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Russia's May 2026 Nuclear Exercise

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In May 2026, President Vladimir Putin announced that Russia had conducted a large nuclear exercise;¹ the exercise had a number of both traditional and unusual aspects. Russian nuclear exercises are almost always overseen by Putin, which was the case in May 2026.² (By contrast, in the West, Presidential involvement in nuclear exercises is very rare.) Typically, Russia's annual large nuclear exercises, conducted in October or later in the year,³ involve a nuclear escalation scenario, initiated by Russia, and end in a massive Russian nuclear strike.⁴ The May 2026 nuclear exercise followed this pattern. (Additionally, there are also numerous usually single service nuclear exercises throughout the year.)

The only previous Russian large nuclear exercise conducted in May (with a later large nuclear exercise in the normal fall time frame) took place in 2014,⁵ the year that Russia staged its first invasion of Ukraine. In February 2022, Russia also conducted a large nuclear exercise just a few days before its massive invasion of Ukraine.⁶ The intent of the May 2014, the February 2022 and the May 2026 Russian exercises, in addition to training, was clearly to intimidate NATO by threatening large scale nuclear war. An interesting aspect of the May 2026 exercise was that it was conducted in a time frame that Russia was not doing well in the Ukraine War.

In particular, the May 2026 exercise was surrounded by other Russian actions that were intended to intimidate the West. As Russian expatriate Pavel K. Baev wrote, "Moscow's recent



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nuclear brinkmanship includes missile tests, military exercises and another Oreshnik strike near Kyiv.”⁷ In June 2026, Russia staged a threatening nuclear-capable bomber patrol near NATO territory.⁸ Also in June 2026, the U.K. Royal Navy disclosed that “...it maintained a continuous, three-month surveillance operation on Russian warships navigating UK waters, including a frigate that fired a warning shot at a British yacht.”⁹

The Russian deployment of Oreshnik missile in late 2025 represented another Russian violation of the New START Treaty.¹⁰ The Oreshnik missile under another name, the Rubezh, had been declared to be an ICBM under the New START Treaty to evade the INF Treaty prohibition on intermediate-range ground-launched missiles. After the 2019 demise of the INF Treaty, in 2025, Russia called the Oreshnik an intermediate-range missile to avoid existing arms control limitations under the New START Treaty which was then still in effect.¹¹

Dr. Aylin Matlé, writing for the German Council on Foreign Relations, noted that:

In May 2026, Russia took a series of nuclear signaling steps toward both Ukraine and the West. These measures strongly correlated with negative developments for Russia in its war against Ukraine. While the likelihood of its most recent military exercise serving as a pretense for a nuclear escalation against Ukraine was relatively low from the outset, the drill must be taken seriously by Germany and other NATO allies. In this context, prompt policy steps should be taken.¹²

As noted above, like previous Russian large nuclear exercises, the May 2026 exercise certainly had a nuclear escalation scenario because it combined both strategic and non-strategic nuclear forces, clearly making it the largest nuclear exercise in years.¹³ However, the announced extensive involvement of non-strategic nuclear forces in the exercise was unusual. While the involvement of Belarus in large Russian nuclear exercises is relatively new, it has become common in the last few years in theater nuclear exercises. In fact, the Kremlin announced that, “Today, as part of the exercise, we are conducting the first joint training session of the Russian and Belarusian armed forces in the command and control of strategic and tactical nuclear forces.”¹⁴

The announced order of battle of the May 2026 exercise (not usually provided by Russia in its description of its large nuclear exercises), clearly indicated that the exercise was of a very large scale. The Russian Defense Ministry said that “...over 200 missile launchers, more than 140 aircraft, 73 surface ships, and 13 submarines, including 8 strategic missile submarines” took part in the exercise.¹⁵ The Russian Defense Ministry also said that 64,000 troops and 7,800 pieces of military equipment were involved.¹⁶ The exercise involved the Strategic Missile Force, the Northern and Pacific Fleets, the long-range aviation military command and some forces of the Leningrad and Central Military Districts.¹⁷

Comparable information about the composition of the Russian nuclear forces involved in the exercise were only made public by Russia’s Defense Ministry in 2019. At the time, Thunder (Grom) 2019 was reportedly the largest Russian nuclear exercise ever conducted.¹⁸ Russian expatriate Pavel Podvig observed that there was an “...unprecedented level of Russian public relations promotion of Grom 2019, reflecting the growing importance of nuclear deterrence in



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Russian internal and external policies.”¹⁹ However, as is normal in Russian large nuclear exercises, the thrust was nuclear warfighting and nuclear intimidation not nuclear deterrence. The exercise involved the majority of Russian ICBM launchers.²⁰

Speaking at a Russian Ministry of Defense briefing in 2019, Major General Yevgeny Ilyin stated that:

- The exercise involves 213 launchers of Strategic Missile Forces.
- Aerospace Forces will involve up to 105 aircraft of different purposes to solve practical tasks. Five of them are strategic missile carriers.
- The naval component of the exercise consists of 15 surface ships and 5 missile-carrying nuclear submarines.
- The event will involve over 310 pieces of military and special hardware.²¹

An exact comparison between the 2019 exercise and the May 2026 exercise is difficult. The announced number of surface ships and aircraft which can carry non-strategic nuclear weapons involved in the May 2026 exercise was clearly larger than in 2019. The “over 200 missile launchers” in the May 2026 exercise could be the number of strategic nuclear missiles, the number of ICBMs or less likely the number of strategic and non-strategic nuclear missiles. The eight strategic missile submarines involved in the May 2026 exercise alone carry 128 strategic nuclear missiles which is 48 more than the five ballistic missile submarines that participated in the 2019 large nuclear exercise. Normally, in large nuclear exercises, Russian ICBM involvement exceeds the number of SLBMs involved by a substantial number. This is because Russia has more ICBMs and it is easier and cheaper to involve large numbers of ICBMs in large nuclear exercises, particularly silo-based ICBMs. Russian large nuclear exercises usually also involve substantial numbers of mobile ICBMs (which also participate in the smaller Strategic Missile Forces exercises). Thus, the “over 200 missile launchers” most likely represent the number of ICBMs involved in the exercise. It is quite likely that the 2026 large nuclear exercise is either the largest or the second largest exercise of this type that Russia has ever conducted.

The May 2026 exercise involved the launch of two strategic ballistic missiles, a Yars (SS-27 Mod 2) ICBM and a Sineva SLBM carried by the Delta-IV ballistic missile submarine.²² Russian large nuclear exercises usually involve three live strategic ballistic missile launches. ICBM and SLBM launches are expensive and Russia is under considerable financial pressure due to its war against Ukraine. Russia announced that there would be cruise missile launches which is typical.²³ In addition, in the May 2026 exercise, there was the launch of a Tsirkon hypersonic missile from a surface ship.²⁴ The Tsirkon can be used for both strategic and non-strategic nuclear strikes although from the launch area it could only have been used against NATO Europe. There was no announced strategic missile launch from the Russian Pacific Fleet, which usually launches an SLBM in large nuclear exercises. Russia also practiced arming Mig-31s with Kinzhal hypersonic “aeroballistic” missiles with “special” (i.e., nuclear) warheads.²⁵



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The Belarus Defense Ministry described its involvement in the exercises as follows:

Today, as part of military units' training in the combat use of nuclear weapons and nuclear support, one of the Belarusian missile units occupied a designated area. Personnel carried out measures to protect, defend, and provide comprehensive support. At the same time, combat crews carried out a series of activities to prepare for receiving special ammunition for the Iskander-M operational-tactical missile system and loading it onto launch vehicles.²⁶

Russian nuclear exercises are important because they not only involve military training but shape the attitude, assumptions and expectations that impact the thinking of Russia's senior military leadership and influence the actual war plans they generate. They also likely affect Russian procurement decisions.

Since the Zapad-1999 theater exercise in which Russia first announced its first use of nuclear weapons,²⁷ Russia has been routinely exercising first use of nuclear weapons in circumstances in which no Western leader would even consider using them. In 2008, noted Russian journalist Pavel Felgenhauer observed that "...our superiors are potentially ready to burn all of us in nuclear fire because of disputes over ice, rocks or South Ossetia."²⁸

There is strong evidence that the actual Russian threshold for using nuclear weapons in its exercises is lower than what was publicly announced. In 2024, *The Financial Times* reported that. "The [Russian] classified papers, seen by the Financial Times, describe a threshold for using tactical nuclear weapons that is lower than Russia has ever publicly admitted, according to experts who reviewed and verified the documents."²⁹

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of Russia's nuclear doctrine is that its leadership appears to have no concept of what the consequences would be if it actually implemented the actions that it routinely practices in its strategic nuclear exercises – a massive nuclear strike to achieve victory over a nuclear-armed adversary. The lack of assessment of the repercussions of a massive nuclear strike risks catastrophic consequences.

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² "Russian military showcases nuclear deterrent (VIDEO)," *RT*, May 20, 2026, <https://www.rt.com/russia/640258-russian-nuclear-exercise-video/>.

³ "FACTBOX: Review of Russia's strategic nuclear forces drills since 2020," *Sputnik News*, May 19, 2026, <https://tass.com/defense/2132997>.

⁴ Mark B. Schneider. "Russian Nuclear Strategy," *Journal of Strategy and Politics*, (2017) Volume 2, Number 1, pp. 129, 133-135, <https://strategyandpolitics.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/russian-nuclear-strategy.pdf>.

⁵ Pavel Podvig, "Russia-Belarus non-strategic nuclear exercise," *Russian Forces.org*, May 21, 2026, https://russianforces.org/blog/2026/05/russia-belarus_non-strategic_n.shtml.

⁶ Pavel Podvig, "Exercise of strategic forces held in May," *Russian Force.org*, May 21, 2021, https://russianforces.org/blog/2026/05/exercise_of_strategic_forces_h.shtml.

⁷ Pavel K. Baev, "Russia Hits Strategic Ceiling With Attacks, Strikes, and Bluffs," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, June 1, 2026, <https://jamestown.org/russia-hits-strategic-ceiling-with-attacks-strikes-and-bluffs/>.



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⁸ “Tu-160s conduct scheduled flight over Barents, Norwegian seas,” TASS, June 22, 2026, <https://tass.com/defense/2150025>.

⁹ Ben Mitchell, “Royal Navy shadows Russian warships in UK waters for three months,” AOL.com, June 26, 2026, <https://www.aol.com/articles/royal-navy-shadows-russian-warships-110457807.html>.

¹⁰ Mark B. Schneider, “Recent Evidence of Russian Arms Control Violations,” *Real Clear Defense*, September 12, 2025, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2025/09/12/recent_evidence_of_russian_arms_control_violations_1134367.html.

¹¹ Mark B. Schneider, “Military and Arms Control Implications of the New Russian Oreshnik Missile,” *Real Clear Defense*, December 17, 2024, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2024/12/17/military_and_arms_control_implications_of_the_new_russian_oreshnik_missile_1079036.html.

¹² Aylin Matlé, “Russia’s Nuclear Signaling in 2026 and Implications for European Security,” German Council on Foreign Relations, June 3, 2026, <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/russias-nuclear-signaling-2026-and-implications-european-security>.

¹³ Linus Höller, “Russia launches unannounced nuclear exercise, including Belarusian launch sites,” *Defense News.com*, May 20, 2026, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2026/05/20/russia-launches-unannounced-nuclear-exercise-including-belarusian-launch-sites/>.

¹⁴ “Nuclear forces exercise,” op. cit.

¹⁵ Podvig, “Exercise of strategic forces held in May,” op. cit.

¹⁶ Russian Ministry of Defense, *Telegraph*, May 19, 2026, https://t.me/mod_russia_en/27047.

¹⁷ “Russia holding nuclear forces drills — top brass,” TASS, May 19, 2026, <https://tass.com/defense/2132815>.

¹⁸ Maxim Starchak, “Key Features of Russia’s Grom 2019 Nuclear Exercise,” Jamestown Foundation, October 29, 2019, available at <https://jamestown.org/program/key-features-of-russias-grom-2019-nuclear-exercise/>.

¹⁹ Pavel Felgenhauer, “Russia Escalates Its Reliance on Nuclear Deterrence,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume: 16, Issue: 156, November 7, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-escalates-its-reliance-on-nuclear-deterrence/>.

²⁰ Daria Litvinova, “Russia kicks off huge war games to test its nuclear arsenal,” *CBS News*, October 15, 2019, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/russia-war-games-thunder-2019-test-strategic-nuclear-weapons-today-after-inf-collapse-2019-10-15/>.

²¹ “Moscow held a briefing on the preparation and conduct of the strategic command post exercises ‘Grom-2019,’” The Defense Ministry of the Russian Federation, October 14, 2019, <http://eng.mil.ru/en/newspage/country/more.htm?id=12256831@egNews>.

²² Podvig, “Exercise of strategic forces held in May,” op. cit.

²³ “Putin announces ballistic, cruise missile launches as part of military drills,” TASS, May 21, 2026, <https://tass.com/defense/2134543>.

²⁴ Podvig, “Exercise of strategic forces held in May,” op. cit.

²⁵ “Russian Aviation Units Practice Equipping Kinzhal Missiles With Special Warheads,” *Sputnik News*, May 21, 2026, <https://sputnikglobe.com/20260521/russian-aviation-units-practice-equipping-kinzhal-missiles-with-special-warheads-1124165336.html>.

²⁶ “Russian Soldiers Place Nuclear Arms on High Alert During Drills - Belarus’ Defense Ministry,” *Sputnik Globe*, May 20, 2026, <https://sputnikglobe.com/20260520/russian-soldiers-place-nuclear-arms-on-high-alert-during-drills---belarus-defense-ministry-1124163473.html> May 20, 2026. Emphasis in the original.



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²⁷ Mark B. Schneider, *The Nuclear Forces and Doctrine of the Russian Federation* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2006), p. 8, <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Russiannuclear-doctrine-NSF-for-print.pdf>.

²⁸ “Pavel Felgenhauer and Novaya Gazeta,” *European Security Initiative*, available at http://www.esiweb.org/index.php?lang=en&id=281&story_ID=26&slide_ID=15.

²⁹ Max Seddon and Chris Cook, “Leaked Russian Military Files Reveal Criteria for Nuclear Strike,” *Financial Times*, February 28, 2024, available at <https://www.ft.com/content/f18e6e1f-5c3d-4554-ae5-50a730b306b7>.

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