

Leaks See NATO Not Impressed by Military

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BRUSSELS — NATO was not impressed by Russia's military performance after two large maneuvers in 2009 because its forces relied on aging equipment, lacked transport and suffered from manpower shortages, according to a leaked U.S. diplomatic cable.

Russia's armed forces would be able to respond only to a small to mid-sized local conflict in the country's western regions, according to a cable from the U.S. mission to NATO released Monday on the WikiLeaks secret-spilling site. The maneuvers demonstrated that they would not be able to fight in two small conflicts simultaneously or to mount larger-scale operations, the U.S. cable said, citing a report by NATO's military staff.

The documents also claimed that Russia's army and air force could not cooperate properly and lacked all-weather capability.

The NATO report followed two large maneuvers, codenamed Ladoga and Zapad, in Russia's western regions during 2009. They were intended to test the Russian military after its lightning 2008 victory over Georgia.

The operation, in which Georgia's U.S.-trained army was demolished within a week after it tried to invade the breakaway province of South Ossetia, set off alarm bells in NATO nations bordering Russia.

At the time, Eastern European diplomats expressed extreme concern over the Russian army's lightning response to a surprise attack by Georgian forces on the province's capital. The NATO report appeared to be an effort to reassure its allies in Eastern Europe.

"The exercises ... demonstrated that Russia has limited capability for joint operations with air forces, continues to rely on aging and obsolete equipment, lacks all-weather capability and strategic transportation means, ... has an officer corps lacking flexibility and has a manpower shortage," the cable said.

The document was signed off by U.S. Ambassador Ivo Daalder.

The report claimed that the Russian military still appeared prepared to use short-range battlefield nuclear weapons even in small conflicts. Russia is believed to have more than 1,000 tactical nuclear warheads in its arsenal. These are not banned under international treaties.

NATO has condemned the release of the secret diplomatic cables by WikiLeaks. It regularly refuses to comment on their veracity.

Relations between NATO and Moscow hit a post-Cold War low after the Russia-Georgia war. But they have improved significantly since U.S. President Barack Obama announced a "reset" of U.S.-Russian ties in 2009.

Today, the two sides cooperate closely in the war in Afghanistan, where Russia provides a vital overland supply link for NATO forces. The alliance and Moscow also work closely on counter-piracy and anti-terrorist operations, and the two sides are considering setting up a joint anti-missile shield.

The Russian military is in the process of reforming and cutting its military strength. In 2009, its defense budget of about \$50 billion was about one-twentieth of total defense spending by NATO's 28 nations.

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