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Russia Faces Struggle to Replace Bombers Lost in Ukrainian Drone Strikes

By Reuters

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Smoke from a burning aircraft visible behind a Tu-22M3. **Screenshot / SBU**

Russia will take years to replace nuclear-capable bomber planes that were hit in Ukrainian drone strikes last weekend, according to Western military aviation experts, straining a modernization program that is already delayed.

Satellite photos of airfields in Siberia and Russia's far north show extensive damage from the attacks, with several aircraft completely burnt out, although there are conflicting versions of the total number destroyed or damaged.

The United States assesses that up to 20 warplanes were hit — around half the number estimated by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky — and around 10 were destroyed, two U.S. officials told Reuters.

The Russian government on Thursday denied that any planes were destroyed and said the

damage would be repaired, but Russian military bloggers have spoken of loss or serious damage to about a dozen planes, accusing commanders of negligence.

The strikes — prepared over 18 months in a Ukrainian intelligence operation dubbed "Spider's Web" and conducted by drones that were smuggled close to the bases in trucks — dealt a powerful symbolic blow to a country that, throughout the Ukraine war, has frequently reminded the world of its nuclear might.

Related article: We Analyzed New Drone Footage of Ukraine's Operation Spider's Web

In practice, experts said, they will not seriously affect Russia's nuclear strike capability, which is largely comprised of ground- and submarine-based missiles.

However, the Tu-95MS Bear-H and Tu-22M3 Backfire bombers that were hit were part of a long-range aviation fleet that Russia has used throughout the war to fire conventional missiles at Ukrainian cities, defense plants, military bases, power infrastructure and other targets, said Justin Bronk, an aviation expert at the RUSI think tank in London.

The same fleet had also been carrying out periodic patrol flights into the Arctic, North Atlantic and northern Pacific as a show of strength to deter Russia's Western adversaries.

Bronk said that at the outset of its 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russia was operating a fleet of 50-60 Bear-Hs and around 60 Backfires, alongside around 20 Tu-160M nuclear-capable Blackjack heavy bombers.

He estimated that Russia has now lost more than 10% of the combined Bear-H and Backfire fleet, taking into account last weekend's attacks and the loss of several planes earlier in the war — one shot down and the others struck while on the ground.

These losses "will put major pressure on a key Russian force that was already operating at maximum capacity," Bronk told Reuters.

Russia's Defense Ministry did not immediately reply to a request for comment.

Project delays

Replacing the planes will be challenging. Both the Bear H and the Backfire are aircraft that were designed in the Soviet era and have been out of production for decades, said Douglas Barrie, aerospace expert at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London, although existing planes have been upgraded over the years.

Barrie said that building new ones like-for-like was therefore very unlikely, and it was unclear whether Russia had any usable spare airframes of either type.

Western sanctions against Russia have aimed to restrict the import of components such as microprocessors that are vital to avionics systems, although Moscow has so far been comparatively successful at finding alternative sources, Barrie added.

Related article: Russia's Vast Nuclear Modernization Exposed in 'Unprecedented' Security Breach – Der Spiegel

Russia has been modernizing its Blackjack bomber fleet, and Putin sent a pointed signal to the West last year by taking a 30-minute flight in one such aircraft and pronouncing it ready for service.

But production of new Blackjacks is slow — one Russian military blogger this week put it at four per year — and Western experts say progress in developing Russia's next-generation PAK DA bomber has also been moving at a crawl.

The Federation of American Scientists (FAS) said in a report last month that Russia had signed a contract with manufacturer Tupolev in 2013 to build the PAK DA, but cited Russian media reports as saying state test flights are not scheduled until next year, with initial production to begin in 2027.

While it would be logical for Russia to try to speed up its PAK DA plans, it may not have the capacity, said Hans Kristensen, director of the Nuclear Information Project at the FAS. He said in a telephone interview that Russia is facing delays with a range of other big defense projects, including its new Sarmat intercontinental ballistic missile.

RUSI's Bronk was also skeptical of Moscow's chances of accelerating the timeline for the next-generation bomber.

"Russia will struggle to deliver the PAK DA programme at all in the coming five years, let alone accelerate it, due to budgetary shortfalls and materials and technology constraints on industry due to sanctions," he said.

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