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## ECHOES OF THE COLD WAR: STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS OF RUSSIA'S FIRST TACTICAL NUCLEAR DRILL SINCE SOVIET ERA

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## Introduction

For the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia announced the beginning of a two-phase tactical nuclear exercise in Southern Russia, near Rostov-on-Don and close to parts of Ukraine currently under control by Russian forces. The drills included the participation of Belarus troops and simulated the deployment of non-strategic nuclear weapons with the upgraded 'Iskander' ballistic missile systems and 'Kinzhal' hypersonic missiles. Moscow states that the military drill is a direct response to 'militant statements' from Western leaders, especially from the United States, France and Britain, who have recently reiterated their continued financial and military support to Ukraine (Trevelyan, 2024). However, the pattern and timing of these exercises point towards a bigger strategic objective. Beyond the official statements, these exercises are a strategic move intended to intimidate the West and divide NATO from within. Russia is trying to demonstrate its nuclear capabilities and readiness, thereby frightening those Western countries who are showing support to Ukraine. The move serves as a message to NATO nations weighing further military aid in the region. These drills are going on against a backdrop of heightened global tensions, with nuclear language seeing a resurgence in international communication and collaboration. These exercises not only display military strength but also assess the extent to which Western nations are willing to stand up to or cooperate with Russia (Trevelyan, 2024).

The paper will first detail the specifics of the Russian tactical nuclear exercise, explaining in depth the two phases that characterised this exercise, its motives and objectives. Then, the paper will assess potential future threats and analyse the strategic response of the West as it once again comes to terms with Russian nuclear rhetoric.

## A Two-phase Exercise

The first stage of the exercise, which started on the 21st of May, saw the employment of missile systems, namely the 'Iskander' and the 'Kinzhal' hypersonic air-launched missiles. They both can carry conventional and nuclear warheads, while their propulsion systems have recently been upgraded to be more efficient, improving their current payload and expanding their range and manoeuvrability (Defence Security Asia, 2024). Russia's new defence ministry, Andrey Belousov, said in a statement that "The troops are practising combat training tasks of obtaining special ammunition for the Iskander operational-tactical missile system, equipping launch vehicles with them and covertly advancing to the designated position area in preparation for missile launches" (Trevelyan, 2024,). The Kremlin added that the military personnel involved in the exercise practised equipping aviation weapons with special warheads, including the Kinzhal, and flying in designated patrol areas. Tupolev Tu-22M3 bombers and MiG-31K interceptors can carry these types of missiles, which have already been used in the current conflict with Ukraine (Walker & Kayali, 2024).

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The second stage of the drill was announced on June 11th as a joint operation between Russian and Belarusian armed forces to train their troops in deploying tactical nuclear weapons (Trevelyan & Faulconbridge, 2024). The involvement of Belarusian forces was expected, considering that the country recently amended its constitution to host Russian nuclear military installations. According to Russia's Ministry of Defence, the purpose of this phase is to maintain the readiness of the units' personnel and equipment for the combat use of non-strategic nuclear weapons of Russia and Belarus. He further emphasised the role of navy ships in the training, which would equip sea-based cruise missiles with special mock warheads. MiG-31 supersonic interceptors carrying Khinzal missiles and Tupolev Tu-22M3 long-range supersonic bombers also participated in the drill (Trevelyan & Faulconbridge, 2024).

## Potential Threats

Currently, the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) gauges that Russia's military arsenal consists of 1558 tactical nuclear warheads, overseen by the Russian Defence Ministry's 12th Main Directorate, or the 12th GUMO. Their current nuclear doctrine outlines four situations where nuclear weapons may be employed: in response to a nuclear missile attack, a perceived nuclear missile launch, an attack targeting Russia's nuclear forces, or a threat to the existence of the Russian state, potentially from NATO's advanced conventional weapons, such as long-range missiles that could possibly hit Russian territories (Dibb, 2024). The latter could be perceived as a pretext to employ tactical nuclear weapons on the current battlefield, although the consequences would be unpredictable, with a greater chance of conflict escalation. However, from a political point of view, launching a nuclear warhead on Ukraine's soil makes no sense. The use of a tactical nuclear weapon would upset public opinion, isolating Russia even further from the international community.

Experts such as Pavel Podvig of the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research support the following thesis: "This is supposed to be a signal to the West, probably to make people stop thinking about deeper involvement in the war. But I believe we can be quite confident that it is not a threat to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine or against Ukraine". He argued that Russia would not be able to practice nuclear attacks during the exercise, only the procedure for using the weapons. "This is because nonstrategic warheads are normally stored separately from the missiles and aircraft that can fire them" (Goncharenko, 2024).

Nikolai Sokov of the Vienna Centre for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation agrees: "There have never been any intentions to deploy nuclear weapons in Ukraine, not even in critical times like during the withdrawal of the Russian army from the Kharkiv and Kherson regions in the fall of 2022" (Goncharenko, 2024). Throughout history, Russia has used nuclear rhetoric to intimidate Western leaders and influence conflict responses. These threats often provoked strong responses from Western leaders, consolidating their support and dedication to European security.

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As seen in the case of the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia's nuclear threats have led to an increased determination of the West to confront Russian aggression with economic sanctions and the deployment of additional NATO troops in Eastern Europe (Smith-Spark et al., 2015).

In a recent podcast (StrategicALLY, 2024), Andreas Umland, a Senior Analyst at the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies, highlighted a crucial point: the success of a nuclear-armed country, allowed by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), in attacking a non-nuclear-armed country could lead to nuclear proliferation and the eventual end of the NPT, for weaker countries might see the nuclear option as the only way to preserve their independence. This situation is similar to the US-led regime change in Iraq, which incited North Korea and Iran to speed their nuclear development to prevent US intervention (Abrams, A. B., 2024). Consequently, outside of the current conflict, Russia's activities and nuclear weapon display could have far-reaching effects and jeopardise international efforts to stop the spread of nuclear weapons. Therefore, such events would constitute another reason to refrain from using nuclear weapons on Ukrainian soil.

## **Western Strategic Response**

These exercises intend to sow division within the alliance, especially after recent comments by Western officials. Indeed, over the past few months, Western governments have firmly restated their commitment to support Ukraine in many ways. The Western position is unified in its support for Ukraine, even as Russia conducts tactical nuclear exercises to intimidate and divide NATO. The commitment to military assistance and strategic measures demonstrates the West's determination to address Russian threats and support European security in the face of rising tensions. The United States has recently passed a long-postponed 60 billion aid package for Kyiv that will allow Ukrainians to receive ammunition and necessary military equipment as they try to push the Russians back from the Kharkiv Oblast (Baldor & Lee, 2024).

Similarly, French President Emmanuel Macron emphasised the need to prevent a Russian victory in Ukraine, reiterating that the possibility of sending troops to Ukraine is still under consideration. "I'm not ruling anything out because we are facing someone who is not ruling anything out", Macron told The Economist magazine. "I have a clear strategic objective: Russia cannot win in Ukraine. If Russia wins in Ukraine, there will be no security in Europe. Who can pretend that Russia will stop there?". He also promised to send Mirage 2000-5 fighter jets soon, which should be able to improve the ageing Ukrainian fleet of Soviet-era aircraft (Chernova & Edwards, 2024).

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During a recent visit to Kyiv, British Foreign Secretary David Cameron stated that Ukraine could use British-supplied weapons to strike targets inside Russia. “In terms of what the Ukrainians do, in our view, it is their decision about how to use these weapons. They are defending their country. They were illegally invaded by Putin, and they must take those steps”, Cameron told reporters after reassuring them that the United Kingdom will continue to support Ukraine financially and militarily (Melkozerova, 2024).

Furthermore, several NATO countries - Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Norway - have guaranteed their support by supplying dozens of US-made F-16s aircraft to Ukraine. The first batch is expected to be delivered by Denmark this summer (Ansa, 2024). According to Sergii Holubtsov, Ukrainian Air Force Senior Officer, some aircraft will remain in Ukrainian pilot training centres and aviation personnel outside Ukraine. “There are several aircraft that will be in secure air bases outside Ukraine so that they will not be targeted here” (Korshak, 2024).

## **Conclusion**

This nuclear military exercise represents just another sign of the current rise in tensions between Russia and the West. Although Moscow justifies the exercises with ‘militant statements’ by Western leaders, the deeper strategic-military objectives remain hidden. These exercises serve Russia’s purposes, notably to try to generate tensions within the Western alliance by assessing the resilience and cohesion of NATO members. The display of sophisticated Iskander and Khinzal missile systems, along with the preparedness of Russian and Belarusian troops, highlight the potential danger posed by Russia, prompting neighbouring nations to review their security protocols. The reaction of the West has been strong and cohesive, with many NATO countries reaffirming their commitment to help Ukraine through military and financial support. In sum, Russia’s nuclear exercises are a strategic manoeuvre to demonstrate its strength and control, undermine Western support for Ukraine, and reassert its supremacy in the area. Therefore, NATO must continue to support Ukraine, both militarily and financially, while at the same time facing the difficult task of managing these provocations without escalating the conflict, emphasising the careful balance needed to sustain peace and security in a nuclear-armed world.

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