

Putin 'redeploys' N-arms in Baltics

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MOSCOW/LONDON, Jan. 4. — American intelligence officials believe that the Russians have redeployed tactical nuclear weapons at Kaliningrad, Russia's westernmost territory on the Baltic Sea, despite denials from Moscow yesterday.

It would mark the return of nuclear weapons to Eastern Europe for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of an agreement brokered by Mr George Bush Sr and Mr Mikhail Gorbachev to keep the Baltic region nuclear-free.

It would also be the latest sign

of President Putin's tougher approach towards the West after the 'buzzing' of an American aircraft carrier in the Sea of Japan by two Russian naval reconnaissance aircraft in November, the resumption of regular patrols towards Alaska by long-range Bear bombers and the arms talks with Iran.

During the Cold War, the Russian military base in Kaliningrad, a territory wedged between Poland and Lithuania, held stocks of nuclear weapons to provide cover for the Soviet forces in East Germany.

The redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons, first reported in an American military intelligence bulletin, began in June, according to The

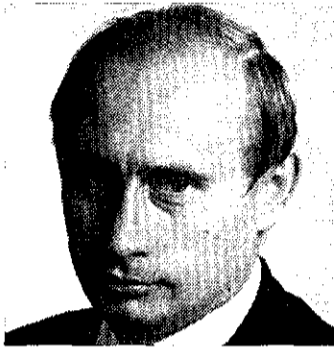
Washington Times yesterday. The Pentagon refused to confirm the report but senior US officials indicated that nuclear weapons had been moved to a base in Kaliningrad.

Russia still has at least 4,000 tactical nuclear weapons, with a range of less than 186 miles. Under an agreement between Moscow and Washington, eastward tactical nuclear weapons of particular range have

been eliminated.

Russian defence ministry sources insisted that the report "absolutely does not correspond with reality". None of Russia's nuclear weapons had been moved from their permanent sites, sources added.

The move has long been threatened by Russian military planners alarmed by Nato's expansion, in particular the possibility of the three Baltic states joining the



Mr Vladimir Putin

alliance.

Moscow warned Nato in mid-1998, as Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic prepared to join the organisation, that any further expansion would mean the redeployment of nuclear weapons in Kaliningrad.

The Baltic states remain outside the alliance, but on a trip to Lithuania last year, Mr William Cohen, the American defence secretary, said that the Nato door remained open to them. Nuclear-tipped Tochka missiles with a range of 80 miles may already have been stationed in Kaliningrad with the full knowledge of US intelligence by the time of Mr Cohen's trip, the Washington Times reported.

A series of Russian military

exercises mounted as a show of strength after Nato's Kosovo campaign in 1999. As part of the exercise, a pair of Tupolev 95 nuclear-capable bombers simulated the launch of cruise missiles towards the American east coast from near Iceland.

The manoeuvre, photographed by Nato fighters which scrambled to intercept the bombers, indicated a new Russian willingness to respond with nuclear weapons to a conventional attack.

The return of tactical nuclear weapons to Kaliningrad would reflect both the realism and the paranoia that co-exist in Russia's corridors of power. As its forces decay, Russia must rely on its nuclear arsenal to be able to punch above its weight.

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 4. — Hinting at adoption of a tough policy on Russia, US national security adviser-designate Ms Condoleezza Rice has said Moscow wanted to "assert itself" in the world by "threatening" American interests. She was flaying Russia's handling of the Chechnya issue, saying it showed it posed a threat to weak states around it.

"Moscow is determined to assert itself in the world and

'Moscow wants to threaten US interests'

often does so in ways that are at once haphazard and threatening to American interests," Ms Rice wrote in an article in the Chicago Tribune published today.

She said the Chechnya war was "a reminder of the vulnerability of the small, new states around Russia and of America's interest in their independence. If they can become stronger, they will be

less tempting to Russia. But much depends on their ability to reform their economies and political systems."

"As Prime Minister, Mr Vladimir Putin used the Chechnya war to stir nationalism at home while fueling his own political fortunes," she said, alleging "the Russian military has been uncharacteristically blunt and vocal in asserting its duty to defend the integrity of

the Russian federation."

Stating that the long-term effect of the war on Russia's political culture should not be underestimated, Ms Rice said, "This war has affected relations between Russia and its neighbours in the Caucasus, as the Kremlin has been hurling charges of harbouring and abetting Chechen terrorists against states as diverse as Saudi Arabia, Georgia and

Azerbaijan."

On sharing defence technology with Russia, Ms Rice said Moscow should understand any possibility for sharing technology or information in areas such as missile defence "would depend heavily on its record, problematic to date, on the proliferation of ballistic-missile and other technologies related to weapons of mass destruction."

Criticising the Clinton admini-

stration's handling of Russia, Ms Rice said the US support for democracy and economic reforms became support for Mr Boris Yeltsin. "His agenda became the American agenda. The realities in Russia simply did not accord with the administration's script about Russian economic reform," she said. Mr Bush has chosen Mr Lawrence Lindsey as assistant to the President for economic policy.

He will be Ms Rice's equivalent on the economic side as she will be on the political side.

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