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Poseidon: A Doomsday Underwater Drone

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Image Source: Eurasian Times



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Poseidon, also known as Status-6/Kanyon, is a nuclear-powered autonomous underwater vehicle. The Poseidon programme was first revealed in 2015 when Russian state-run media aired footage showing a classified presentation slide of the nuclear-capable unmanned underwater vehicles (UUV). The leaked briefing described it as “Oceanic Multipurpose System ‘Status-6’ a nuclear-armed and nuclear-powered undersea drone”.¹

Thereafter, in March 2018, Poseidon was unveiled as one of the six new strategic super-weapons by Russian President Vladimir Putin. In the first week of May 2022, a well-known Russian state television anchor stated that “Moscow could wipe Britain off the map with a nuclear tsunami in retaliation for supporting Ukraine.” A strike by the Poseidon nuclear underwater drone “could drown the UK under a 500-metre tidal wave of radioactive seawater”.²

Specifications

Poseidon is an “intercontinental nuclear-powered nuclear-armed autonomous torpedo”. When compared to intercontinental ballistic missiles, it is very slow but possibly “unstoppable”.³ Russian TV footage slide referred to it as a “self-propelled underwater vehicle” with a range of approximately 10,000 km and the ability to operate at a depth of 1000 metres.⁴ Russian media reported that the “torpedo can travel at 100 knots avoiding all ‘acoustic tracking devices and other traps’”, this robotic submarine has a diameter of 1 metre.⁵ According to media reports, each Poseidon drone can be armed with a nearly two-megaton nuclear payload, which could be detonated thousands of feet below the surface.⁶ It is also speculated that the thermonuclear warhead could be equipped with cobalt-59, which on detonation will transmute into radioactive cobalt-60.⁷ Being powered by nuclear propulsion, the nuclear reactor will allow the weapon to have an almost infinite range of operation. It will also give new levels of operational adaptability for launch and target locations.⁸ Its titanium hull is reported to be able to withstand extreme pressure; therefore, it will be used as a seabed weapon. It can be prepositioned on the seabed in advance and can be activated from there.⁹ The explosion by this torpedo will cause a giant radioactive tsunami, and after its passage, it will leave a radioactive desert.¹⁰ For this reason, it has been nicknamed “Doomsday Drone”.¹¹

Reportedly, Russia plans to have 16 Poseidon drones for its Northern Fleet. Two submarines would carry eight drones each. The submarine being developed for drones, K-329 Belgorod, is based on Oscar II-class nuclear attack boat. Another submarine is Khabarovsk, which is also in construction and will be delivered by 2023.¹² It is expected to come into service in 2027.¹³

Poseidon in Context of ongoing Russia-Ukraine Conflict and its Implications

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict has brought the world to the brink of a nuclear war. Echoing the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, President Putin put his nuclear forces on high alert in the early phase of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. He placed nuclear arsenals on a “special combat duty regime” and warned that any interference from western nations would lead to consequences never experienced before in history. These threats have raised the spectre of ongoing conflict and kept the world on edge.¹⁴

Amidst all this, in the first week of May, the broadcasted footage by the Russian television provided some details about the Poseidon. It is being claimed that there has never been another nuclear "mega torpedo" like this one in the world's history. It raises concerns about strategic stability and will also change the shape of nuclear deterrence.¹⁵ It will increase the arms race by increasing the trends toward the offense-defence spiral and will have a larger impact on the overall international security environment.

According to reports, Poseidon, being an underwater drone, will be slower than intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) but will be more difficult to eliminate than land-based ICBMs. Sources claim that it can penetrate the nuclear defence of any country and cannot be nullified by any of the present anti-missile defence systems. It remains nearly invulnerable to any countermeasure-weapons.¹⁶ For its successful interception, new counter-weapons would be needed, which would take a substantial amount of time and effort to come into place. It is also believed that UUV is a response to the rising sophistication of US ballistic missile defence systems. For Russia, it is considered a weapon of last resort to strengthen Russia's nuclear deterrence posture *tete-a-tete* with NATO and the US. In response to such weapons, the US will also be tempted to defend itself by developing counter-weapons.

Poseidon reminds us of the ‘Dead Hand’, the doomsday machine developed by the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Even if the Poseidon lacks the destructive capability of its Greek God namesake, it still poses a significant threat

NOTES

¹ Edward Moore Geist, "Would Russia's undersea 'doomsday drone' carry a cobalt bomb?", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol.72, no. 4, p. 238-242, 2016, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00963402.2016.119519>. Accessed on May 19, 2022.

² Natalie Huet, "What is Russia's Poseidon nuclear drone and could it wipe out the UK in a radioactive tsunami?" *Euronews*, May 5, 2022, <https://www.euronews.com/next/2022/05/04/what-is-russia-s-poseidon-nuclear-drone-and-could-it-wipe-out-the-uk-in-a-radioactive-tsun>. Accessed on May 20, 2022.

³ H I Sutton, "Russia's New 'Poseidon' Super-Weapon: What You Need To Know", *Naval News*, March 03, 2022, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2022/03/russias-new-poseidon-super-weapon-what-you-need-to-know/>. Accessed on May 20, 2022.

⁴ Franz-Stefan Gady, "Russia Begins Sea Trials of Nuclear-Capable 'Poseidon' Underwater Drone", *The Diplomat*, July 21, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/07/russia-begins-sea-trials-of-nuclear-capable-poseidon-underwater-prone/>. Accessed on May 15, 2022

⁵ Franz-Stefan Gady, "Revealed: Russia's Top Secret Nuclear Torpedo", *The Diplomat*, November 13, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/11/revealed-russias-top-secret-nuclear-torpedo/>. Accessed on May 20, 2022.

⁶ Huet, n.2.

⁷ Gady, n.4. *Also see*, Huet, n.2.

⁸ Sutton, n.3. *Also see*, Gady, n.4.

⁹ Huet, n.2.

¹⁰ Tweet of Francis Scarr, https://twitter.com/francis_scarr/status/1520846423629213699?s=20&t=ai_fGX2c2GsgAP5ryMR5qg, Accessed on May 2, 2022.

¹¹ Gady, n.4.

¹² Brent M Eastwood, "Meet the Poseidon: Russia's Nuclear Torpedo Could Change Everything", *19fortyfive.com*, March 27, 2022, <https://www.19fortyfive.com/2022/03/meet-the-poseidon-russias-nuclear-torpedo-could-change-everything/>. Accessed on May 16, 2022.

¹³ Franz-Stefan Gady, "US Intelligence: Russia's Nuclear-Capable 'Poseidon' Underwater Drone Ready for Service by 2027", *The Diplomat*, March 26, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/03/us-intelligence-russias-nuclear-capable-poseidon-underwater-drone-ready-for-service-by-2027/>. Accessed on June 2, 2022.

¹⁴ Dmitri Sevastopulo, "Putin puts world on alert with high-stakes nuclear posturing" *Financial Times*, March 07, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/6d236d2d-26c6-40f1-8d12-e6cc2a3aacf0>. Accessed on June 5, 2022.

¹⁵ Sutton, n.3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*