9K720 Iskander (SS-26)

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The 9K720 Iskander (NATO: SS-26 "Stone") is a road-mobile short-range ballistic missile (SRBM) with a range of up to 500 km. Using a common transporter-erector-launcher (TEL) and support vehicles, the system can also fire the 9M728 (R-500, SSC-7) and 9M729 (SSC-8) cruise missiles.

Iskander (SS-26 "Stone") at a Glance

ORIGINATED FROM
Russia

POSSESSED BY
Russia, Algeria, Armenia

ALTERNATE NAMES
Stone, Tender, 9M720, 9M723, 9M723-1

CLASS
Short-Range Ballistic Missile (SRBM)

BASING
Road-mobile

LENGTH
7.3 m

DIAMETER
0.92 m

LAUNCH WEIGHT
3,800-4,020 kg

PAYLOAD
480–700 kg, 480 kg (export variant)

WARHEAD
High-explosive, submunition, earth-penetrator, thermobaric

PROPULSION
Single-stage solid propellant

RANGE
400–500 km, 280 km (Export variant)

STATUS
Operational

IN SERVICE
2006


Missiles in the 9A (no. 9) unit, Russia (MB)


Composite of locally sourced Iskander launchers, 9K720, 2018


Missiles in unit's firing position (video screen), Kursk, Russia, 9K720 (video still)

Iskander Development

Russia began development of the SS-26 in the late 1980s to replace the OTR-23 "Oka" SRBM. After the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty banned the OTR-23 in 1987, the Soviet Machine Industry Design Bureau in Kolomna (KBM) modified the the Oka's solid rocket motor for a new missile design.[1] KBM began developing the Iskander complex in 1993.[2] In 1998, Russia began state trials of the missile, completing 13 flights at Kasputin Yar test range until 2005.[3] The Iskander system finally entered Russian service in 2006. In 2010, Russia tested an updated missile—the 9M723-1—and accepted it into service in 2012.[4]

Variants

Replacing both the OTR-23 "Oka" and OTR-21 "Tochka-U" SRBMs, the Iskander is a tactical missile system capable of launching ballistic and cruise missiles.[5] The "Iskander" designation is typically used to identify both the launch system and its associated ballistic missiles, the Iskander-M (9M723), exclusive for Russian military use, and the Iskander-E (9M720) for export. A third variant uses the Iskander-M transporter-erector-launcher (TEL) to fire the SSC-7 (9M728) cruise missile.

The 9M723 and 9M720 Ballistic Missiles

The 9M723 SRBM is 7.3 meters long, 0.92 meters in diameter, and has a launch weight of 3,750 kilograms.[6] The missiles possesses a maximum range of 500 km and carries payloads between 480 and 700 kg. The export variant, the 9M720, has a reduced range of 280 km while carrying a 480 kg payload.[7]

These missiles fly on a depressed trajectory and can maneuver up to 30g in flight. The 9M720 is reportedly accurate to 200 meters circular error probable (CEP) with inertial guidance (at 300km range), 50 meters with GLONASS satellite guidance, and 10 to 20 with with an optional optical seeker.[8] The optional optical seeker-equipped warheads, which detach in flight, use a digital scene matching area correlation (DSMAC) terminal guidance system to detect targets. [9] The seeker was flight tested in 2011 and entered service in 2012.[10]

The 9P78 Launcher and Support Vehicles

The Iskander launcher is based on an eight-wheel MZKT 7930 truck, weighing 43 tonnes when loaded with two 9M720/9M723 missiles.[11]

The Iskander TEL is equipped with an armored roof to protect its two ballistic or cruise missiles. The TEL's cabin is hardened against chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) hazards and extreme temperatures, with an operating range between -50 to 50 degrees Celsius. The vehicle is also amphibious and can travel at speeds up to 70 km/h (43 mph) for 1,100 km (684 miles). Each TEL is capable of operating independently. Reload vehicles, each carrying two missiles and a crane, enable prolonged battlefield operations.[12] A command vehicle, based on a KAMAZ-43101 truck, can communicate with multiple Iskander units and send new target coordinates to launch crews.[13]

Cruise Missile Developments and INF Treaty Violation

Through the 2000s, Russia has fitted Iskander TELs with ground-launched cruise missiles. Carrying two SSC-7 (9M728) cruise missiles—reportedly a variant of the 3M54 "Klub"—the system was informally referred to as the 'Iskander-K' combat system. Russia first flight tested this variant in 2007, which reportedly entered service in 2013.[14] In 2019, the Kremlin displayed a new launcher carrying four SSC-8 (9M729) cruise missiles. According to U.S. government reports, the Russian military first tested the Iskander/SSC-8 system in 2014, violating the INF Treaty, which prohibited ground-launched cruise missiles with ranges over 500 km.[15] In a 2019 statement, the United States cited Russian development of the SSC-8 as a major factor in its decision to withdraw from the INF Treaty.[16]

Exports and Foreign Operators

Russia first exhibited the Iskander-E for sale in 1999. By 2005, it was reported that the United Arab Emirates, Syria and Iran had discussed potential purchases, a claim Russian officials later denied.[17] In 2008, Russian defense figures stated that Kuwait, South Korea, Syria, the UAE, Malaysia, and India had shown interest in purchasing the Iskander-E.[18] Despite supply shortages reported in 2014, Russia allegedly negotiated with Saudi Arabia on an Iskander-E sale in 2015, which other officials later denied.[19]

In 2016, Armenia became the first buyer of the Iskander-E and paraded them later that year.[20] Algeria then bought 4 Iskander-E regiments—totaling 48 TELs and 120 support vehicles—in 2017.[21]

Iskander Service History

Russia operates 11 combat brigades of Iskander-M systems as of 2019.[22] A standard Iskander brigade includes 12 TELs and their associated support vehicles. In April 2019, the Kolomna Machine-Building Design Bureau began constructing the final brigade set of Iskander-M systems, which it delivered to Russia's 448th Missile Brigade in November 2019.[23] According to Russian media reports, the Kremlin plans to enlarge its Iskander brigades from 12 to 16 launchers each.[24]

The Russian armed forces first used the the system in combat against Georgia in 2008. The Kremlin also deployed a unit to Syria in 2016 but did not use the missiles in combat.[25] Tajikistan and Russia first launched an Iskander-M missile outside of Russian soil during a military exercise in June 2017.[26]

Russia has routinely deployed the Iskander-M to Kaliningrad, where the weapon could target NATO forces in Poland, the Baltic States, and Sweden. These deployments are a crucial element of Russian coercive diplomacy. From 2009, Russia repeatedly threatened to deploy Iskander-M missiles in response to U.S. missile defense deployments in the region, sending units to Kaliningrad in 2013, 2015, and 2016.[27] Russia has permanently deployed the Iskander-M in Kaliningrad since 2018.[28]

Footnotes +

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