



It is clear, given the capabilities of these new and upgraded weapons systems, that the scope and depth of the rapidly evolving military modernization program exceeds operational requirements of a solely defensive nature. President Putin maintains that the intensive air, ground and naval operations in the Western, Central and Southern military districts are in response to the perceived encroachment of NATO in the former East European bloc countries as a threat to Russia's security. Past Soviet and current Russian history demonstrates that military field exercises can be a springboard to a surprise invasion of a neighboring country. Understandably, there is growing concern on the part of the United States, NATO countries and those along the contiguous border with Russia. For example, combined arms exercises and "snap" no-notice readiness inspections in all Russian military districts on an unprecedented scale not seen since the Cold War, strategic probes and odd maneuvers by long-range nuclear bombers and submarines in the periphery of the United States and several West European countries, and the recent establishment of the Arctic Joint Strategic Command with headquarters at the home base of the Northern Sea Fleet in Severomorsk are significant developments that go beyond normal Russian peacetime military posture and operations. To what end one might ask?

Do these striking developments serve as camouflage for future covert operations in what the Russian leadership calls the "near abroad" along the Western periphery of the Russian Federation? "Near abroad" is Russian code for the geographical buffer comprised of former East European countries under Soviet hegemony and that Russia clearly considers an area within its sphere of influence. Protection of these sizeable ethnic Russian populations living in the "near abroad" could provide the pretense for Russian military intervention at an opportune time. Putin appears to be repeating a pattern of Soviet behavior exhibited during the Cold War period. The extant model: 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. Russia's more recent grab of the Crimean Peninsula at the expense of sovereign Ukraine is evidence that this tactic still exists in the Russian politico-military textbook.

Military force is always an option if political manipulation fails to meet the desired national objectives. As the birthplace of Kievan Rus and the Slavic people with both Ukrainian and Russian roots, Ukraine represents a special case historically, culturally, politically and strategically for Russia. Understandably from that perspective Putin will not relinquish Ukraine from Russia's perceived sphere of influence, whether by overt and/or covert methods. Among the options for Kremlin military planners is continuation of an aggressive strategy through covert operations and eventual intervention with military force to split Ukraine along the political fault line that divides pro-Russian eastern Ukraine from the pro-European western half of the country. The implication of possible military intervention and/or covert infiltration at some level extends to the Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania (all three are members of NATO), as well as to Moldova. The Operational Group of Russian Forces in Moldova is stationed on sovereign Moldovan territory in the separatist eastern rump called Transdnistria (Pridnestrovie). In the case of Estonia, for example, Ida-Virumaa (county) in the northeast corner adjacent to the Russian border is populated by over 70 percent ethnic Russians. A summons, whether real or fabricated, for assistance from the Russian Federation could come from a separatist Russian group within one of these independent countries on short notice. This was the ruse used by the Soviet Union when it invaded Czechoslovakia in August 1968. Recently, the Russian *maskirovka* propaganda machine produced a video documentary which presents a fabricated and revisionist account that the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia to prevent a coup supported by NATO. As an intelligence officer at that time I could almost watch the Soviet military operation from my balcony five kilometers from the Czech-East German border. My view is substantially different.

On balance, the unusually high level of Russian military activity in the European theater could be explained simply as Putin flexing his military muscle as a test bed for the new reforms and state-of-the-art equipment and nothing more. Or perhaps something as logical as focusing on the military-industrial complex to rejuvenate the faltering Russian economy. Or might Russia's seemingly reckless military operations presage something more sinister, and if so, to what end?