

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our Subscriber Agreement and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit [www.djreprints.com](http://www.djreprints.com).

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/nato-and-russia-run-nuclear-war-drills-amid-tensions-over-ukraine-11666211947>

WORLD

# NATO and Russia Run Nuclear-War Drills Amid Tensions Over Ukraine

Annual exercises proceed despite Putin's nuclear threats as alliance stresses need for training to reinforce deterrent

By *Michael R. Gordon* [Follow](#) in *Washington and Daniel Michaels* [Follow](#) in *Brussels*

Oct. 20, 2022 5:30 am ET

NATO and Russia are moving ahead with major nuclear exercises amid spiraling tensions over the war in Ukraine and hints from Russian President Vladimir Putin that the territory Moscow claims to have annexed could be protected by nuclear arms.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization on Monday began its exercise, which is dubbed Steadfast Noon and includes B-52 bombers flying from their base in Minot, North Dakota.

Russia, for its part, will soon hold its annual Grom nuclear-readiness exercise. U.S. officials said Moscow has yet to notify the U.S. about what missile will be tested. National Security Council strategic communications coordinator John Kirby said last week that it would involve the deployment of strategic assets and missile launches.

Both exercises are annual events, but their timing this year comes against the backdrop of the largest conflict in Europe since World War II.

“It is a unique situation,” said Hans Kristensen, an expert on nuclear forces at the Federation of American Scientists. “The exercises are happening at the height of a major conventional war. We haven’t seen that before.”





NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said the alliance needed to continue the exercises to validate its nuclear deterrent.

PHOTO: KENZO TRIBOUILLARD/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

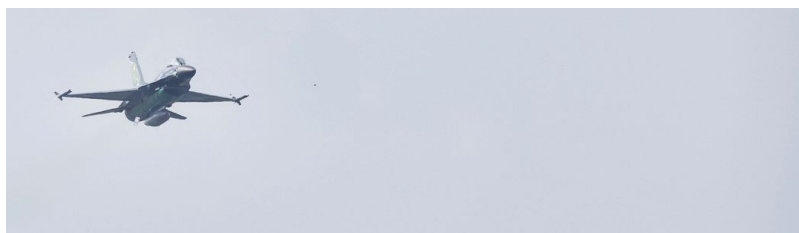
Cold War annals include episodes in which military exercises and missile tests heightened tensions and possibly increased the risk of inadvertent war.

Declassified documents have revealed that the Soviet Union responded to a 1983 NATO exercise dubbed Able Archer by putting Soviet air forces on heightened alert. Historians and some analysts have said the episode may have been the closest the two sides came to armed conflict after the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962.

To guard against the risk of miscalculation this year, U.S. and NATO officials took the unusual step of telegraphing some details of Steadfast Noon before the exercise began and have also discussed publicly what Moscow's drill might entail. Steadfast Noon involves only airplanes, while Russia's exercise generally includes air, land and naval forces that form parts of what is known as the nuclear triad.

“We felt it was important to lay out what we expected them to do as well as what we expected to do,” a U.S. official said. “Expectations are important right now.”

According to NATO, Steadfast Noon will involve as many as 60 planes, including B-52s, fighter escorts, refueling aircraft and planes capable of reconnaissance, control and electronic warfare. It will involve flights over host-country Belgium, the U.K. and the North Sea. No live munitions will be used in the drills, which are to last until Oct. 30 and will be more than 600 miles from Russian territory.





The ‘Steadfast Noon’ exercises began Monday and are based out of Belgium’s Kleine-Brogel air base.  
PHOTO: KENZO TRIBOUILLARD/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

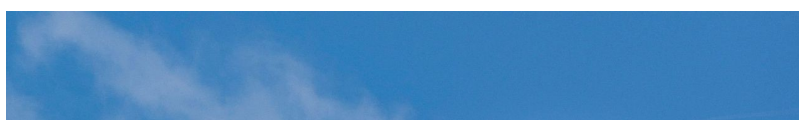
The exercise, based out of Belgium’s Kleine-Brogel Air Base, allows the U.S. to practice “nuclear sharing,” or cooperating with NATO partner countries that don’t have nuclear arms of their own but operate jets capable of carrying and dropping U.S. B-61 nuclear bombs. Those countries include Germany, Turkey, the Netherlands and Belgium. No NATO nuclear weapons are stationed in member countries that were formerly part of the Warsaw Pact, European officials have said.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said last week that the alliance needed to proceed with the training to validate its deterrent and prevent what he described as coercion by Moscow.

“We need to understand that NATO’s firm, predictable behavior, our military strength, is the best way to prevent escalation,” he said.

NATO defense ministers attending a semiannual gathering last week in Brussels held a meeting of the alliance’s Nuclear Planning Group, which includes all members except France, to consult and coordinate on nuclear issues, Mr. Stoltenberg said.

Russia has said little about its Grom exercise, which usually takes place around late October. Last year’s exercises were delayed until this past February, shortly before Russia’s large-scale invasion of Ukraine. Mr. Putin oversaw the launch of an array of ballistic and cruise missiles in a display of his nation’s nuclear and conventional might. He was accompanied by Belarusian ally and counterpart Alexander Lukashenko.





A Belgian F-16 jet fighter taking part in an annual NATO nuclear-war exercise at a Belgium air base on Tuesday.

PHOTO: KENZO TRIBOUILLARD/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Against the background of the exercise, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov was asked Tuesday if the Ukrainian territories Russia has claimed to have annexed could be protected by Russia's nuclear forces. He responded that Moscow considered the territories to be "inalienable parts of the Russian Federation" and that they would all be protected.

"Of course, they're using the situation and momentum to show that they're serious," Estonian Defense Minister Hanno Pevkur said Tuesday in an interview with The Wall Street Journal during a visit to Washington.

"I'm also more than sure that the Kremlin has got the message from the allies" that the exercise is the limit of what the West will tolerate in the way of Russia's nuclear actions and that they can't go further, Mr. Pevkur added.

The White House has said it would carefully monitor the Russian exercise, especially in light of Mr. Putin's nuclear threats.

"We anticipate the exercise will span several days," the NSC's Mr. Kirby said last week. "It'll include actions within the normal bounds of what Russia has done in the past."





An Iskander-K missile launching as part of Russia's annual Grom nuclear-readiness exercise at an undefined location in the country in February.

PHOTO: HANDOUT/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

The U.S. in the past year has sought to avoid giving the impression that routine military tests were saber-rattling, including by putting off the test launchers.

The Pentagon twice deferred tests of its Minuteman III missile earlier this year—the first time to avoid escalating tensions with Russia during the Ukraine crisis and the second time to avoid any miscalculation on China's part as Beijing engaged in a show of force near Taiwan.

A Minuteman III test launch eventually was conducted on Aug. 16.

Write to Michael R. Gordon at [michael.gordon@wsj.com](mailto:michael.gordon@wsj.com) and Daniel Michaels at [Dan.Michaels@wsj.com](mailto:Dan.Michaels@wsj.com)