Russian nuclear weapons capability

【Overview】

Compared with the U.S. French, and UK nuclear capabilities, Russian capabilities are quite vague. As for the data pertaining to the U.S.-Russia New START Treaty, Russia, unlike the U.S., has not disclosed any breakdown of the number of (deployed/non-deployed) launchers. On March 1, 2020, Russia announced that it possessed a total 485 strategic delivery vehicles and 1,326 deployed strategic nuclear warheads (U.S. Department of State 2020). This chart and the New START Treaty data can be reconciled by replacing the 200 warheads counted under "Strategic bomber payloads" with the estimated number of operational strategic bombers (50) to reduce the number of strategic delivery vehicles and deployed warheads to 496 and 1,422, respectively. Given the general lack of transparency in Russia plus day-to-day changes in deployments, this is thought to be an appropriate estimate. This gap suggests that about 10 SS-18s have been retired.

Also, Russia has approximately 160 ballistic missiles on high alert (capable of launch in 15 minutes), and most of them are estimated to be ICBMs (Kristensen, Hans M. 2017). After 2008, 96% of deployed ICBMs are said to be on high alert (Podvig, Pavel 2014).

Russia is in the process of systematically replacing Soviet-era SS-18,-19, and-25 systems with the latest SS-27M2 systems with complete replacement by 2021. SS-18s are likewise being replaced by SS-X-30 Sarmats under development. The rate of ICBM modernization, as of late 2019, was 76%. The goal is to reach 100% by 2024 (TASS 2019-3). Strategic nuclear submarines and SLBMs will also be replaced by the latest Borei-class submarines and new SLBM Bulava. Elsewhere, Russia's bombers, cruise missiles and non-strategic nuclear weapons and their launchers are all being modernized.

As a matter of fact, maritime patrols by Russia's nuclear submarines have gained in frequency in the recent years. However, this Russian fleet comprises about a total 20 submarines per year. Given constraints on submarine patrols, they are believed to be attack nuclear submarines (Kristensen, Hans M. & Norris, Robert S. 2017). Last year Russia conducted the following ballistic tests: five ICBMs and six SLBMs, whereas four ICBMs and three SLBM generally (Space Launch Report 2019). Every October since 2013, Russia has conducted large-scale military maneuvers involving one ICBM and three SLBM launches. These exercises involve strategic bombers launching cruise as well as short-range ballistic missiles (Podvig, Pavel 2019).

In February 2018, the Trump administration released the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), aimed at the maintenance and modernization of strategic nuclear weapons as well as the development of smaller and more agile warheads and cruise missiles to be launched from surface ships and submarines. In the following month, President Putin, in a State of Federation address, reacted in kind by disclosing the development of a series of new nuclear weapons (Kremlin 2018). Of these, two units with the hypersonic glide vehicle Avangard, delivered on an ICBM and able to penetrate missile defense, were fielded in late 2019 (TASS 2019-3). Also, the Kinzhal, a hypersonic aeroballistic missile for the Mikoyan MiG-31 interceptor, is believed to be in deployment (TASS 2018-2). Elsewhere, Russia is developing the Poseidon, a large-scale nuclear-armed underwater vehicle with nuclear propulsion, and the Burevestnik, a hypersonic cruise missile (Hruby, Jill 2019). All this escalation is enough to raise concerns reminiscent of Cold War nuclear buildup.

Updated: June 1, 2020

NATO designation	Missile/ bomb	No. of warheads per weapon	No. of warheads	Yield (kt)	Year first deployed	Remarks
Deployed	646		1,572			
Intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM)	302		812			1)
SS-18 M6 Satan	46	6	276	500 or 800	1988	
SS-19 M4 Stiletto	2	1	2	150?	2019	Avangard
SS-25 Sickle	36	1	36	800	1988	
SS-27 M1 (silos)	60	1	60	800	1997	
SS-27 M1 (mobile)	18	1	18	800?	2006	
SS-27 M2 (mobile)	126	3	378	100?	2010	
SS-27 M2 (silos)	14	3	42	100?	2014	
SS-X-29 (silos)	-	10	-	500?	(2021)	
Submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM)	144		560			2)
SS-N-18 Stingray	16	3	48	50	1978	Carried by the Delta III-class nuclear submarine
SS-N-23 Sineva	80	4	320	100	2007	Carried by the Delta IV-class nuclear submarine
SS-N-32 Bulava	48	4	192	100	2014	Carried by the Borey-class nuclear submarine
Strategic bomber payloads	200		200			3)
AS-15A Kent A	200	1	200	200	1984	Carried by the Bear H
AS-15B Kent B		1		200	1987	Carried by the Blackjack
AS-23B		1		?	2019?	Carried by the Blackjack
Nuclear bomb		1				
Reserve / Nondeployed			2,734			4)
Ground-based (ICBM, etc.)			794			
ICBM			324			1)
Ground-based non-strategic nuclear weapons			470			5)
Sea-based (SLBM, etc.)			1,060			
SS-N-23			64	100		2)
SS-N-32			96	100		2)
Sea-based non-strategic nuclear weapons			900			6)
Air-launched systems (Bombers, etc.)			880			
Missile, nuclear bomb			380			3)
Non-strategic air-launched nuclear weapons			500			7)
Retired warheads awaiting dismantlement, etc.			~2,060			8)
Total inventory			~6,370			

【Notes】

1) This is in line with the latest estimates (Kristensen, Hans M. & Korda, Matt 2020-2).Changes from last year include nine (mobile) SS-27M2s replacing nine SS-25s at the Irkutsk Air Base and eighteen SS-25s at the Yoshkar-Ola Base (Kristensen, Hans M. & Korda, Matt 2020-1). Meanwhile, the hypersonic glide vehicle Avangard, carried on the SS-19 (UR-100N), was deployed in late 2019 (TASS 2019-3). The original warhead has been replaced in the SS-19 and the Avangard conversion is intended as a life extension of the missile.
With a view to complying with one estimate of the total ICBM stockpile puts it at 1,181 (Podvig, Pavel 2020-1) but this is mainly due to differences in methodology to account for the SS-25's migration to the road-mobile SS-27M2, so there is no material discrepancy.
The New START Treaty, SS-18s' warheads are believed to have been reduced from ten to six and SS-27 Mod 2s' from four to three. These reductions are now in reserve. The SS-X-29, set to replace SS-18s, commenced flight tests in 2020 and will likely begin deployment in 2021 (TASS 2019-2).

2) Russian strategic nuclear submarines currently consist of nine submarines in operational deployment and one in maintenance. The Delta III class, with K-44 Ryazan's sole exception (Navaltoday 2017), is all thought to have been retired. Of the Delta IV class, K-117 Bryansk is believed to be in overhaul (Podvig, Pavel 2020-2), with five others in operational deployment. SLBM Blavars on three Borei-class submarines have been reduced to four warheads from the standard six, in order to adhere to the New START. The total Russian count, as a result, is 560 deployed warheads (3 warheads/missile x 16 missiles/submarine x 1 submarine + 4 warheads/missile x 16 missiles/submarine x 5 submarines + 4 warheads/missile x 16 missiles/submarine x 3 submarines), leaving 160 in reserve (64 per Delta IV in overhaul, and 96 not deployed on Blavars.)

3) The estimate (actual number of aircraft tasked for nuclear missions is around 50 aircrafts) for strategic bombers capable of carrying nuclear weapons is placed at 70 (Kristensen, Hans M. & Korda, Matt 2020-1), comprising 14 Bear H6, 7 Bear H16, 18 upgraded Bear H16 and 11 Blackjack aircraft. Since they are capable of carrying six, 16, 14 and 12 cruise missiles, respectively, we count a combined 580 warheads available for these strategic bombers to be in operational deployment/reserve. In peacetime, some 200 warheads are allocated to the bombers but not deployed to bombers, and stored on air bases at Ukrainka (Amur Oblast) and Engels (Saratov Oblast). These are counted as being deployed. The remainder are stored at a central depository and are counted as reserve stockpiles. An estimate for strategic bombers tasked for nuclear assignments is 55 Bear H and 11 Blackjacks for an operational missile total of approximately 200 missiles (Podvig, Pavel 2020-3).

4) Russia's reserve stockpile consists of warheads not loaded on ICBMs, those stored temporarily out of submarines during overhaul or not allocated to bombers, and non-strategic weapons. These are said to be stored in 48 locations across the Federation (Kristensen, Hans M. & Norris, Robert. 2017). Since the end of the Cold War, Russia's tactical warheads have been significantly reduced, with current estimates pegging them at some 1,870 (see 470 + 900 + 500 on table). Each warhead, while tagged to a specific launch pad, is not deployed operationally and centrally stored (Kristensen, Hans M. 2012). The Russian Foreign Ministry, during the 2014 NPT Preparatory Committee, affirmed that all non-strategic warheads are categorized as nondeployed and assembled at multiple central storage sites (Uliyanov, M. I. 2014). According to a new noteworthy research finding about Russian tactical weapons (Sutyagin, Igor 2012), such concepts as operational deployments, central storages and surpluses need to be redefined, in accordance with the Russian military's unique operational practices. Sutyagin's analysis says that, of about 2,000 tactical nuclear weapons, some 1,000 are "operationally allocated" to launch pads and, though not loaded onto delivery means, kept in alert readiness for immediate use. Some of these may be found aboard ships or with ordnance units under the direct command of strike forces. Although this table adheres to Kristensen's reserve category, large amounts, conceptually, resemble more closely with Kristensen's operational deployments.

5) There are estimated to be 470 ground-launched tactical nuclear weapons. Of these, defensive missiles account for approximately 360 warheads, anti-air missiles 290 warheads, anti-ballistic missiles 68 warheads, and anti-ship missiles for coastal defense four. On the other hand, Russia has deployed with four units the ground-launched cruise missile SSC-8 (capable of delivering both nuclear or conventional warheads), which the US has alleged to be an INF violation (Army Recognition 2019).

6) There are estimated to be approximately 900 sea-launched tactical nuclear weapons, allocated to approximately 190 warships, submarines, ship-based aircraft, and helicopters. They are made up of anti-ship cruise missiles, anti-submarine rockets, land-attack cruise missiles, torpedoes, and depth charges. Most of the missiles are for dual nuclear and non-nuclear use (Kristensen, Hans M. 2012). Following the US notification to leave the INF, Russia responded by announcing a conversion of the sea-launched Kalibr cruise missiles to a ground-launched variant (TASS 2019-1).

7) Approximately 500 warheads are estimated to be allocated to aircraft in cruise missiles, short-range attack missiles, and gravity bombs. They are carried by the Tu-22M3 (NATO reporting name: Backfire C) intermediate-range bomber and the Su-24 (NATO reporting name: Fencer D) and Su-34 (NATO reporting name: Fullback) strategic bombers.

8) In the Megatons to Megawatts program carried out after the end of the Cold War, the high enriched uranium (HEU) from Russia's retired nuclear warheads was diluted and sold to the United States as fuel for nuclear power plants. This program was concluded at the end of 2013. Under this program, 20,000 nuclear warheads were disassembled over a 20-year period (NNSA 2013). With dismantling continuing, warheads retired and to-be-dismantled are now fewer in stock. In the coming years, Russia is expected to continue dismantling at a rate of 200-300 warheads per annum. (Kristensen, Hans M. & Korda, Matt 2020-2).

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Intercontinental ballistic missile		
Russian designation	:	R-36M2 Voevoda
NATO designation	:	SS-18 Mod.6 Satan
Propulsion	:	Two-stage liquid propellant
No. of warheads	:	Maximum 10 warheads
Launch platform	:	Silo
Specifications	:	Length 34.3m, Diameter 3.0m, Weight 211tons
Range	:	11,000km
Circular error probability	:	220m

Intercontinental ballistic missile		
Russian designation	:	UR-100N UTTH
NATO designation	:	SS-19 Mod.4 Stiletto
Propulsion	:	Two-stage liquid propellant
No. of warheads	:	1 warhead (Avangard)
Launch platform	:	Silo
Specifications	:	Length 24.3m, Diameter 2.5m, Weight 106tons
Range	:	10,000km
Circular error probability	:	350-430m

Intercontinental ballistic missile		
Russian designation	:	RT-2PM Topol
NATO designation	:	SS-25 Sickle
Propulsion	:	Three-stage solid-propellant
No. of warheads	:	1 warhead
Launch platform	:	Transporter erector launcher
Specifications	:	Length 21.5m, Diameter 1.8m, Weight 45.1tons
Range	:	10,500km
Circular error probability	:	350-430m

Intercontinental ballistic missile		
Russian designation	:	RT-2PM2 Topol M
NATO designation	:	SS-27 Mod.1 (Silo)
Propulsion	:	Three-stage solid-propellant
No. of warheads	:	1 warhead
Launch platform	:	Silo
Specifications	:	Length 21.5m, Diameter 1.8m, Weight 45.1tons
Range	:	10,500km
Circular error probability	:	350-430m

Intercontinental ballistic missile		
Russian designation	:	RT-2PM2 Topol M
NATO designation	:	SS-27 Mod.1 (mobile)
Propulsion	:	Three-stage solid-propellant
No. of warheads	:	1 warhead
Launch platform	:	Transporter erector launcher
Specifications	:	Length 21.5m, Diameter 1.8m, Weight 45.1tons
Range	:	10,500km
Circular error probability	:	350-430m

Intercontinental ballistic missile		
Russian designation	:	Yars
NATO designation	:	SS-27 Mod.2 (mobile)
Propulsion	:	Three-stage solid-propellant
No. of warheads	:	Maximum 4 warheads
Launch platform	:	Transporter erector launcher
Specifications	:	Length 20.9m, Diameter 2.0m, Weight 49.0tons
Range	:	10,500km
Circular error probability	:	?

Intercontinental ballistic missile		
Russian designation	:	Yars
NATO designation	:	SS-27 Mod.2 (Silo)
Propulsion	:	Three-stage solid-propellant
No. of warheads	:	Maximum 4 warheads
Launch platform	:	Silo
Specifications	:	Length 20.9m, Diameter 2.0m, Weight 49.0tons
Range	:	10,500km
Circular error probability	:	?

Intercontinental ballistic missile		
Russian designation	:	Sarmat
NATO designation	:	SS-X-29
Propulsion	:	Two-stage liquid propellant
No. of warheads	:	～ 10 warheads
Launch platform	:	Silo
Specifications	:	Length 36.3m, Diameter 3.0m, Weight 200tons
Range	:	11,000km
Circular error probability	:	?

Submarine-launched ballistic missile		
Russian designation	:	R-29R
NATO designation	:	SS-N-18 Mod.1 Stingray
Propulsion	:	Two-stage liquid propellant
No. of warheads	:	Maximum 3 warheads
Specifications	:	Length 20.9m, Diameter 2.0m, Weight 49.0tons
Range	:	6,500km
Circular error probability	:	900m
Submarine	:	Delta III

Submarine-launched ballistic missile		
Russian designation	:	Sineva
NATO designation	:	SS-N-23 Mod.1
Propulsion	:	Three-stage liquid propellant
No. of warheads	:	Maximum 10 warheads
Specifications	:	Length 14.8m, Diameter 1.9m, Weight 40.3tons
Range	:	8,500km
Circular error probability	:	500m
Submarine	:	Delta IV

Submarine-launched ballistic missile		
Russian designation	:	Bulava
NATO designation	:	SS-N-32
Propulsion	:	Three-stage solid-propellant
No. of warheads	:	Maximum 6 warheads
Specifications	:	Length 12.1m, Diameter 2.0m, Weight 36.8tons
Range	:	8,500km
Circular error probability	:	500m
Submarine	:	Borey

Strategic nuclear submarine		
Russian designation	:	Kalmar
NATO designation	:	Delta III
Submerged speed	:	25knot (km/h 46km)
No. of tubes	:	16
Specifications	:	Length 155m, Width 12m, Displacement underwater 13,000tons
No. of submarines in service	:	1

Strategic nuclear submarine		
Russian designation	:	Delfin
NATO designation	:	Delta IV
Submerged speed	:	22-23knot (km/h 41-43km)
No. of tubes	:	16
Specifications	:	Length 167m, Width 12m, Displacement underwater 13,600tons
No. of submarines in service	:	6

Strategic nuclear submarine		
NATO designation	:	Borey
Submerged speed	:	25knot (km/h 46km)
No. of tubes	:	16
Specifications	:	Length 170m, Width 13.5m, Displacement underwater 19,400tons
Where deployed	:	Northern Fleet base (Gadzhiyevo) (1st and 3rd vessel) Pacific Fleet base (Vilyuchinsk) (2nd vessel)
No. of submarines in service	:	3
Remarks		In all, eight submarines will be built. The fourth submarine is scheduled for delivery in 2019, while five through eight submarines are under construction

Cruise missile		
Russian designation	:	Kh-55
NATO designation	:	AS-15A Kent A
No. of warheads	:	1 warhead
Range	:	2,500km
Carried by	:	Tu-95MS (NATO designation: Bear H)

Cruise missile		
Russian designation	:	Kh-55SM
NATO designation	:	AS-15B Kent B
No. of warheads	:	1 warhead
Range	:	3,000km
Carried by	:	Tu-160 (NATO designation: Blackjack)

Cruise missile		
Russian designation	:	Kh-102
NATO designation	:	AS-23B
No. of warheads	:	1 warhead
Range	:	3,000km
Carried by	:	Tu-160 (NATO designation: Blackjack)

Strategic bomber		
Russian designation	:	Tu-95MS6/16
NATO designation	:	Bear H6/16
Max. speed	:	830km/h (Propeller aircraft)
Specifications	:	Length 49.5m, Span 51.1m
Range	:	10,500km
Payloads	:	AS-15A
Remarks	:	Bear H6 internally carries six missiles Bear H16 externally carries an additional 10 missiles underneath the wings

Strategic bomber		
Russian designation	:	Tu-160
NATO designation	:	Blackjack
Max. speed	:	2,200km/h (supersonic bomber)
Specifications	:	Length 54.1m, Span 55.7-35.6m
Range	:	14,000km
Payloads	:	Carries 12 AS-15Bs internally
Remarks	:	Variable wing aircraft

Ground-based non-strategic nuclear weapons

- Anti-ballistic missile
  53T6(SH-08 Gazelle)
- Air defense missile
  S-300P(SA-10 Grumble/-20 Gargoyle)
  S-300V(SA-12 Giant)
- Coastal defense missile
  SPU-35B Redut (SSC-1B Sepal)

Sea-based non-strategic nuclear weapons

- Anti-ship cruise missile
  P-120 Malakhit(SS-N-9 Siren)
  P-500 Bazalt(SS-N-12 Sandbox)
  P-700 Granit(SS-N-19 Shipwreck)
  P-270 Moskit(SS-N-22 Sunburn)
- Land-attack cruise missile
  RK-55 Granat(SS-N-21 Sampson)
- Anti-submarine rocket
  RPK-2/81R Vyuga(SS-N-15 Startfish)
  RPK-6/86R Vodopad(SS-N-16 Stallion)
- Torpedo
- Depth charge

Air-carried non-strategic nuclear weapons
● Cruise missile Kh-22 Burya(AS-4 Kitchen) ● Short range attack missile Kh-15(AS-16 Kickback) ● Unguided bomb