



**Russian Documents Show Targeting of Civilian
Infrastructure during Wartime: Why?**

Introduction

In December 2024, the *Financial Times* published a report on secret Russian files from 2013-2014 outlining detailed cruise missile strike plans on Japan and South Korea. The documents show the Russian fear of exposure of the country's eastern flank to U.S. allies Japan and South Korea in a potential Russian conflict with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The documents discussed a number of civilian targets including nuclear complexes, chemical factories, and industrial sites, alongside typical military targets such as regional command headquarters and radar stations. The inclusion of a significant number of civilian targets in Russian war planning may seem unusual to western eyes. As the sub-headline put it: "Leaked military files show detailed plans for strikes on civilian infrastructure in event of war." However, this kind of civilian target selection for strategic conventional strikes is entirely in line with Russian conventional deterrence policy and Russian strategy that has evolved over the preceding decades. The release of these secret Russian documents shows that previously understood Russian asymmetric approaches to conventional deterrence have been implemented into operational plans on Russia's eastern front. Especially in the context of the Trump administration's recent push into missile defense with the "Golden Dome" project, the release of these documents should serve as a reminder to policymakers about the realities of Russian targeting objectives and the difficulty of combating such objectives.

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Non-Nuclear Strategic Deterrence and Asymmetric Targeting

One of the important elements in the development of Russian conventional weapons was to build up Russia's non-nuclear strategic capacity. Russian military thinkers believed that, in the face of large numbers of Western high-precision weapons, the threat of Russian nuclear weapons would not be credible as an escalatory action responding to non-nuclear conventional high-precision attacks. They believed that, since Russia did not have the ability to respond to conventional strikes in kind, this gave "escalation dominance" to the West.

However, a problem with developing its own conventional high-precision missiles was that, even as Russia moved to make up for the lost time in the chaos of the fall of the Soviet Union, Western capabilities would not remain static and improve over time. For example, retired major of the Strategic Nuclear Forces, Vladimir Dvorkin, noted in 2005 that "while (and if) Russia moves in the same direction [toward modern precision weapons], the Western-leaning nations will only increase their lead, thus broadening the gap." Since the gap between Russian and Western conventional capabilities (and stockpiles) remained exceedingly large, part of the Russian approach to non-strategic deterrence was the asymmetric targeting of objectives such as "ecologically hazardous facilities." These facilities included "atomic power installations; plants producing chemical, bacteriological, and conventional weapons; [and] oil pipelines."

For an early example of this kind of thinking, take a 1993 article in the official Russian Ministry of Defense journal *Military Thought*, Danilevich and Shunin describe categories of targets that a Russian long-range precision weapon's strike force could threaten. First, nuclear weapons, combat control systems, and missile warning and defense systems. However, these kinds of targets are usually difficult to hit, as they are mobile, concealed, or well-protected, and striking them carries the risk of enemy nuclear retaliation. Second, nuclear power plants, chemical industry facilities, hydroelectric power plants, and "similar targets, the destruction of which can lead to consequences close to the use of WMD." The damage resulting from attacks on these types of facilities would result in "potentially irreversible" changes both "in nature and human society." This level of damage would allow Russian strikes to rise to the level of "unacceptable damage" required for deterrence and halt combat actions taken against Russia. To this end, Vitalii Tsygichko wrote in a 2001 article in *Military Thought* that "the modern infrastructure of European states is highly vulnerable" and that the consequences of the destruction of "critically important targets" such as dams, chemical industry and nuclear power plants could "halt any combat actions" if there was a U.S. conventional strike." Developed nations were particularly vulnerable to the effects of high-precision weapons since there were a number of different facilities that could be targeted.

High-Precision Weapons

Even before the collapse of the USSR Soviet defense planners, led by the Soviet Chief of the General Staff Marshall Nikolai Ogarkov, examined the possibilities of high-precision weapons and their importance in future conflicts. During his tenure as Chief of the General Staff in the late 1970s and 1980s, Ogarkov was responsible for a massive shift in the Soviet understanding of the power of high-precision conventional weaponry. Ogarkov believed that military development required the integration of "fundamentally new types of weapons and combat technology." Ogarkov believed that conventional weaponry would play a significant role in future combat operations and that the role of strategic nuclear weapons in modern theater operations was comparatively diminishing. He also placed an increasing emphasis on the initial period of combat where an aggressor could conduct extensive operations throughout the entire territory of an adversary to "inflict a crushing defeat" without using nuclear weapons. Ogarkov's predictions on the increasing role of high-precision conventional weaponry were controversial among Soviet military theorists but increasingly gained traction.

The rapid pace of the western (or U.S.) coalition's victory during Operation Desert Storm (1991) was extensively studied by Soviet military strategists, many of whom were impressed by the efficiency of U.S. precision guided weapons, and began to think about how the USSR, and later Russia, might develop analogous systems. Since the early 1990s Russian military theorists have emphasized the great danger the country faced from external conventional attacks and the fear of such strikes by advanced Western conventional systems on Russian territory was a strong motivator for the development of comparable Russian analogues. Colonel-General Danilevich wrote in 1993 that Russia is "vulnerable not only to nuclear but also conventional strikes by highly developed states" and "this disparity must be eliminated if political stability and deterrence are to

be maintained.” In eliminating this disparity, Russian weapons needed to be able to strike “opponent’s important political, economic, and strategic targets at any range with conventional warheads.” In an article for *Military Thought* in 2014, Colonel Protasov noted the “obvious response” to the threat of large-scale use of high-precision weapons is the development of domestic forces “equipped with high-precision weapons.”

In 1992, the development of precision weapons was listed as a priority in the Russian National Defense strategy. However, despite the long history of Soviet and Russian military thinkers on the importance of high-precision weapons in modern warfare, the collapse of military expenditures following the fall of the Soviet Union meant that Russia was at a massive disadvantage compared to the West when it came to developing conventional precision weapons. In the 1980s, Soviet planners believed that by the year 2000 the U.S. and the Soviet Union would have both the technology and stockpiles of precision weapons to conduct a large-scale conventional war. This was not the case, however, and Russian military theorists spent decades watching the U.S. deploy high-precision systems in numerous theaters around the world to devastating effect. Finally, in 2008 the development of high-precision weapons was included in Russia’s “New Look” military reforms that finally dedicated significant resources to such a goal.

In recent decades, Russia has introduced a new short-range ballistic missile (Iskander-M), an air-launched ballistic missile (Kinzhal) and multiple types of air- (Kh-101), ground- and sea-launched cruise missiles (Kalibr, Tsirkon). The Russian missile outlined in the leaked documents described by the *Financial Times* is the air-launched Kh-101, which is a relatively new missile introduced into service in 2012 and praised by Russian commentators for its stealth. Russian commentators have also praised the Kh-101 for its performance in the war in Ukraine noting that “these missiles destroyed many strategically important objects for Ukraine at the beginning of the special operation.” In response, the recent Ukrainian “Operation Spiderweb” targeted a number of Tu-95 bombers which are one of the primary carriers for Kh-101 missiles. Given its importance in both the war in Ukraine and conventional deterrence, as well as its dual-use capability in nuclear deterrence with the Kh-102, the Kh-101 will continue to be an important part of Russian force posture going forward.

Conclusion

While much of the discourse around Russia has been the threat of a Russian invasion of NATO in Eastern Europe, the threat emanating from NATO-allies Japan and South Korea clearly plays a key role in Russian strategic thinking based off the documents. NATO assets in Japan and South Korea would present a challenge for a Russia focused on the Western front of a potential NATO-Russia conflict. In this context, asymmetric targeting of Japanese and South Korean assets could enable Russia to focus the majority of its focus on the Western front.

The Russian targeting of Korean and Japanese civilian sites, revealed in the leaked documents seen by the *Financial Times*, shows a scenario decades in the making, the result of years of debate and development within the Russian military community on targeting objectives and a desire to

compensate for weakness while retaining the ability to keep a potential conflict conventional for a prolonged period and inflict tremendous damage with just conventional weapons. The leaked documents confirm what Russian military thinkers and strategic planning documents have emphasized for years on Russia's desire to integrate conventional strikes into its deterrence toolkit allowing for more flexible deterrence responses in the face of a potential escalation ladder with NATO. In addition, the focus on Japan and South Korea in the documents should also serve as a reminder that Eastern Europe would not be the only front in a potential conflict and that East Asia would on the contrary play a critical role in such an event.