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Russia, Belarus Begin Joint Tactical Nuclear Drills

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The second stage of Russia's non-strategic nuclear weapons exercises. **Russian Defense Ministry**

Russian and Belarusian armed forces have begun joint non-strategic nuclear weapon exercises, Russia's Defense Ministry said Tuesday, marking the "second stage" of wider drills announced by Moscow early last month.

Moscow's Defense Ministry said the latest stage of "the exercises are aimed at maintaining the readiness of personnel and equipment of units for the combat use of non-strategic nuclear weapons," adding that they would "ensure the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Union State."

The Union State is a political and economic union established between Russia and Belarus and aims to deepen integration between the two countries.

A video released by the Russian Defense Ministry on Tuesday showed armored vehicles and missile carriers driving through fields, as well as jets and bombers taking off from an airstrip. The military did not specify where the exercises were taking place.

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The first stage of Russia's non-strategic nuclear weapon exercises took place late last month in the Southern Military District, which borders and includes parts of Ukraine that Moscow claims to have annexed. The Russian Defense Ministry did not specify the exact location of that stage.

President Vladimir Putin ordered the drills in early May in response to Western "threats and provocations." At the time, Russian officials pointed to comments by French President Emmanuel Macron about the possibility of NATO countries sending their troops to Ukraine.

In early May, Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko ordered a surprise inspection of its non-strategic nuclear weapon carriers.

Minsk does not have any nuclear weapons of its own, but last year it agreed to host Russian tactical warheads on its territory amid rising tensions over the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

AFP contributed reporting.

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