

**After Ukraine attacks Russian airbases, Putin talks about nuclear strategy.  
Meanwhile, the war on the ground continues in eastern Ukraine.**



UK Defence Intelligence update on Russian attacks and troop locations as of today.

Last Monday, Ukraine launched drones that targeted two Russian airbases several hundred miles inside the border between the two countries at which it believed the planes that had fired cruise missiles at its energy infrastructure were based. The attacks prompted Russia to launch approximately 70 cruise missiles at targets throughout Ukraine. Most were shot down, but roughly 15 got through the air defenses and hit targets in Kyiv, Odessa, and other cities. The next day, Ukraine launched more drones at a third airbase. That day the eleven permanent members of Russia’s Security Council met and “discussed matters related to ensuring national security.” It wasn’t surprising the Security Council met after the strikes on the airbases. The two bases hit last Monday – the Engels-2 base in Saratov and the Dyagilevo base in Ryazan – serve as bases for some of Russia’s strategic bombers – most notably, its Tupolev TU-95 turbo-prop strategic bombers, Tupolev TU-160 supersonic strategic bombers, and Tupolev TU-22M supersonic long-range bombers. And the Dyagilevo base is only a little more than 100 miles from Moscow.

The next day, at the annual meeting of the Russian Council for Civil Society and Human Rights, Russian President Vladimir Putin, who chairs the council, responded to a participant who said the threat of nuclear war appears real. His response, which could only be read as a serious warning to Ukraine and, more broadly, to the U.S. and its NATO allies, suggested that Russia is having second thoughts about its longstanding commitment to the doctrine of no first use of nuclear weapons. Responding to the participant, he said, “Concerning the threat of nuclear war, you are right, the threat is growing, to be honest.” He then discussed what he described as Russia’s traditional commitment to no first use and the serious problem that doctrine poses for Russia: “Regarding Russia never using [nuclear weapons] first under any circumstances. Well, if

it does not use them first, then it will not be the second to use them either, because in the case of a nuclear strike at our territory, our capabilities will be significantly limited. Nevertheless, our strategy of using means of defence – and we view weapons of mass destruction, nuclear weapons as a defence – is entirely centred around the so-called retaliatory strike, that is, we strike back when we are attacked.”

Continuing, he said, “There are also tactical nuclear weapons, much talked about recently. The US has large stockpiles of nuclear weapons in Europe. We have never given anyone our nuclear weapons but it is natural that we will defend our allies with all means at our disposal, if needed.... I reiterate that we do not deploy or have our nuclear weapons in other countries including tactical weapons, whereas the Americans do – in Turkey and a number of other European nations. They conduct drills on the possible use of these countries’ carriers for American nuclear weapons. Meanwhile, we have never done this so far.... Have we ever spoken about the possibility of their use? No, we have not.... Therefore, we have not lost our minds, we are well aware of what nuclear weapons are. We have them, and they are in a more advanced and up-to-date condition than the weapons in the possession of any other nuclear power. It is obvious, it is an obvious fact today. Yet we are not going to wield these weapons like a razor running around the globe. However, we proceed from the fact that we have them. This is a natural deterrent which does not provoke an escalation of conflicts but is rather a deterring factor. I hope everyone understands this.”

On Friday, in a news conference following a meeting of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, Putin was asked to elaborate on the statement he made at the meeting of the Human Rights Council two days earlier, in speaking of Russia and its use of nuclear weapons, that “if it does not use them first, then it will not be the second to use them either,” which, the journalist asking the question said, “caused an uproar.” Putin said, “I understand that everyone is worried and has always been worried since the advent of nuclear arms, and weapons of mass destruction in general. People, all of humanity, have been concerned about what will happen to the planet and to us? But look what I had in mind, I will explain some things. The United States has this theory of a preventive strike. This is the first point. Now the second point. They are developing a system for a disarming strike. What does that mean? It means striking at control centres with modern high-tech weapons to destroy the opponent’s ability to counterattack, and so on. What are these modern weapons? These are cruise missiles that we did not have at one time – we did not have land-based cruise missiles. We removed them; we scrapped them. Meanwhile, the Americans were smarter at that time when they were holding talks with the Soviet Union. They scrapped land-based missiles but retained air- and sea-based missiles that were not covered by the treaty, and we became defenceless. But now we have them and they are more modern and even more efficient.”

“There were plans to deliver a preventive disarming strike with hypersonic weapons. The United States does not have these weapons, but we do. Regarding a disarming strike, perhaps we should think about using the achievements of our US partners and their ideas about how to ensure their own security. We are just thinking about this. No one was shy about discussing it out loud in the past. This is the first point. The United States has a theory and even practice. They have the concept of a preventive strike in their strategy and other policy documents. We do not. Our Strategy talks about a retaliatory strike. There are no secrets whatsoever. What is a retaliatory

strike? That is a response strike. It is when our early warning system, the missile attack warning system, detects missiles launched towards Russian Federation territory. First, it detects the launches, and then response actions begin. After the early warning system receives a signal indicating a missile attack, hundreds of our missiles are launched and they cannot be stopped. But it is still a retaliatory strike. What does that mean? It means that enemy missile warheads will fall on the territory of the Russian Federation. This cannot be avoided. They will fall anyway. True, nothing will remain of the enemy, because it is impossible to intercept hundreds of missiles. And this is, without a doubt, a potent deterrent. But if a potential adversary believes it is possible to use the preventive strike theory, while we do not, this still makes us think about the threat that such ideas in the sphere of other countries' defence pose to us. That is all I have to say about that."

Putin was, of course, simply noting the potential flaw in the no-first-use strategy – that a country committed to no first use could conceivably be destroyed if another country that is assumed to be committed to that strategy in fact carries out a first strike, even at the cost of suffering a retaliatory strike. Avoiding mutual destruction depends, in short, on mutual and well-founded trust that the other side will not carry out a first strike. In the absence of that trust, the alternative to a strategy of no first use is obvious: Develop the capacity to deliver a preventative, disarming first strike. Putin made it clear that Russia currently doesn't have such a strategy and therefore continues to adhere to a strategy that presumes it would, to some uncertain extent, survive a first strike and launch a retaliatory second strike. Nevertheless, the U.S. and NATO – and certainly Ukraine if it continues to hit Russian strategic airbases – should be worried that, as Putin suggested, Russia believes the U.S. has adopted the concept of a preventative and disarming first strike in its nuclear strategy and policy and that Russia should perhaps do likewise.

Meanwhile, back in the grim real world of eastern Ukraine, the war on the ground continues, primarily, as today's map of Russian attacks and troop locations from British Defence Intelligence indicates (above), along the contact line between the Russian and Ukrainian forces in the Donbas – most notably, in the area west of the city of Donetsk; in and around the city of Bakhmut, which Russia must take if it wishes, as it does, to take the larger cities of Kramatorsk and Slovyansk; and along the western border of Luhansk region. Winter is setting in. But the war goes on with no end in sight.

David R. Cameron  
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