

GLOBAL GEOPOLITICS

ISSN 2977-8271 | E-ISSN 2977-828X

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Recommended citation format:

Lima, M. F. A. S., & Azevedo, D. A. de. (2026). Enduring deterrence from the skies: The Tu-95 and B-52 in contemporary geopolitics. *Global Geopolitics*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.64901/29778271.2026.019>

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Published online:

30 August 2026

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Enduring Deterrence from the Skies

THE TU-95 AND B-52 IN CONTEMPORARY GEOPOLITICS

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RECEIVED: 11 NOVEMBER 2025 | **REVISED:** 06 AUG 2026 | **ACCEPTED:** 29 AUG 2026

DOI: 10.64901/29778271.2026.019

Abstract

This article investigates the persistence use of the Tupolev TU-95 (USSR/Russia) and Boeing B-52 (United States of America) strategic bombers as active elements in contemporary geopolitics. The research uses a collection of news reports (2019–2024) that record the appearance of these aircraft, using general news aggregators. The methodology combines the filtering and classification of these occurrences with readings of the classics of air power and warfare, such as Douhet, Warden, Clausewitz, Jomini, and Fuller. Our analysis interprets the permanence of these vectors as instruments of deterrence, power projection, and maintenance of geostrategic imaginary in the first half of the 21st century. The use of bombers as a projection of power occurs mainly in the Indo-Pacific basin, Europe, and near the Arctic Circle. The high load capacity, coverage area, increased strategic offensive range, and significant tech-

nological leap that occurred during the Cold War justify the current use of the TU-95 and B-52.

Keywords

air power; deterrence; geopolitics; power projection; strategic bombers

Introduction

The aerospace field is marked by constant innovation and technological reconfiguration. However, some military structures resist time and change. The Boeing B-52 Stratofortress strategic bomber, in operation since April 1952, has the capacity to take off with up to 185,000 pounds of payload, reach 14,000 km of range, and operate at an altitude of 15,000 meters. A total of 744 units were produced by 1962. In 2023, the US Air Force (USAF) announced plans to extend its service life until 2050 by replacing the TF33 engines with Rolls-Royce F130 engines, enhancing its energy efficiency and tactical and symbolic value (USAF, 2019; Business Insider, 2025). As for the Russian Tupolev TU-95, this aircraft dates back to the 1950s and remains part of Russia's strategic arsenal. Like its American counterpart, the aircraft operates at an altitude of 13,000 meters, carries up to 24,000 pounds, and has a range of 8,000 km (without the addition of in-flight refueling). A total of 500 units of the aircraft were produced in all variants by 1994 (IBP, 2007).

The persistence in the use of these aircraft reveals a paradox: designed for long-distance flights and high altitudes, their operational longevity defies the common cycle of technical obsolescence, which is generally less than 30 years for high-altitude aircraft. While other instruments of air power are being replaced—such as the F-14 Tomcat, MiG-25 Foxbat, and Mirage III fighter jets, decommissioned after a few decades of service—these bombers remain in operation, incorporating successive technological upgrades and remaining central to strategic power projection (Sweeney, 2019).

In this context, the objective of this article is to investigate the persistence of the use of B-52 and Tu-95 strategic bombers in different geopolitical regions, based on contemporary records,

linking these occurrences to the classic references of Air Power and War — Douhet, Warden, Clausewitz, Jomini, and Fuller. To this end, a qualitative and interpretative methodology was adopted (Bardin, 2016; Krippendorff, 2018), covering the period from 2019 to 2024 and collecting data from general media reports filtered by specific keywords. The information obtained was systematized and categorized, allowing it to be related to classic references of air power and warfare for analysis of strategic presence, demonstration of force, and deterrence.

The article is structured in three main sections. The first outlines the methodological procedures, detailing the selection and categorization of the empirical material. The second develops the theoretical framework, focusing on the logic of force, air power, and deterrence. The third presents and analyzes the empirical findings, examining the strategic employment and effects of the B-52 and Tu-95 as vectors of power.

Methodological Framework

The time frame was set from 2019 to 2024 and is justified by combining geopolitical and technological factors that have accentuated the relevance of the TU-95 and B-52 strategic bombers in the contemporary scenario. On the geopolitical front, 2019 marked the intensification of strategic tensions between major powers, evidenced by the collapse of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty¹ after mutual accusations of violations by the US and Russia. In this context, there was an increase in show of force² operations in the Arctic, Pacific, and Baltic, with the recur-

1. The INF Treaty (Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty), signed on December 8, 1987, between the US and the USSR, required the elimination of ground-based ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges between 500 and 5,500 km, making it the first agreement to eliminate an entire category of nuclear weapons. The formalization of the US withdrawal in 2019 and subsequent abandonment by Russia marked a new era for arms control (ACA, 2019).

2. A show of force refers to the ostentatious use of military means—such as flyovers, naval deployments, or exercises—intended to signal strategic capability and determination to adversaries or allies without resorting directly to combat. It is a coercive

rent use of these aircraft, in addition to the reactivation of Russian long-range patrols and the conduct of strategic nuclear exercises (Clem & Finch, 2021).

This situation intensified between 2022 and 2024, a period marked by the War in Ukraine, which expanded the use of TU-95 and B-52 aircraft in both demonstrations of power and operational missions, receiving widespread media coverage. From a technological and strategic point of view, the period is also significant for its relevant modernizations: in the Russian case, the TU-95MSM version incorporated new navigation and weapon systems; in the American case, the B-52H received engine and avionics upgrades, in addition to the integration of new cruise missiles. The operational continuity of platforms designed in the 1950s, even in the face of technological evolution, is in itself a central element in the debate on the longevity and adaptability of strategic vectors in current geopolitics.

We chose to use general media, through Google News, as a collection tool. The filter for capturing news will use the following keywords and Boolean operators: “B-52” AND “região” / “TU-95” AND “região” (portuguese) and their English equivalents: “B-52 bomber”, “Tu-95 bomber”, “B-52 bomber” AND “region” e “Tu-95 bomber” AND “region”. Seven reports were selected, five of which were repeats of the same event.

This choice sought to cover reports that recorded the presence of these aircraft in various contexts, including not exclusively military ones, such as diplomatic news, international crises, and large-scale joint exercises. This methodological strategy is in line with the approach of Bardin (2016) and Krippendorff (2018), who advocate the systematization of scattered information and its grouping by thematic categories in order to interpret it in light of theoretical references. Specialized defense sources, such as The Drive – War Zone, Janes Defense, FlightGlobal, and Aviationist, were not systematically adopted, being consulted only occasionally due to

action that seeks to influence the political decisions of others through a calculated demonstration of power (Biddiscombe, 2013).

possible access restrictions and the influence of subtle political or military agendas. Duplicate news items about the same event involving the appearance or use of these aircraft were disregarded. Throughout the text, interpretations are made of the use of B-52 and TU-95 strategic bombers in light of Air Power and War theorists.

The systematization and analysis of the occurrences followed three stages. First, the news items collected were organized in a spreadsheet, containing the date, vehicle, geopolitical location of the appearance, type of operation (exercise, show of force, interception, nuclear mission, among others), and explicit mentions of strategic frameworks. Next, these occurrences were grouped by geopolitical region (Arctic, Pacific, Eastern Europe, Middle East, and Asia-Pacific), allowing for the observation of patterns of recurrence. Finally, the resulting categories were interpreted in light of the previously defined theoretical references, with special attention to the articulation between strategic air presence and coercive signaling, following the content analysis logic proposed by Bardin (2016) and Krippendorff (2018).

The Logic of Force and the Persistence of Strategy

The analysis of air power as an autonomous strategic dimension involves understanding its destructive capacity as well as its political and psychological role in international relations. Since the beginning of the 20th century, air supremacy has established itself as one of the main forms of power projection, combining technology, logistics, and symbolic communication (Gray, 2012).

The continued presence of strategic bombers in contemporary arsenals challenges traditional interpretations of military modernization as constant replacement. Giulio Douhet already stated that air dominance is a *sine qua non* condition for success in modern warfare, a thesis later expanded by John Warden with the “theory of rings” — where “surgical bombing” can paralyze the enemy by attacking vital centers. For Warden, local strategic targets include industrial centers, military bases, and infrastructure (Warden, 1989).

To some extent, bombers are vulnerable to drone attacks when on the ground (BBC, 2022), and in flight they are usually accompanied by fighter aircraft (CSIS, 2024). However, the contemporary technological paradigm—which favors drones, artificial intelligence, and stealth aircraft—has not rendered classic strategic vectors obsolete. On the contrary, the B-52 and TU-95 are updated and maintained as nuclear deterrent assets, projecting power from visibility and range (USSC, 2019). In this sense, the use of these bombers acts as a form of “strategic power maintenance” (Douhet, 1921), but also as a practical update of Clausewitz and Jomini’s premises on concentration and conservation of force.

Jomini and Clausewitz converge on the notion that victory depends on the concentrated application of force at decisive points (Rosa, 2022). Clausewitz warns, however, against the mistake of employing all force simultaneously, advocating strategic conservation for critical moments: “wear down the adversary with few forces and maintain reserves for decisive actions” (Clausewitz, 2001). Thus, the tactical use of bombers as instruments of pressure, without military escalation, fits into this logic of maneuvering and retaining total force.

Conceptually, military aviation represents the materialization of “force at a distance” — a form of power that reduces direct vulnerability and increases strategic reach. In this sense, air power is defined by its flexibility, speed of mobilization, and global response capability (Meilinger, 2017). The use of aircraft, whether fighters, bombers, or drones, reflects a power’s ability to intervene without necessarily physically occupying enemy territory. Thus, control of airspace is simultaneously an operational and symbolic vector, conferring status and legitimacy on the powers capable of sustaining it.

Directly related to discussions of air power in geopolitics (Gray, 2012; Meilinger, 2017), strategic bombers are therefore long-range military aircraft designed to attack strategic points, whose destruction or neutralization directly affects the enemy force’s ability to continue the war (Douhet, 1921). In their updated versions, the B-52J and TU-95MSM represent Washington and Moscow’s intention

to keep these platforms operational in the long term. Appearances of the bombers have been identified on the territorial borders of both states, as well as in China, Japan, and regions of the European continent.

Within this landscape, strategic bombers occupy a unique position. Although fighter jets and drones play crucial roles in tactical superiority and precision short-range strikes, strategic bombers stand out as instruments of sustained national power projection, capable of operating over long distances, maintaining a prolonged presence, and influencing adversaries even without engaging in direct combat.³ In this context, the concept of Bomber Task Force (BTF), formalized since 2018 by the Air Force Global Strike Command, defines regular missions for strategic bombers (B-52, B-1, B-2) with the purpose of “assuring allies and deterring adversaries,” replacing the former continuous presence with a more flexible and unpredictable form of power projection (AFGSC, 2025). Their main feature is their long-range autonomy and ability to carry large conventional or nuclear warheads, which allows them to act as pillars of the doctrine of deterrence. Even in times of peace, these aircraft serve as “messengers of force” and conduct patrols and presence flights near strategic borders, with the aim of reaffirming spheres of influence.

The maintenance of B-52 and TU-95 bombers in the arsenals of the United States and Russia exemplifies the resilience of this paradigm. Both models, designed in the 1950s, survived the Cold War and have been continuously modernized in technical and conceptual terms.

3. Only three countries currently operate strategic bombers in active service—the United States, Russia, and China—characterized by their long-range strike capability, including nuclear weapons, and by integrating doctrines of deterrence and global power projection (Ciscar Ruiz, 2018; Simple Flying, 2023).

The B-52 and TU-95 as Vectors of Power: Patrol, Presence, and Deterrence

Seventy-two news reports were identified; after excluding duplicates, sixty-seven remained for analysis. The selected news items were classified into three thematic areas regarding the use of the B-52 and TU-95: joint exercises or training (14), show of force (BTF) or patrol (46), and combat operations (7).

In joint exercises and training, the presence of B-52s and Tu-95s appears to be associated with operational integration and the demonstration of interoperability between allies. Cases such as "*Bombardeiros B-52 dos EUA chegam ao Reino Unido para treinamentos na Europa*" [US B-52 bombers arrive in the UK for training in Europe] (AeroMagazine, 2022), "US, NATO aircraft integrate, fly over all 30 NATO nations" (USAF, 2021), and "South Korea, US, and Japan hold first-ever trilateral aerial exercise in face of North Korean threats" (Associated Press, 2023) show the use of these aircraft as a tool for multinational training and coordination, with the aim of strengthening joint capabilities and readiness. This type of operation does not necessarily involve direct provocation, but it projects air power and ensures tactical alignment.

The second group concerns demonstrations of force and strategic patrols, falling within the logic of BTF. In these missions, the deployment of bombers to sensitive regions seeks to signal deterrence to potential adversaries. Examples of this are "*EUA planejam enviar bombardeiros nucleares B-52 à Austrália em meio a tensão com China*" [US plans to send B-52 nuclear bombers to Australia amid tension with China] (BRASIL247, 2022), "US flies B-52 bombers over Persian Gulf as show of force against Iran" (Knutson, 2020), and "*Bombardeiros B-52 dos EUA voam perto da fronteira russa*" [U.S. B-52 bombers fly near Russian border] (Cavok, 2024), which combine geopolitical reach and strategic messaging, reinforcing the credibility of rapid military response. These missions, although not involving the direct use of weapons, are marked by an intense political-military component.

The third set comprises actions involving the effective use of fire,

whether in the context of direct conflict or coordinated attacks. Reports such as "*Guerra na Ucrânia: Rússia emprega bombardeiros estratégicos Tu-95*" [War in Ukraine: Russia deploys Tu-95 strategic bombers] (Poder Aéreo, 2022), "*Bombardeiros russos Tu-95 têm como alvo a rede de energia e a infraestrutura de aquecimento da Ucrânia*" [Russian Tu-95 bombers target Ukraine's power grid and heating infrastructure] (Cavok, 2022), and "*Ataque em larga escala com bombardeiros russos Tu-95 leva Polónia a enviar caças*" [Large-scale attack with Russian Tu-95 bombers leads Poland to send fighter jets] (Aeroin, 2024) highlight the transition from a deterrent role to actual combat use, integrating cruise missiles and precision strikes against critical infrastructure. Here, bombers take on a direct operational role on the battlefield. The reports show defense operations on territorial borders and military action near foreign allies.

Military exercises involving the B-52 are mainly concentrated in Europe and South Korea, while its show of force and patrol missions take place mainly in Northern Europe, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East, particularly in the region between Saudi Arabia and Iraq, as well as in the Yellow Sea. The TU-95's demonstrations of force and patrols are focused on the Bering Sea, the Sea of Japan, and the Yellow Sea, while the TU-95's use of firepower has been recorded in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine.

The geostrategic context of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has been constantly reinforced by joint military exercises widely reported in the international media (OGlobo, 2019a; Aeroflap, 2022). Two air bases are strategically central to the framework of US power projection in the Indo-Pacific: Guam, focused on the East Asian axis, and Diego Garcia, which plays an essential logistical and operational role in the central portion of the Indian Ocean (Military, 2020). Operations with B-52 strategic bombers were carried out from these locations. There are no records, in the time frame analyzed, of direct use of weapons by B-52s, although this absence does not rule out the possibility of using other platforms, including smaller bombers or multi-role aircraft in related actions.

The use of strategic bombers seems to follow a logic of

geographically targeted responses to specific events, such as crises involving Iran in the Persian Gulf (OGlobo, 2019b), when the US issues patrol alerts with B-52s in the region. Other relevant episodes include US President Joe Biden's visit to Tokyo, where he sought to strengthen the alliance with Japan and South Korea; at the same time, Russia and China conducted joint exercises in the region (Reuters, 2022). Another notable event was the incursion of US B-52s following missile tests conducted by North Korea (Cavok, 2023). These facts demonstrate the use of aerospace power as an instrument of strategic signaling, where the mobilization of long-range aircraft takes on both deterrent and political-diplomatic value. B-52 show of force and patrol operations are concentrated in Northern Europe, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East, with emphasis on the region between Saudi Arabia and Iraq, as well as the Yellow Sea. This distribution clearly reflects the Rimland logic, as formulated by Nicholas Spykman, in which control of the peripheries of Eurasia constitutes the “strategic ring” essential for projecting continental influence and limiting the expansion of rivals (Spykman, 1942).

On the Russian side, there is a concentration of demonstrations of force in the Arctic region and adjacent areas, especially on the border with Alaska (USA), Canada, and Finland, as well as in areas of strategic interest such as Ukraine, the Sea of Japan, and the Yellow Sea, often in cooperation with Chinese forces (USNI, 2023; The Aviationist, 2024). Since TU-95 demonstrations of force and patrols are concentrated in the Bering Sea, the Sea of Japan, and the Yellow Sea, while the use of fire has been recorded in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine, these patterns seem to reinforce Russia as a regional power, committed to maintaining power projection over its near abroad — both in Europe and on the maritime routes of the North Pacific and Sea of Japan — reaffirming its strategic capability and territorial influence. These efforts are reflected in the use of strategic bombers.

In our analysis, such patterns of Russian air force employment resonate with Fuller's (1926) concept of “concentration of effort,” in which military power is applied in a focused manner in geographical

areas of greater geopolitical relevance, maximizing strategic efficiency and symbolic impact (Fuller, 1926; Rosa, 2022). This stance reveals a convergence between spatial logic and the selective use of strategic assets, configuring a pattern of power projection in which geography largely determines operational priorities. For the Russians, the TU-95 also has a nuclear function and carries Soviet symbolism (Rosa, 2022). The presence of the TU-95 in military exercises or incursions into disputed areas aims at military purposes, instrumentalizing this vector as a means of ideological projection and territorial reaffirmation, mainly in the Arctic and Eastern Europe.

In the US, the B-52 represents the institutionalization of the doctrine of presence and surveillance. Approximately 13.2% of the USAF's total B-52 fleet—equivalent to ten aircraft—is currently deployed at overseas bases, notably RAF Fairford (United Kingdom) and facilities in the Middle East. This deployment may correspond to up to 25% of the operational fleet (Air & Space, 2024). The B-52 missions over the South China Sea, often over Chinese air defense identification zones (ADIZ), can be read in light of Thucydides' trap: the established empire responds to the challenge of the emerging one with clear demonstrations of belligerence. The bomber is not just a machine; it is a symbol—visible, traceable by radar, and politically audacious.

Diehl (2007) notes that military means remain the ultimate resource of political units for imposing their will. The patrol of a strategic bomber, even without the use of lethal force, is therefore a message: there is a price to pay for escalation. It is coercive diplomacy performed by technology — a language whose lexicon is power and whose syntax is range.

The use of the B-52 Stratofortress remains for the projection of US power, both in containment operations and in direct support of strategic alliances such as NATO. In missions aimed at deterring Iranian actions, the bomber was used not only as an offensive vector but also as an instrument for demonstrating allied readiness and interoperability. As reported by *Aeromagazine* (2021), its use

combines continuous improvements in weapons and sensor systems, expanding range and situational awareness to project a deterrent capability beyond conventional technologies. Lieutenant Colonel Vanessa Wilcox herself, quoted by Cavok (2023), reinforces that such operations send a message of commitment to freedom of movement and regional stability, ensuring that allies perceive US support as constant and operationally viable in the present and future.

Keeping the B-52s in the inventory also speaks to a fundamental element of the nuclear doctrine of major powers: disbelief in the effective use of nuclear warheads due to their high destructiveness and the balance imposed by the logic of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD). This strategic deterrence encourages the testing and demonstration of multimodal vectors—such as nuclear submarines and strategic bombers—capable of maintaining military credibility without directly triggering nuclear potential. During the Cold War, the B-52 and TU-95 participated in a technological leap that included advances in materials and the development of hypersonic weapons. These projects continue to be studied and adapted to this day. The reliability of this vector is a direct result of decades of structural and systemic modernization: replacement of avionics, integration of new weapons, and rigorous preventive maintenance. The development of a completely new bomber with equivalent capabilities would entail high costs and long lead times; therefore, the modernized B-52 and TU-95 continue to fulfill their roles in an updated and fully operational manner.

Studies such as that by MITRE Corporation (2019), funded by the Pentagon, point to the need to preserve and expand the capabilities of this fleet. The report recommends that the Air Force maintain long-range strategic bombers to sustain intense operations in the Indo-Pacific—one of the most geopolitically sensitive regions—and raise mission capability rates to above 80%, with parallel investment in logistics and support bases. Furthermore, it suggests postponing the retirement of older units until at least 50 new B-21s are in operation, accelerating their production and the modernization of rear infrastructure. This scenario reinforces that, at least until the

force is sustainably renewed, the presence of the B-52s is essential. The fact that their movements and exercises are widely reported in the international media illustrates their operational relevance and also their symbolic weight in the global perception of air strategic power.

The contemporary strategic bomber operates at the intersection of symbolism, tactics, and strategy. It preserves the principles of maneuver, surprise, and conservation of force (Jomini and Clausewitz), but also communicates morale, glory, and nationalism—what Clausewitz identifies as the “spirit of the people in arms.” The TU-95 and B-52 remain functional platforms not only because of their technical robustness, but also because of their diplomatic, geostrategic, and symbolic utility.

The presence of these vectors today lies in their paradoxical function: they are weapons of non-use (or of rare use of fire, considering their use in Ukraine). Their power mostly lies in the implicit threat, in ostentatious patrols, in signaling that war—although avoided—remains a possibility. Therefore, the B-52 and TU-95 illustrate how air power transcends the purely military aspect: it becomes a geopolitical language, used to communicate strength, stability, and technological capability in airspace. The permanence of these aircraft, even in the face of the rise of drones and fifth-generation fighters, confirms that the projection of symbolic power and the logic of presence remain as relevant as technological innovation. Thus, in the contemporary geopolitical scenario, strategic bombers become harbingers of war that help structure power relations.

Conclusion

The objective of this article was to analyze the permanence and strategic use of Boeing B-52 and Tupolev TU-95 bombers as active vectors of power and deterrence in contemporary geopolitics, relating their operational presence to classical theories of Air Power and War. Based on the collection and systematization of news

reports published between 2019 and 2024, significant recurrences in the use of these aircraft were identified in three main areas: joint exercises and training, demonstrations of force and strategic patrols, and effective combat deployment. These data reveal that, despite technological modernization and the rise of new platforms—such as drones and stealth aircraft—strategic bombers continue to play an essential role in the deterrence and power projection structure of the major powers.

The results obtained allow us to observe that the continued presence of the B-52 and TU-95 is not limited to the operational field, but extends to the symbolic and diplomatic, reaffirming alliances, delimiting spheres of influence, and communicating military credibility. This finding fills a gap in studies on air power by empirically demonstrating — through the systematization and classification of media occurrences — how the longevity of these vectors reflects a strategy of permanence and conceptual updating of classic deterrence.

Our analysis also unveils the spatial representation of the appearances and uses attributed to the bombers. The geographical distribution of occurrences shows the concentration of these operations in three central regions: the Indo-Pacific, Europe, and the Arctic, corresponding to areas of tension and strategic interest for the United States and Russia. Thus, the study contributes to understanding how the persistence of these bombers reflects a technical and historical legacy and a choice to maintain air power as an instrument of stability, coercion, and global presence in the 21st century.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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