

# Russia sends long bombers back on patrol

By IVAN SEKRETAREV, Associated Press Writer Fri Aug 17, 5:46 PM ET

President Vladimir Putin placed strategic bombers back on long-range patrol for the first time since the Soviet breakup, sending a tough message to the United States on Friday hours after a major Russian military exercise with China.

Putin reviewed the first Russian-Chinese joint exercise on Russian soil before announcing that 20 strategic bombers had been sent far over the Atlantic, Pacific and Arctic oceans — showing off Moscow's muscular new posture and its growing military ties with Beijing.

"Starting today, such tours of duty will be conducted regularly and on the strategic scale," Putin said. "Our pilots have been grounded for too long. They are happy to start a new life."

Putin said halting long-range bombers after the Soviet collapse had hurt Russia's security because other nations — an oblique reference to the United States — had continued such missions.

"I have made a decision to resume regular flights of Russian strategic aviation," Putin said in nationally televised remarks. "We proceed from the assumption that our partners will view the resumption of flights of Russia's strategic aviation with understanding."

U.S.-Russian relations have been strained over Washington's criticism of Russia's democracy record, Moscow's objections to U.S. missile defense plans and differences over crises such as the Iraq war. But the Bush administration downplayed the significance of the renewed patrols.

"We certainly are not in the kind of posture we were with what used to be the Soviet Union. It's a different era," State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said. "If Russia feels as though they want to take some of these old aircraft out of mothballs and get them flying again, that's their decision."

Soviet bombers routinely flew missions to areas where nuclear-tipped cruise missiles could be launched at the United States. They stopped in the post-Soviet economic meltdown. Booming oil prices have allowed Russia to sharply increase its military spending.

Russian Air Force spokesman Col. Alexander Drobyshevsky said that Friday's exercise involved Tu-160, Tu-95 and Tu-22M bombers, tanker aircraft and air radars. NATO jets were scrambled to escort the Russian aircraft over the oceans, he said, according to the ITAR-Tass news agency.

Eleven Russian military planes — including strategic bombers and fighter jets — carried out maneuvers west of NATO member Norway on Friday, a military official said.

Norway sent F-16 fighter jets to observe and photograph the Russian planes, which rounded the northern tip of Norway and flew south over the Norwegian Sea toward the Faeroe Islands before turning back, said Brig. Gen. Ole Asak, chief of the Norwegian Joint Air Operations Center.

A pair of Russian Tu-95 strategic bombers approached the Pacific Island of Guam — home to a major U.S. military base — this month for the first time since the Cold War.

Last month, two similar bombers briefly entered British air space but turned back after British fighter jets intercepted them. Norwegian F-16s were also scrambled when the Tu-95s headed south along the Norwegian coast in international air space.

"This is a significant change of posture of Russian strategic forces," Alexander Pikayev, a senior military analyst with the Moscow-based Institute for World Economy and International Relations, told The Associated Press. "It's a response to the relocation of NATO forces closer to Russia's western border."

NATO has expanded in recent years to include the former Soviet republics of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia as well as the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland.

As of the beginning of the year, Russia had 79 strategic bombers, according to data exchanged with the United States under the START I arms control treaty. At the peak of the Cold War, the Soviet long-range bomber fleet numbered several hundred.

Friday's war games with China near the Urals Mountain city of Chelyabinsk involved some 6,000 troops from both countries, along with soldiers from four ex-Soviet Central Asian nations that are part of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a regional group dominated by Moscow and Beijing.

The former Cold War rivals share a heightening distrust of what they see as the United States' outsized role in global politics, and they have forged a "strategic partnership" aimed at counterbalancing Washington's policies.

The United States, Russia and China are locked in a tense rivalry for influence in Central Asia, the site of vast hydrocarbon resources. Washington supports plans for pipelines that would carry oil and gas to the West and bypass Russia, while Moscow has maneuvered to control exports. China also has shown a growing appetite for energy to power its booming economy.

Putin, Chinese leader Hu Jintao and other leaders of the SCO nations attended the joint exercise, which followed their summit Thursday in Kyrgyzstan's capital Bishkek.

The summit concluded with a communique that sounded like a thinly veiled warning to the United States to stay away from the region: "Stability and security in Central Asia are best ensured primarily through efforts taken by the nations of the region on the basis of the existing regional associations."

Putin hailed the exercise — which involved dozens of aircraft and hundreds of armored vehicles countering a mock attack by terrorists and insurgents striving to take control of energy resources — "as another step to strengthen relations between our countries." Hu said the maneuvers "underlined the SCO's readiness to confront terror."

The exercises underlined that "the SCO wants to show that Central Asia is its exclusive sphere of responsibility," said Ivan Safranchuk, an analyst at World Security Institute

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Losyukov said the exercise was not aimed at the United States.

"I don't see anything anti-American in the SCO exercise," he was quoted as saying by the ITAR-Tass news agency.

The SCO was created 11 years ago to address religious extremism and border security issues in Central Asia. In recent years, the group has grown into a bloc aimed at defying U.S. interests in the region.

In 2005, the SCO called for a timetable to be set for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from two member countries, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Uzbekistan evicted U.S. forces later that year, but Kyrgyzstan still has a U.S. base, which supports operations in nearby Afghanistan. Russia also maintains a military base in Kyrgyzstan.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whose country has SCO observer status, attended the summit for the second consecutive year. On Thursday, he echoed Russia's criticism of U.S. plans to deploy missile interceptors in Poland and a radar in the Czech Republic, saying they were a threat to the entire region.

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Associated Press Writer Vladimir Isachenkov contributed to this report from Moscow.