's borders.

The drive to cover more of the globe with their bombers — sometimes loaded with nuclear bombs and cruise missiles — “gives them wider strategic options to threaten NATO assets,” Ben Moores, a senior aerospace analyst at global defense consultancy IHS Aerospace, Defense & Security said Thursday.

The Third Prong

Russian strategic bombers are part of a three-pronged nuclear force that includes missiles and submarines.

For nearly 15 years after the fall of the Soviet Union, Russian bombers were essentially grounded. Only in 2007, when Russia was flush with oil wealth, did President Vladimir Putin order the Air Force to resume regular combat patrols.

The bombers project offensive power. Their military role is “to provide a level of [nuclear attack] flexibility not offered by missile systems alone,” said Douglas Barrie, a Russian military aviation expert at the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies.

“Bomber aircraft equipped with cruise missiles — conventional or nuclear armed — provide a potent combination,” Barrie said.

Putin has justified the strategic bomber flights in the context of the ongoing standoff between Russia and the West over Ukraine by saying the U.S. never stopped its bomber patrols along Russian airspace after the Cold War.

U.S. bombers fly regular combat patrols around the world, using a network of foreign air bases to stop at for refueling. Some of their routes take them close to Russian airspace.

Moores said Russia's patrols were propaganda tools aimed at “appearing to be more dangerous than they are” to intimidate other countries.

Russia's Reach

According to Moscow Defense Brief, an industry publication produced by the Center for the Analysis of Strategies and Technologies (CAST), a Russian defense think tank, Russia's current standard bomber routes are the same ones flown by the Soviet Air Force's long-range bombers before 1992.

These routes are typically flown out of Russia's main bomber bases — Engels, a city near Saratov in the West, and Ukrainka in the Amur region in the Far East.

These bases house regiments of Tu-95 “Bear” propeller-driven bombers, and the larger Tu-160 supersonic bombers.

With minor deviations, the standard flight paths take Russian bombers out of Engels over Scandinavia, toward Britain, and then into the North Atlantic, according to Moscow Defense

Brief. Bombers flying from Ukrainka in the Far East fly up to Alaska, over the Aleutian Islands, and then into the Pacific and Sea of Japan before returning home.

Recapturing Soviet Scale

Recently, flights have been expanded beyond the Soviet flight paths and bombers have flown further south, toward Venezuela and the Caribbean, carrying Russian offensive weapons into the U.S. neighborhood.

To do this, Russian bombers have to link up in the air with refueling aircraft to expand their range — which is generally around 10,000 kilometers, depending on the type of aircraft flown.

These flights are rare, and do not yet represent any reliable expansion of bomber coverage. The Air Force has only a limited number of long-range Ilyushin Il-78 Midas tanker aircraft needed on such missions, Barrie said.

But they are likely to become more frequent. Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu in November responded to criticism that Russian bomber flights are provocative and potentially dangerous to civilian traffic by promising expansion.

“We need to ensure a military presence in the western Atlantic and eastern Pacific oceans, [as well as] the waters of the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico,” the BBC quoted Shoigu as saying.

Shoigu said Russia is looking to establish air bases in Venezuela, Nicaragua and Cuba, which would remove the problem of in-flight refueling and increase bombers' range.

General Yevgeny Buzhinsky, Chairman of the Executive Board of the Moscow-based PIR Center military think tank, said Russia was negotiating with these countries “on the possibility of using their air bases for refueling our long-range aircraft, resting the crews and conducting minor repairs, nothing more than that.”

But these plans mask underlying problems in Russia's ability to field a meaningful bomber threat. Its planes are old, and their increasingly regular use demands correspondingly regular maintenance and hardware upgrades, said Ruslan Pukhov, CAST's director.

“If you fly extensively, if you go to Venezuela and so on and so forth, it kills the resource and one day when you really need it, you simply can't use it,” Pukhov said.

But Buzhinsky said that it's only a matter of time before Russia begins building a new generation of bombers. The Defense Ministry has launched a development program known as PAK DA for a future long-range bomber, expected to begin testing around 2020, but no details about the form of the aircraft have yet emerged.

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