

Russia bombers get NATO escort near Alaska: reports

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MOSCOW (Reuters) - NATO forces sent jets to escort two Russian long-range air force bombers patrolling neutral skies near Alaska on Wednesday, Russian news agencies quoted the defense ministry as saying.

Russia's military has resumed its Cold War practice of flying regular patrols far beyond its borders, and in the last year has also sent turbo-prop Tu-95s over U.S. naval aircraft carriers and the Pacific island of Guam.

Accompanied by two Il-78 refueling tankers, the two Tu-95 "Bear" bombers flew for 15 hours over the Arctic and Pacific oceans, Interfax news agency quoted Russian Air Force spokesman Alexander Drobyshevsky as saying.

"In the course of the air patrol, long-range aviation aircraft were escorted by NATO jets in the region of Alaska," said Drobyshevsky.

Originally designed to drop nuclear bombs, the Tu-95, Russia's equivalent of the U.S. air force's B-52, is a Cold War icon refitted for surveillance and maritime patrols.

Russia, in the eighth year of an economic boom driven by high global oil prices, has raised military funding after years of neglect following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The Russian navy has finished construction of mothballed submarines and restarted large-scale naval exercises that shortages of fuel and spare parts had made a rarity.

Analysts say the Kremlin is using its reviving military might to support a policy of projecting Russia's power again on the world stage.

But some military observers say the Russian armed forces are still hampered by a shortage of combat-ready assets and that the exercises are primarily a public relations exercise.

(Reporting by Chris Baldwin; Editing by Catherine Evans)

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