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Russia may be planning to develop a nuclear submarine drone aimed at 'inflicting unacceptable damage'

By Jeremy Bender
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The potential plans of Russia's drone submarine.

During a regular meeting with defense officials on November 10, Russian President Vladimir Putin discussed methods of countering NATO's missile-defense shield, which the Kremlin worries could neutralize the country's nuclear deterrent.

Putin's come up with a possible countermeasure, boasting that the Kremlin would develop "strike systems capable of penetrating any missile defenses." Footage of the meeting includes a clear view of a document that defense officials were looking over.

The document looks at one type of "strike system" that Putin was talking about.

The document, according to the Russian Forces blog, includes plans to develop an underwater drone that could be launched from submarines in order to carry out nuclear strikes at key coastal areas. The project is known as "Ocean Multipurpose System 'Status-6.'"

According to a translation by Russian Forces, this weapons system is aimed at "damaging the important components of the adversary's economy in a coastal area and inflicting unacceptable damage to a country's territory by creating areas of wide radioactive contamination that would be unsuitable for military, economic, or other activity for long periods of time."

The drone, according to the project documents, will be launched from two new models of submarine that Russia has started developing over the past three years. The drone will also reportedly have a maximum range of 5,400 nautical miles (10,000 kilometers) while traveling at a depth of 1,000 meters.

Bill Gertz, writing for The Washington Free Beacon, notes that Pentagon officials have determined that Russia is developing a "drone submarine" that would be capable of delivering a nuclear weapon with a yield of multiple megatons. The drones could destroy port cities in the event of a war. And since they'd be delivered underwater, they'd be immune to the NATO missile shield.

Still, there is the possibility that Russia leaked details of the project for propaganda purposes. Since the end of the Cold War, the Russian military has suffered a series of setbacks that are continuing to hamper the country's development of high-end hardware.



An artist's rendering of the nuclear drone.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia lost a good portion of its military-industrial base. US-led sanctions against Russia and falling oil prices have compounded earlier problems and led to a number of procurement difficulties for the Kremlin.

A new fifth-generation bomber, the PAK DA, was intended to enter service in 2023. The plane's development has been pushed back and Russia will instead focus on production of an updated version of the Soviet-era Tu-160 supersonic nuclear bomber. And the Kremlin is also having problems financing its hulking third-generation Armata tank. Dmitry Gorenburg of Harvard University estimates that Russia will only be able to field a maximum of 330 Armata tanks by 2020, a fraction of the 2,300 originally planned.

In light of Russia's recent history of not being able to deliver on ambitious defense projects, the submarine drone may be nothing more than an attempt to bolster the Kremlin's image, rather than a weapons system that Russia actually intends to build.