How could Russia respond when Kiev gets ATACMS missiles and armed drones?

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An ATACMS being launched by an M270. Photo: Wikipedia

It's virtually guaranteed that the Kiev regime will get the MGM-140 ATACMS (Army Tactical Missile System), a U.S.-made tactical/theater ballistic missile system with a maximum engagement range of approximately 300 km and a supersonic speed of up to Mach 3. While its capabilities are far from Russian counterparts, such as the now legendary "Iskander" with a hypersonic speed (up to Mach 8, with maneuvering capabilities for its missiles) and a range of approximately 500 km, this is still enough to jeopardize Russian supply lines, as well as civilian settlements deeper within Moscow's territory. The ATACMS can also be fired from two platforms, namely the tracked M270 MLRS (Multiple Launch Rocket System) and the wheeled M142 HIMARS (High Mobility Artillery Rocket System), both of which have been delivered to the Neo-Nazi junta forces well over a year ago.

When paired with adequate ISR (intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance) assets, which NATO fields extensively, particularly in the vicinity of Russian borders, the ATACMS can be quite a challenge. Its battlefield performance can be significantly amplified through the effective usage of real-time ISR data that essentially acts as a major force multiplier. This is where the legal "grey areas" of warfare get even more complicated. Namely, Moscow is doing its best to keep the scope of the SMO localized, but NATO continues to escalate, as evidenced by the resurgent presence of its ISR platforms around Russia's borders, particularly in the Black Sea. The Russian military already shot down some of NATO's ISR platforms, resulting in several months of pause in flights close to the SMO zone. However, the belligerent alliance recently restarted this highly destabilizing practice.

Moscow is perfectly aware that the political West controls the Kiev regime's targeting, even issuing orders on which Russian assets are to be attacked. The sole reason why Russia hasn't responded by shooting down all NATO ISR platforms in the relative vicinity of its forces is that it wants to avoid escalating the conflict. However, the U.S.-led political West sees this as a weakness and an opportunity to hurt Russia because the way the Ukrainian conflict is being conducted is highly

beneficial to NATO. Namely, the way that the political West is engaged in hostilities in Ukraine would simply be impossible in a shooting war with Moscow. The reason is quite simple. One of the very first targets for Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS) would be NATO's ISR platforms. Precisely these are responsible for the vast majority of data being relayed to the Kiev regime.

As Ukraine borders four NATO members, this gives the belligerent alliance a unique opportunity to use their airspace for ISR flights. And while the political West argues that these are "perfectly legal" and that the aircraft "just passively collect information," the impact of their activities is anything but "passive." NATO ISR platforms are directly responsible not only for the deaths and injuries of Russian servicemen but also civilians. The United States Air Force (USAF) and the British Royal Air Force (RAF) are the most active NATO members in this regard, particularly with their Boeing RC-135V/W SIGINT (signals intelligence) aircraft that regularly fly over the Black Sea. These are among the belligerent alliance's most commonly used strategic ISR assets and play a crucial role in spying on Russian forces, covering the collection of ELINT (electronic intelligence) and COMINT (communications intelligence).

These are used to find gaps in Russian defenses (particularly radar coverage) which are then reported to the Neo-Nazi junta forces that can exploit them to launch attacks on valuable assets, as evidenced by recent air strikes with NATO-sourced cruise missiles. This makes ISR aircraft far deadlier than satellites that simply cannot loiter in an area to provide a constant supply of real-time data. NATO SIGINT aircraft also complicate Russian communications significantly, as military units are forced to maintain radio silence or use encryption, which slows down battlefield coordination, thus degrading their effectiveness. More precisely, Moscow's military planners simply have to pay close attention to what sort of information will end up in the hands of NATO, as this could help in the creation of better countermeasures against Russian forces.

The sheer magnitude of ISR data collected by SIGINT aircraft has helped the Kiev regime forces to a certain extent, but not nearly enough to create conditions for defeating Russian troops. Still, it's often enough to bring the much-needed PR "victories" that are a crucial part of the overall propaganda war. However, with the delivery of the ATACMS, things can become a lot more complicated, forcing the Russian military to expand the scope of the SMO. Namely, since it's a land-based missile system, the ATACMS is logistically far less strenuous than the Franco-British "Storm Shadow/SCALP EG" or the German-Swedish "Taurus," both of which are air-launched and are limited by the number of carrier aircraft (in the case of Neo-Nazi junta, that would be the Soviet-era Su-24), as well as the logistics for the said aircraft. To say nothing of the possibility these could get shot down.

On the other hand, the launch of a single ATACMS is not only more difficult to detect on time, but the weapon is also several times faster than air-launched cruise missiles, meaning that Russian air and missile defenses have significantly less time to respond. This changes the calculus for Moscow, as its major assets could be targeted, causing significant losses that will not be easy to replace, while it may prove difficult to detect and destroy the ATACMS launchers. Once again, it would be impossible for NATO to wage a direct war against Russia in this way, as the VKS would simply send its fighter jets, such as the superfast, high-flying MiG-31BM interceptor or the state-of-the-art Su-35S, both of which carry unrivaled long-range air-to-air missiles (AAM), such as the 400-km-range R-37M, known for its ability to maneuver at hypersonic speed (Mach 6).

Such AAMs would be used to easily destroy any ISR aircraft and other supporting assets hundreds of kilometers around Russian borders. Having the Neo-Nazi junta do all the heavy lifting and dying for "a NATO mission" while the belligerent alliance collects battlefield data is perfect for the political West, but only as long as they can maintain plausible deniability of involvement. However, as Moscow is losing patience for this sort of insolence, the conflict that is still largely limited to Ukraine

could inevitably escalate, as Russia can decide to legally redefine what constitutes direct involvement. For the time being, the Russian military might decide to shoot down unmanned SIGINT assets, such as the RQ-4B "Global Hawk." This was already done once when a Russian Su-27SM3 masterfully downed a USAF MQ-9 "Reaper" back in March.

What's more, the political West is close to approving deliveries of such drones as well, specifically the MQ-9 and the medium-range MQ-1C "Grey Eagle." However, these were designed to fight low-tech enemies, meaning they're completely useless against opponents like Russia, which shot down over 100 "Bayraktars" by April. And while some ISR drones, such as the RQ-4B are extremely expensive and strategically important, the "Global Hawk" is still just a machine, unlike the RC-135, which is manned by up to 30 crewmen. Still, if the political West decides to continue escalating even in that case, then Moscow will be forced to shoot down all of NATO's ISR assets, which could potentially lead to a world-ending thermonuclear confrontation. If the belligerent power pole thinks it's worth risking the fate of the world over this, then so be it, as Moscow has had enough.

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Source: InfoBrics