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Russia's Top Strategic Bombers Grounded After Crash Kills One Flyer

By The Moscow Times

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A Russian Tupolev Tu-95 bomber.

Russia has grounded a type of strategic bomber famous for being used to probe U.S. and European air defenses, news agency Interfax reported Tuesday, temporarily granting European and U.S. airspace a slight reprieve from increased prodding by Russia's bomber fleet.

All 62 Tu-95 "Bear" bombers were grounded after one of the Soviet-built planes crashed late on Monday when an engine reportedly caught fire as the plane attempted to take off, causing the plane to run off the tarmac.

The crash killed one pilot and hospitalized another, a Defense Ministry spokesperson told Interfax on Tuesday.

The large, propeller-driven plane is derived from a Soviet-era copy of the U.S. B-29 bomber

— the plane that dropped the atom bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II.

NATO fighter jets in Europe and North America have been deployed repeatedly to intercept Tu-95s poking around near alliance airspace over the past year and a half as the Ukraine crisis drove a wedge in relations between Moscow and the West.

Tu-95 flights have also been the focus of multiple media reports in the West, as the planes have reportedly approached NATO airspace without transponders and on at least one occasion disrupted civilian traffic near Ireland, allegedly forcing flights to be diverted to avoid collisions.

The Tu-95 that crashed on Monday was based at the Ukrainka air base, one of Russia's two large strategic bomber bases. Bombers flying on long-range patrols from the base often fly north toward Alaska, then pass over the Aleutian Islands, before heading south over the Pacific and Sea of Japan.

Russia only has two other types of strategic bombers available for patrol: the long-range Tu-160 and shorter-range Tu-22M3 supersonic bombers, though the air force only has 16 and 63 of these types respectively.

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