

# Behind The Lines!

3 March 2014

## “LET THE (WAR) GAMES BEGIN!”

While the world’s athletes were competing in the spirit of peaceful competition, President Vladimir V. Putin and the Russian Federation Ministry of Defense were finalizing the operational plan (OP PLAN) for the invasion of Crimea.

Putin appears to be repeating a pattern of Soviet behavior exhibited during the Cold War period. For example, ethnic Russians inside an independent, sovereign country perceive an internal threat to their safety and issue a plea to the Russian Federation for assistance from their Slavic brothers and sisters. The Russian leadership responds with a military presence in force. Thus, wherever there are ethnic Russians Putin can claim the protection of Russia’s national interests as a pretext to justify military involvement in the neighboring state. Military exercises as a precursor and launching pad for expanded operations beyond the Russian state is reminiscent of Soviet military operations during the Cold War against their neighbors. The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 comes to mind as a classic example. Russia’s more recent grab of South Ossetia at the expense of the sovereign state of Georgia is evidence that this tactic remains extant in the Russian political textbook. “Protection of national interests” is a comprehensive term in the lexicon of international politics, and ultimately it is left to interpretation by the political entity making such a claim.

Russia’s blatant aggression in Crimea in violation of international law sends alarm signals to other contiguous countries such as Latvia and Lithuania where a sizeable population of ethnic Russians resides alongside their non-Russian citizens. NATO membership by these two countries does allay some of that concern on the part of those independent countries.

The tenuous and tardy response by governments in the West to Russia’s military operations in Crimea encourages Putin to proceed to the next phase of the OP PLAN. For the long term, a tepid response may be read as weakness by the leaders of several hostile states and embolden them so take similar actions in their national interests: 1) People’s Republic of China as it covets the return of Taiwan to the mainland, (2) North Korean designs on South Korea as its mercurial leadership seeks to consolidate the Korean Peninsula, and 3) continuing threats by Iran for the destruction of Israel come to mind.

Crimea as an integral part of Ukraine presents a special problem inasmuch as Russia has maintained a military presence there since Catherine the Great in the eighteenth century. In 1954 Soviet Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev returned the Crimean Peninsula to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in an apparent moment of largess. Russia still maintains the headquarters of its Black Sea Fleet at Sevastopol under a lease agreement with Ukraine that remains in force until 2042.

For the short term, Putin likely will secure his military presence throughout the Crimean Peninsula where he is welcomed by the predominant ethnic Russians. The economic and political reality for the long-term scenario in strategically important Ukraine where critical Russian natural gas pipelines transit at several points en route to Western Europe is a great deal more complicated to predict. Putin’s next move depends on the response from the Western powers to the current situation, as well as any overt resistance on the part of western Ukraine which is predominantly pro-European. One should bear in mind that world opinion carries no weight with Putin. Phase Two of the OP PLAN with a longer timeline may include eventually securing the area of Ukraine east of the Dnieper River with its resident Ukrainian and Russian population which is sympathetic to Russia’s cause. Phase Three probably portrays a Ukraine that is restored to its *de facto*, if not *de jure*, status within the Russian orbit to complete Putin’s ultimate objective.