

Russia Warns of Lower Nuclear Threshold

by Rachel Douglas

Russian President Vladimir Putin took the opportunity of his participation in Russian strategic force maneuvers Aug. 17, to state bluntly his opposition to the increasing readiness to use nuclear weapons. Interfax reported Putin's remarks from onboard the Navy cruiser *Peter the Great*: "I think that lowering the threshold for the use of nuclear arms is a dangerous trend, because somebody may feel tempted to use nuclear weapons. If that happens, the next step can be taken—more powerful nuclear arms can be used, which may lead to a nuclear conflict. This extremely dangerous trend is in the back of the mind of some politicians and military officials."

In tune with the President's remark, several Russian media drew attention to U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney's reported preparations for a nuclear strike on Iran. In addition to the circulation of Lyndon LaRouche's July 27 warning, "Cheney's 'Guns of August' Threaten the World," on Russian-language websites based in Russia and Ukraine, coverage of Cheney's moves included an Aug. 3 Inforos.ru dispatch titled "War With Iran Will Be Nuclear."

The Aug. 16-17 exercises in which Putin personally took part, involved two legs of Russia's strategic nuclear triad: the Air Force and the Navy. After opening the MAKS-2005 Air Show, a high-tech event at a Moscow airfield, Putin went to an Air Force base, from which he took off in a supersonic Tu-160 ("Blackjack") strategic bomber, piloted by Gen. Maj. Anatoli Zhikarev, Deputy Chief of the Strategic Air Command. Putin sat in the commander's seat for the five-hour flight to Olenogorsk, in the far North, during which missiles were fired by his and another Tu-160, and there was a mid-air refueling. "A new, high-precision, long-range cruise missile was tested today," Putin announced, "and it hit the target."

Asked by Interfax why he had made the flight, Putin said, "I think that a person in my position ought to know firsthand, to see, to feel how this works." Highlights of his flight were broadcast on national television and video-posted on the Kremlin website.

On the second day, Putin was aboard the *Peter the Great*, flagship of Russia's Northern Fleet. Sailing out of Murmansk for exercises in the Barents Sea, the cruiser was joined by the aircraft carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov* for maneuvers, during which two Dolphin submarines launched RSM-54 Sineva (named SSN-23 in the West) long-range ballistic missiles, which hit targets in Kamchatka Peninsula on Russia's Pacific coast.

Close on the heels of these strategic force exercises came eight-day joint military exercises by China and Russia, the first of their kind. They began Aug. 18, with consultations between Chinese People's Liberation Army Chief of the General Staff Liang Guanglie and his Russian counterpart, Gen. Yuri Baluyevsky, who opened the exercises at the Russian Pacific Fleet base. Code-named *Peace Mission 2005*, the exercises then moved to Shandong Peninsula in China, and nearby waters.

Some 1,800 Russian and 8,000 Chinese troops took part in strategic consultations and battle planning, transportation, and deployment of troops, and combat practice, Liang said. The exercises do not mean the two sides are forming any military bloc, Baluyevsky said, nor were they aimed at third countries. The Russian Chargé d'Affaires in Beijing told the Chinese news agency Xinhua that the exercises were preparation for a possible joint fight against international terrorists, national separatists, and religious extremists. "Let them have a look at our joint military exercises and think it over, whether it is worth continuing their activities," he said, adding that more such exercises, possibly involving more troops, would be held by members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), under whose auspices the Chinese-Russian practice took place.

Defense Ministers and military experts from other SCO members—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan—attended, with guests also invited from SCO observer nations Mongolia, India, Pakistan, and Iran. Indian press reported Aug. 19 that Indian-Russian maneuvers will be held in October in Rajasthan, involving naval, ground, and air forces from both nations, and will be the first of annual joint exercises. Commercial military cooperation is also advancing. China is also a major purchaser of Russian weapons systems, and the opportunity for Chinese officers to see them in action was another factor in the Chinese-Russian exercises.

Several commentaries in the Russian media questioned the staging of large-scale, nearly simultaneous military practices in far-flung areas, and treated Putin's Tu-160 flight as merely the opening salvo in his political campaign for an as-yet-not-legal third term. Well-known military columnist Alexander Golts wondered in *Yezhednevny Zhurnal*, "to what extent these war games prepare the army to counter real threats." Calling the naval and air force exercises "a rehearsal for repelling large-scale aggression by a major adversary, which is another way of saying the United States," Golts wrote that he found it "hard to believe, of course, that Russia's Defense Ministry is seriously planning to fight the United States," but that, unfortunately, "the nation's strategists know no other military scenario."

Given the current posture of the United States under Cheney and George Bush, it would be foolish not to realize that that military scenario has not been forgotten in nuclear great power Russia, and that Eurasia's other powerhouses, China and India, are preparing for the contingencies of global conflict, as well.