

Nuclear force exercises in Russia and Belarus

Andrzej Wilk, Witold Rodkiewicz, Kamil Kłysiński

On 19–21 May, the Russian Armed Forces conducted comprehensive exercises involving both components of the country's nuclear forces – strategic and tactical. The drills included the joint preparation and simulated use of tactical nuclear weapons with the Belarusian Armed Forces (see Appendix). The Russian Ministry of Defence gave significant publicity to the exercise, reporting that it involved more than 65,000 troops and 7,800 items of weapons and military equipment, including 200 launchers, 140 aircraft, 73 surface vessels and 13 submarines. Eight of the submarines were ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs). The exercises involved 'tactical formations and units' of the Strategic Rocket Forces, the Central and Leningrad Military Districts, the Northern and Pacific Fleets, and the Aerospace Forces, primarily their strategic aviation component (long-range aviation in Russian terminology), tasked with achieving the highest level of combat readiness.

The exercises did not differ in scale or character from previous drills. Comprehensive nuclear force exercises are a permanent feature of the training process of the Russian Armed Forces and are routinely conducted every two years, previously in 2022 and 2024. In addition, drills involving exclusively strategic nuclear forces are held every four years under the codename 'Grom', most recently in 2023. This year's exercises introduced two new elements: the use of hypersonic missiles as nuclear delivery systems and the participation of the Belarusian Armed Forces. From a political and propaganda perspective, the drills were intended as another signal to European NATO member states that their continued support for Ukraine would lead to an armed conflict with Russia that would inevitably escalate into nuclear war. A further aim was to reinforce public belief in Russia that the country possesses the capabilities required to prevail both in the ongoing war against Ukraine and in a potential conflict with the West.

Commentary

- **The exercises did not differ in scale or character from those conducted previously, although they introduced two new elements: the use of hypersonic missiles as potential nuclear delivery systems and the participation of the Belarusian Armed Forces.** Both stem from changes that took place between 2022 and 2024: the launch of serial production of Kinzhal and Zircon missiles, which carry conventional warheads and have been used in Russian strikes against Ukraine, and the deployment of modern tactical nuclear delivery systems (Iskander-M) within the Belarusian Armed Forces. In 2023, Russia and Belarus also agreed to store nuclear munitions on Belarusian territory. It remains unclear to what extent actual nuclear warheads, rather than dummies were used in the exercises, particularly during the phase involving their transfer from storage

facilities to military units and their installation on missiles. Based on the available information regarding the exercise, it is impossible to determine whether nuclear weapons were actually transported from Russia to Belarus.

- **From a military perspective, the use of the Sineva missile by the naval component of Russia's strategic nuclear forces is particularly noteworthy.** It is deployed on Russia's oldest ballistic missile submarines, which are being gradually replaced by Project 955A vessels. This may indicate either an attempt to dispose of older missile stocks through their use during the exercise, or an effort to test the missile's capabilities in preparation for a possible extension of the service life of the Project 667BDRM submarines, thereby increasing the nuclear strike potential of the Russian Navy beyond the 14 submarines routinely maintained in service since the turn of the millennium. At present, the Russian fleet operates six Project 667BDRM submarines and eight Project 955/955A vessels. Two additional submarines are currently under construction, while contracts have also been signed for a further two.
- **The political and propaganda objective of the exercises was to 'restore a sense of fear' among European elites and convince them that continued arms deliveries to Ukraine would lead to armed conflict with Russia, in which Moscow would resort to the use of nuclear weapons.** For this reason, the drills received extensive coverage in Russian media targeting both domestic and foreign audiences. The reporting emphasised the supposedly unprecedented scale and scope of the exercises and their political purpose in the context of the war against Ukraine and the confrontation with the European countries supporting it. At the same time, the Kremlin's propaganda narrative claiming that Russia surpasses all other powers, including the United States, in the field of nuclear weapons was intended to boost morale among a population that in recent months has shown growing signs of fatigue as a result of economic difficulties and the protracted war.
- **The participation of Belarusian units in the exercises, together with the personal involvement of Alyaksandr Lukashenka, served as a demonstration of his regime's unconditional allied loyalty.** This was accompanied by traditional anti-Western rhetoric and the characteristic Belarusian narrative portraying the country's security policy as 'purely defensive'.

Appendix. Conduct of the exercises

During the preparatory phase (19–20 May), the units participating in the exercise prepared for simulated launches of missiles equipped with nuclear warheads. This included delivering tactical nuclear munitions to field storage facilities of Ground Forces missile brigades, deploying mobile launchers of Strategic Rocket Forces missile divisions to field positions, and dispatching SSBNs to naval training ranges. Nuclear warheads were also delivered to Aerospace Forces units operating MiG-31K interceptor aircraft adapted to carry Kinzhal hypersonic missiles.

One day earlier, on 18 May, the Belarusian Ministry of Defence announced the start of the preparatory phase for the joint exercises with Russia, presenting them as a domestic event. **The central element of the drills conducted in Belarus involved the delivery of nuclear munitions to the field storage facilities of the 465th Missile Brigade in Asipovichy,** which is

equipped with Iskander-M short-range ballistic missile launchers; the unit number was not specified in official statements. Belarusian forces subsequently conducted live-fire drills using the Iskander-M system at the Kapustin Yar training range in Russia.

The active phase (21 May) of the exercise involved primarily simulated launches of missiles equipped with nuclear warheads. Single missiles of various types were launched against training targets, including Yars and Sineva intercontinental ballistic missiles (launched from the Plesetsk test range and a Project 667BDRM nuclear-powered submarine respectively), Zircon and Kinzhal hypersonic missiles (launched from a Project 22350 guided missile frigate and a MiG-31K fighter aircraft respectively), and Kh-55/Kh-101 cruise missiles launched from Tu-95MS strategic bombers.