

Iskander missiles in Kaliningrad: a constant element of Russia's policy of intimidation

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On 8 October, in response to press releases, the Russian Ministry of Defence confirmed that an Iskander-M missile complex (2 dual-missile launchers plus support vehicles and security) had been transported via sea to the territory of the Kaliningrad region, on board a civilian Ambal-type roll-on/roll-off vessel. It took place within the framework of the unannounced missile artillery exercises started on 4 September in the Western Military District (MD). These exercises are intended to check the ability of the logistic services to ensure the transport of military equipment to the Kaliningrad region, and to train the staff of the 152nd Missile Brigade stationed in Chernyakhovsk how to use new hardware. As previously announced by the Russian Ministry of Defence, the arming of this unit with Iskander missile complexes will be completed by the end of 2018.

Commentary

- Russia signalled its plan to deploy Iskander systems in the Kaliningrad region for the first time in 2008, as a response to US plans to build an anti-missile shield in Europe. The rivalry with the United States and NATO is being used as an excuse to justify the modernisation of the Russian armed forces, including the withdrawal of the Tochka-U rocket systems; meanwhile plans to bring the Iskanders into service, which have been ongoing since 2006, have been included in two consecutive National Armaments Programmes (to 2015 and 2020). The Russian side confirmed (most recently last May) that the rearming of the 152nd Missile Brigade is expected to be completed by the end of 2018. So far, Iskanders have been sent to 7 out of the 10 missile brigades (the new weapons are still to be delivered to two brigades in the Western MD, including in the Kaliningrad region, and one to the Central MD). It is also planned to develop an additional missile brigade in the structure of the 1st Guard Tank Army in the Western MD (in total, this district will host 5 of the 11 planned missile brigades).
- The training of the 152nd Missile Brigade in handling Iskanders was announced by Russia in both 2014 and 2015. Reporting expansions of the offensive capabilities of the Russian armed forces in the Kaliningrad region (including reports about the possible deployment of tactical nuclear weapons) have since 2008 been a regular part of the psychological warfare stoking the sense of threat in NATO countries. Also, Iskanders have most likely been temporarily relocated to Kaliningrad from the 26th Missile Brigade

in Luga in the Leningrad region.

- In the military dimension, the Russian actions as observed are aimed at increasing the anti-access and area denial capacity in the Kaliningrad region (the Iskander-M missile systems have a range of at least 500 km, the S-400 surface-to-air missile systems of 400 km, the Kalibr guided missiles on the Baltic fleet ships at least 1500 km). The purpose of these activities is to demonstrate Russia's readiness to block NATO operations in the Baltic Sea region.