

Russia to station tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus

Deal with allied neighbour will not violate non-proliferation agreements, Putin says

Dan Sabbagh in Kyiv

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Russia has reached an agreement with **Belarus** to station tactical nuclear weapons on its smaller neighbour's territory, so bringing some of its arsenal closer to the rest of Europe, Vladimir Putin has said.

The Russian president made the announcement on state television, arguing that it would not breach non-proliferation agreements and that it would match similar arrangements that the US has with several of its European allies.

Putin said he was acting after negotiations with Belarus's president, Alexander Lukashenko, who he said had "long raised the question" of a nuclear deployment on his country's territory.

"There is nothing unusual here either: firstly, the United States has been doing this for decades," Putin said. "They have long deployed their tactical nuclear weapons on the territory of their allied countries."

It is estimated by the **Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation** that there are about 100 American nuclear weapons – airborne gravity bombs – stored in Europe across six bases in five countries, although they are retained in the control of the US.

"We agreed that we will do the same – without violating our obligations, I emphasise, without violating our international obligations on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons," the Russian president added.

Putin has repeatedly made nuclear threats or escalated nuclear rhetoric after the full invasion of Ukraine, but this is the first time he has announced a plan to station nuclear weapons in another country.

Moscow has 5,977 nuclear warheads in its inventory, according to the [Federation of American Scientists](#), and has long had the capability to strike a target anywhere in the world. The US has slightly fewer, at 5,428.

The US Department of Defense said on Saturday that there were no indications that Russia was preparing to use nuclear weapons after Moscow's announcement.

"We have seen reports of Russia's announcement and will continue to monitor this situation," the department's press office said. "We have not seen any reason to adjust our own strategic nuclear posture, nor any indications Russia is preparing to use a nuclear weapon. We remain committed to the collective defence of the Nato alliance."

Belarus is one of Russia's few remaining friends. Lukashenko allowed the Kremlin to invade Ukraine from its territory at the beginning of the war, which saw Moscow make a failed attempt to capture Kyiv. But it has not joined in the war itself, and another attack via the country is still not thought likely.

However, Putin's televised remarks came only a few days after the Kremlin signed up to a joint declaration with China agreeing to restrict future nuclear weapons deployments abroad, after the visit of Beijing's president, Xi Jinping, to the country.

Russia will have completed the construction of a storage facility for tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus by 1 July, Putin said, but no timetable was given for when the bombs would physically move into the country.

Pavel Podvig, director of the Russian Nuclear Forces Project and one of the world's leading independent experts on Russia's nuclear arsenal, said it was not clear whether the storage site was already under construction.

If it was, Podvig tweeted, he hoped it would be located by independent specialists quickly using satellite imagery because “three months [to complete it by July] seems like a really tight schedule”.

Russia has stationed 10 aircraft in Belarus capable of carrying tactical nuclear weapons, Putin said, and equipped them appropriately. Aircrews would be trained from 3 April, the president added.

Putin also said that Russia had given Belarus Iskander missile systems that can be used to launch nuclear weapons, although it was unclear whether that reflected the type of bombs to be deployed.

The Russian leader also bizarrely claimed that Lukashenko had asked about nuclear weapons after a statement earlier this week by the UK that it would be supplying **depleted uranium shells** with its fleet of Challenger 2 tanks.

Depleted uranium is a by-product of the enrichment process to make nuclear weapons or fuel, so as a result is less radioactive. Its military purpose is as a tough and penetrating metal for shells and, while its toxicity makes its use on the battlefield controversial, it is not in any sense a nuclear weapon.

US nuclear weapons are believed to be stored in six bases: Kleine Brogel in Belgium; Büchel airbase in Germany; Aviano and Ghedi airbases in Italy; Volkel airbase in the Netherlands; and İncirlik in Turkey.

Putin’s timeline for storing tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus is hard to believe

Julian Borger

in Washington

Although Alexander Lukashenko has agreed to host nuclear bases little construction work seems to have started

Like a lot of what Vladimir Putin says about nuclear weapons, his suggestion that Russia would start **storing its bombs in Belarus** may add up to less than it appears.

In February last year, Putin said he was putting Russia's nuclear arsenal on high alert, but there was no perceptible change in the country's nuclear posture, or any unusual movements of its weapons.

Putin and the leader of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, have been hinting at some kind of **nuclear basing arrangement** for some time. Over a year ago, the Belarus leader staged a referendum to change the constitution to allow for that.

What **Putin is threatening this time** is to take another couple of steps along that road, starting the training of Belarus aircrews in early April to pilot aircraft carrying nuclear bombs, and to finish storage facilities for tactical nuclear weapons by 1 July.

Nuclear experts are sceptical of such ambitious timelines, and point out that Russia has been working on a **nuclear weapon storage facility in Kaliningrad** for at least seven years and it is still not clear whether the bombs have actually arrived there.

So far, no satellite imagery has surfaced that might suggest something similar is being built in **Belarus**.

"I've looked around at some of the likely bases and I don't see anything that indicates construction of a nuclear storage site," said Hans Kristensen, director of the nuclear information project at the Federation of American Scientists. "But you can't rule it out. You can bet a lot of people are combing over the country right now."

Putin had suggested a nuclear announcement was on the way earlier in the week, saying **Russia would respond** to Britain's decision to supply armour-piercing shells to Ukraine made of depleted uranium.

Such shells are toxic enough to require special handling and pose an environmental threat, but they are by no means nuclear weapons. In his remarks on Saturday, Putin did not dwell on the issue and attributed any such linkage to Lukashenko.

Instead, he focused on a longstanding gripe of Moscow's about the US nuclear-sharing arrangements with five of its allies: Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy and Turkey. Under that arrangement, the US stores B61 gravity bombs (about 100 in all) in those countries and their aircrews are trained to fly planes carrying them in the event of nuclear war.

Russia argues this is a violation of the 1968 nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT) and just last week, Putin's joint statement with Xi Jinping said: "All nuclear-weapon states should refrain from deploying nuclear weapons abroad and withdraw nuclear weapons deployed abroad."

Putin's announcement about Belarus suggests he has changed his mind about that principle since Tuesday. However, he can expect the global backlash to be muted due to widely shared impatience over many years with the US-Nato sharing arrangements.

Those arrangements are not technically in violation of the NPT as they predated the treaty. The Soviet Union accepted them and at the time, Moscow could deploy its nuclear weapons in Belarus or any other of its republics. But when Belarus, **Ukraine** and the republics became independent, it lost that right.

The US sharing deal with its allies, and the proposed Russian arrangement with Belarus, also get around NPT restrictions by not formally transferring the stored weapons to the host government until a war begins. For non-weapon states and arms control advocates, however, that is a cynical dodge and against the spirit of the NPT.

The Obama administration contemplated withdrawal of the B61s from Europe as a move towards disarmament, but some European allies resisted any move that might suggest the nuclear umbrella was getting thinner, and then relations with Moscow worsened again. Rather than being removed, the bombs were

modernised, and the new version, the B61-12, is in the process of being **transferred to Europe**.

“The new bombs are a whole new wave of weapons coming in and that’s of grave concern to European populations,” said Susi Snyder, the programme coordinator of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons.

“Putin calling this out and threatening to do the same thing is putting a spotlight on a problem that has existed for quite some time and that the rest of the world has also been trying to draw attention to and remedy.”

Kristensen argued, however, that Putin has in large part himself to blame for the continued presence of B61s in Europe, through his seizure of Crimea and eastern Ukraine in 2014.

He said: “There’s no doubt in my mind that if Putin had not started what he’s doing there in 2014, it’s very likely that the nuclear weapons would have been withdrawn by now.”

With plan for tactical nukes in Belarus, Putin is scaring the world to distract from his problems

Analysis by Jill Dougherty, CNN

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CNN –

Vladimir Putin says he plans to deploy tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus, the neighboring ally from which he staged part of his February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. When the Russian president uses the word “nuclear” the world pays attention and that appears to be a major reason why he said it.

As usual with Putin, the world should read the fine print and check the context. The weapons Putin plans to move to Belarus are not strategic nuclear weapons, those giant intercontinental ballistic missiles that, if fired, could end life on earth.

Tactical nuclear weapons are smaller, but powerful, and can be used on the battlefield. Putin has been threatening the possibility of nuclear war for the past year, especially when his military operation in Ukraine is faltering.

That could help to explain the context of Putin's announcement. He's a man with a lot of problems right now. Russian forces are bombarding Ukrainian cities from the air, but their ground war is not making much headway.

Aside from several new trade agreements with China, Putin didn't get much out of his summit with Chinese leader Xi Jinping. If anything, Russia now appears to be China's junior partner.

Then there's the International Criminal Court and the arrest warrant it has issued for Putin.



Russia plans to station tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus, Putin says
Now, about that fine print.

Putin is blaming his decision on the other side, saying he made it in response to the United Kingdom supplying Ukraine with anti-tank ammunition that contains depleted uranium.

That, Putin charges, is a dangerous escalation. The UK denies this, explaining that the ammunition is used only for conventional purposes.

Putin says Russia already is constructing a storage facility for the tactical nukes that will be ready by July. He gave no specific date on which the tactical weapons would arrive.

What's more, he notes, Russia already has 10 aircraft capable of carrying nuclear weapons, as well as several short-range Iskander missile systems that could carry nuclear weapons.

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Russia has a huge nuclear arsenal but will Putin use it in Ukraine?

02:48 - Source: [CNN](#)

Significantly, the Russian leader said he will not transfer control of the tactical nuclear weapons to Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, who has been requesting the weapons for a long time.

That strikes two former US diplomats with whom I spoke as strange.

Lukashenko, they point out, signed an agreement in 1994 to give up the strategic nuclear weapons that Belarus still had at the end of the Cold War.

Why would he decide to do this? One diplomat points out that the weapons would have to be maintained by Russian forces who would be permanently stationed on Belarusian soil, a sign that Lukashenko is even more under Putin's control.

The Biden administration appears unperturbed by Putin's announcement. National Security Council spokesperson Adrienne Watson said the US is monitoring the implications of Putin's statement but added: "We have not seen any reason to adjust our own strategic nuclear posture, nor any indications that Russia is preparing to use a nuclear weapon. We remain committed to the collective defense of the NATO alliance."

And yet, moving Russian tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus moves them closer not only to Ukraine but to Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, all NATO allies.

That raises the threat level in Europe, something that Putin intended to do.