

US rehearses dropping nuclear bombs in Europe

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On Monday, the NATO military alliance will hold a training exercise, known as Steadfast Noon, in which US B-52 bombers and F-16 fighters will simulate dropping atomic bombs over Europe amid a deepening nuclear standoff with Russia.

The training exercise comes just ten days after US President Joe Biden warned of a nuclear “apocalypse,” saying the risk of nuclear war is the greatest since the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962.

“This is the exercise that practices NATO’s nuclear strike mission with dual-capable aircraft and the B61 tactical nuclear bombs the US deploys in Europe,” wrote Hans Kristensen of the Federation of American Scientists.

The aircraft will rehearse dropping B61 “tactical” thermonuclear bombs, each of which is up to 20 times more powerful than the weapon that destroyed Hiroshima in World War II, killing as many as 126,000 civilians.

While nuclear training exercises are usually presented as routine, nonthreatening, and not targeting any specific country, this year NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg made clear that the exercise is intended as a threat to Russia.

In a speech that mentioned Russia five times, Stoltenberg announced, “Next week, NATO will hold its long-planned deterrence exercise, Steadfast Noon.” He added, “Russia knows that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.”

As of 2019, the United States had 150 “tactical” nuclear warheads stationed throughout Europe as part of the NATO nuclear arsenal, including in Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Turkey.

On Sunday, one day ahead of the scheduled nuclear drill, China told its citizens living in Ukraine to evacuate the country, citing the “grave security

situation.”

In June, the NATO alliance published a document pledging to “deliver the full range of forces” needed “for high-intensity, multi-domain warfighting against nuclear-armed peer-competitors.”

In announcing the Steadfast Noon exercise, NATO said the training flights include “14 countries and up to 60 aircraft of various types, including fourth and fifth generation fighter jets, as well as surveillance and tanker aircraft.” It added that “US B-52 long-range bombers” will “fly from Minot Air Base in North Dakota” to take part in the exercise.

The flights will take place “over Belgium, which is hosting the exercise, as well as over the North Sea and the United Kingdom.”

NATO added, “No live weapons are used,” which is a relief because the weapons involved in the drill would irradiate several hundred square miles and disperse fallout in multiple countries.

On October 7, President Joe Biden said the world is at risk of nuclear “Armageddon,” implying that the rapid escalation of the war in Ukraine could lead to nuclear war between the United States and Russia.

“We have not faced the prospect of Armageddon since Kennedy and the Cuban Missile Crisis,” Biden said.

Biden added that he did not think “there’s any such thing as the ability to easily (use) a tactical nuclear weapon and not end up with Armageddon.”

In February, he warned that sending offensive weaponry to Ukraine would trigger “World War III.” Since that time, the US has sent hundreds of armored vehicles, advanced long-range missile systems, and other high-end weapons to Ukraine.

In an article published last week in *Politico*, former

CIA Director Leon Panetta wrote that the US intelligence agencies believe the odds of the war in Ukraine spiraling into a nuclear war are as high as one in four.

“Some intelligence analysts now believe that the probability of the use of tactical nuclear weapons in Ukraine has risen from 1-5 percent at the start of the war to 20-25 percent today,” Panetta wrote.

On Friday, the *Guardian* reported that governments are making plans to prevent “panic” should the war in Ukraine escalate into a nuclear conflict. “West makes plans to avoid panic if Russia uses nuclear bomb in Ukraine” was the headline of its report, which cited an unnamed official as saying that governments are carrying out “prudent planning for a range of possible scenarios.”

The NATO nuclear exercise is set to occur at virtually the same time that Russia carries out its “grom” nuclear exercise. While NATO has been loudly announcing its nuclear bombing exercises, no similar announcement has come from Russia.

That has not, however, prevented NATO officials from vocally denouncing the as yet unannounced Russian exercise as a provocative escalation.

An unnamed US official told Reuters, “Brandishing nuclear weapons to coerce the United States and its allies is irresponsible.”

He added, “We think nuclear saber rattling is reckless and irresponsible. Russia may choose to play that game – but we won’t.” The US official said this just days before Washington planned to fly bombers to Europe to practice dropping nuclear bombs.

Josep Borrell, the EU’s foreign policy chief, last week threatened to “annihilate” the Russian military if nuclear weapons were used in Ukraine, saying, “Any nuclear attack against Ukraine will create an answer, not a nuclear answer, but such a powerful answer from the military side that the Russian Army will be annihilated.”

On October 7, the same day as Biden’s comment about nuclear Armageddon, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, at a meeting of an Australian think tank, called for NATO to carry out preemptive strikes on Russia to prevent the “possibility of Russia using nuclear weapons.”

“What should NATO do? Eliminate the possibility of Russia using nuclear weapons,” Zelensky said. “We

need preventive strikes, so they know what will happen to them if they use nukes, and not the other way around.”

In this super-heated atmosphere, the US-led nuclear training exercise raises the prospect of a major miscalculation. It is a well-known fact that the annual NATO Able Archer exercise during the Cold War almost led to a full-scale nuclear war in 1983, when the leadership of the Soviet Union became convinced that the United States was actually going to launch a nuclear attack.

The *Washington Post* noted that Soviet bomber crews “were ordered to load nuclear bombs on one squadron of aircraft in each regiment, and aircraft were placed at ‘readiness 3,’ meaning a 30-minute alert.”

In February 2021, the Historian’s Office of the US State Department declassified a letter by S. Lieutenant General Leonard H. Perroots that made clear Soviet forces had responded to the US buildup by loading nuclear warheads onto their bombers, and that if the United States had responded in kind, it could have triggered a nuclear war.

After being publicly released, the Perroots memo was taken offline by the State Department and a judge ruled that it should be reclassified as secret.



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