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What Went Wrong at Russia's Latest Military Drills?

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Defense Ministry / Youtube

Russia staged the Grom-2019 military exercise last week to test the readiness of its military command structure and the efficiency with which orders are carried out.

Instead, last week's drills overseen by President Vladimir Putin raised more questions than answers following two reports of mishaps involving ballistic and cruise missiles.

First, a nuclear-powered submarine fired only one ballistic missile into a test range instead of the two that the military had announced, the Vedomosti newspaper reported Monday.

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Then, a frigate and a corvette had trouble launching the touted Kalibr cruise missile, the RBC news website reported later that day. An unnamed source close to Russia's security services said the drills had tested new systems designed to reduce the Kalibr's launch preparation time

from three hours to 15 minutes.

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“The missiles eventually did fly, but not on the first try and only after backup launch systems were activated,” RBC cited the source as saying.

Another unnamed source close to Russia’s General Staff said that the Kalibrs had launched on their second and third attempts.

The Defense Ministry denied reports on Monday that any contingencies had happened at the exercises and said that everything had gone according to plan.

Russian military expert Dmitry Stefanovich contrasted the “normal story” of the Kalibr launches and the R-29R incident.

“It’s different with the R29RK, as there could have been some technical malfunction, since the rockets and submarine are old,” Stefanovich told The Moscow Times.

The R-29R is a Soviet-era missile that was first deployed in 1977. The Ryazan Delta III class nuclear-powered submarine that launched the ballistic missile was commissioned in 1982.

“The other thing is that we shouldn’t be insecure following these incidents, like when the Defense Ministry denies everything,” Stefanovich told The Moscow Times.

“That’s not the wisest position, as it leads to talk that nothing works while [the Russian military] lies to us,” he said.

The three-day Grom (Thunder)-2019 exercises involved five submarines, more than 100 aircraft, 200 missile launchers and 12,000 Russian troops.

The drills come at a time when Putin has warned of a burgeoning arms race spurred by the unraveling of the 1987 Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, something he blames on the United States. Washington rejects the charges and says it was Russia that flouted its arms control commitments.

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