

# Playing with Atomic Fire

by Ralph Bosshard

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CC/Alexander Chebanenko

*The Tupolev Tu-160 Vasily Reshetnikov supersonic, variable-sweep wing heavy strategic bomber at the Engels Air Force Base.*

*Moscow State University and training at the Military Academy of the General Staff of the Russian Army. He is familiar with the situation in Eastern Europe and Central Asia from his six years at the OSCE, during which he worked as Special Advisor to the Permanent Representative of Switzerland and Operations Officer in the High-Level Planning Group.*

Jan. 3—With the attacks on Russian long-distance aviation bases at Saratov and Ryazan, the Ukrainians, with the likely support of a European country, are raising the risk of a further escalation of the Ukraine war. This is playing with nuclear fire and shows that this war is about much more than Crimea and the four oblasts in south-eastern Ukraine.

On December 26, the Ukrainian army again at-

tacked the Russian Engels military airfield near Saratov on the Volga, which it had previously attacked on December 5. This time, however, the Ryazan base of the Russian tanker fleet became an additional target. Apparently, a modified Tupolev-141 reconnaissance drone, dating back to Soviet times, was used. Such a drone had already flown 600 km through NATO airspace and landed in Zagreb in March of this year.

According to the Russian Ministry of Defense, three Russian army personnel were killed in the latest attack while they were in a nearby barracks, when debris from the shot-down missile hit the area. The airfield itself and the Tupolev-95 (NATO designation Bear) and Tupolev-160 (Blackjack) strategic bombers stationed there were not damaged. This information is only credible if the attack involved a weapon of the necessary size and speed, the parts of which could continue flying and cause considerable damage even after the missile broke up in the air.

That three Russian officers were killed, and the absence of damage to the parked aircraft, have been confirmed by independent sources. However, the same sources also say that the Russian anti-aircraft defense was unable to shoot down the attacking missile or missiles and that one of them ricocheted off the concrete of the parking area and crashed into a barracks. Ukrainian claims that the tower of the airfield was destroyed, and numerous aircraft were damaged were not confirmed. The attack appeared to lack precision, which in turn could indicate that the Russians were successful in jamming navigational data reception around the base.

## Home to Russian Nuclear Bombers

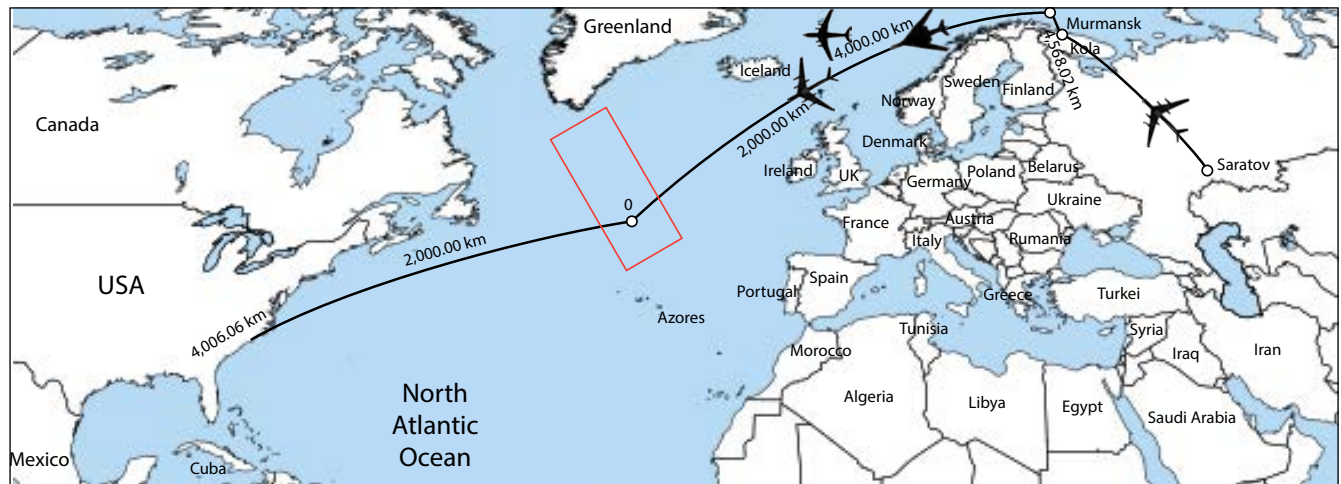
In any case, it would be an exaggeration to suggest that a single weapon could cause damage to the several square kilometers of the Engels airfield that would dras-

tically reduce the operational readiness of the aircraft stationed there. A single weapon would only be able to do this if it carried a nuclear warhead the strength of the Hiroshima or Nagasaki bomb. In order to hit key facilities or facilities where subsequent explosions or fires occur as a result of the impact, the weapon would have to be very accurate, with a circular error probability of only a few meters. We have seen in recent months that Russia possesses such weapons. Nothing like this is known about Ukraine. In the absence of a nuclear weapon, an attacker would have to use a full salvo of missiles from a missile brigade. So, Ukraine is limited to individual pin-pricks, which are nevertheless extensively exploited for propaganda purposes.

### Long Flights

Engels Air Force Base is far from the potential launch positions from which the Tu-95 or Tu-160 could send their nuclear-tipped cruise missiles to North America. Such airspaces are located over the Atlantic, between the southern tip of Greenland and the Azores, from where they could reach the East Coast of the United States. The hours-long flight around northern Norway that became necessary as a result—called “Flight Around the Corner” by the Russian pilots—requires a stopover on the Kola Peninsula or aerial refueling over the North Sea. The fact that the Russian long-distance aviation forces can carry out such flights, has been demonstrated several times in recent years. In July

### Route of Russian Bombers from Saratov (Engels Air Force Base) to the U.S.



EIRNS/Alan Yue, Jan. 2023.

The Engels Air Force Base is the peacetime garrison of a heavy bomber regiment of the Russian long-range aviation forces. As part of the nuclear triad, these forces are designed to ensure Russia’s second-strike capability by permanently keeping aircraft in the air, or in high readiness for take-off. This start readiness, known as *Quick Reaction Alert (QRA)*, is graded into standby times of 15, 10 and 5 minutes. A readiness of 5 minutes requires an aircraft with its engines running to be kept near the runway. This causes high fuel consumption and high maintenance requirements for the engines. In addition, the aircraft are exposed in the open air. As a consequence, people are reluctant to maintain “QRA 5 minutes” for long periods of time. In the event of an attack with ICBMs, a reaction time of 10 minutes may suffice. In the event of an attack with medium-range missiles, however, these reaction times are too long.

2010, a Tu-95 completed a flight of over 30,000 km and was refueled four times in the air.

But if Russia wanted to launch a first strike against the East Coast of the USA with its bombers, then it would have to move them from their peacetime locations to the Kola Peninsula, which would certainly alarm NATO to the extreme. In any case, Europe is within range of Russian long-distance aircraft forces: Even Faro (Portugal) and Belfast (Northern Ireland) can be reached from western Russia by Russian cruise missiles.

The same is true in the Far East, where the bombers would have to travel a long distance from their base at Seryshevo, northeast of Blagoveshchensk, to reach launch positions that would allow them to attack the western United States. Such launch positions are located up to 3,000 km off the Kamchatka Peninsula,



CC/Vitaly V. Kuzmin

*A Tupolev-160, part of Russia's strategic nuclear fleet, April 22, 2015.*

which in turn is 2,000 km away from the bombers' home bases. However, from the airspace over Russia's Primorye Region, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and

even the Philippines are within range of Russian cruise missiles.

As long as individual bombers complete their training flights and go about their routine activities, there is no reason to panic

The fact that, in addition to the Engels and Seryshevo Air Bases, the location of the few Iliushin-78 tanker aircraft of the Russian space and air forces near Ryazan was also attacked, definitely indicates that the long-distance aviation forces were explicitly targeted by the attackers.

### Dangerous Games

This raises the question of what Ukraine's military purpose is with the repeated attacks on the Engels Air Base. The U.S. government has consistently denied its involvement immediately after these attacks. However, it is doubtful whether

### Range of Cruise Missiles from Russia's Primorsky Region



EIRNS/Alan Yue, Jan. 2023.

the Russian government believes these statements. The Russian General Staff, from their offices in the Arbat District of Moscow, could come to the realization that the Ukrainians were carrying out probing attacks, that is, tests of the air base's defense readiness in order to identify weaknesses in defenses, which could be exploited if necessary. Another interpretation would be that the attacks were a test run for a nuclear first strike.

Anyone who initiates attacks like those of December, should expect these consequences. Certainly, the Russians are now working on countermeasures, which could include decentralization and relocation of bombers to other airfields, coupled with the installation of dummies at Engels. The Russian army has a lot of experience with such dummies and routinely procures corresponding dummies for every new large piece of equipment. A group of six *Tupolev-95* bombers and *Iliushin-78* tankers have already been transferred from Saratov to Seryshevo, Russian sources reported. It would not be surprising if the Russians were to carry out a redeployment exercise soon to demonstrate that the bombers could reappear on NATO's eastern border within hours.

The propaganda purpose of the attacks is undisputed. The attacks fit perfectly into the Ukrainian narra-

tive that Ukraine is protecting Western Europe from a Russian invasion. However, the events of the last few months have shown that Ukraine is not in a position to protect Europe from a Russian nuclear strike—and neither are the Europeans themselves. In this respect, the U.S. denial could correspond to the facts. It was not the U.S., but a European country which supported the Ukrainians in their attacks. It is, for the most part, the Europeans who have a primary interest in attacks on the Russian long-distance aircraft in Saratov and Ryazan.

Openly parking bomber aircraft at peacetime locations is a measure of transparency, because the Russians know that the locations of their long-range aviation forces are monitored by Western satellites. If this transparency disappears as a result of the recent attacks, it will not be a gain for European security, rather it will only create uncertainty, which is undesirable when nuclear weapons are involved. At a time when arms control and transparency measures have been undermined, with the help of the West, this can become dangerous for the whole of Europe. Policymakers in Brussels, Washington, and London, would be well advised to seriously consider how far they really want to escalate this war.

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