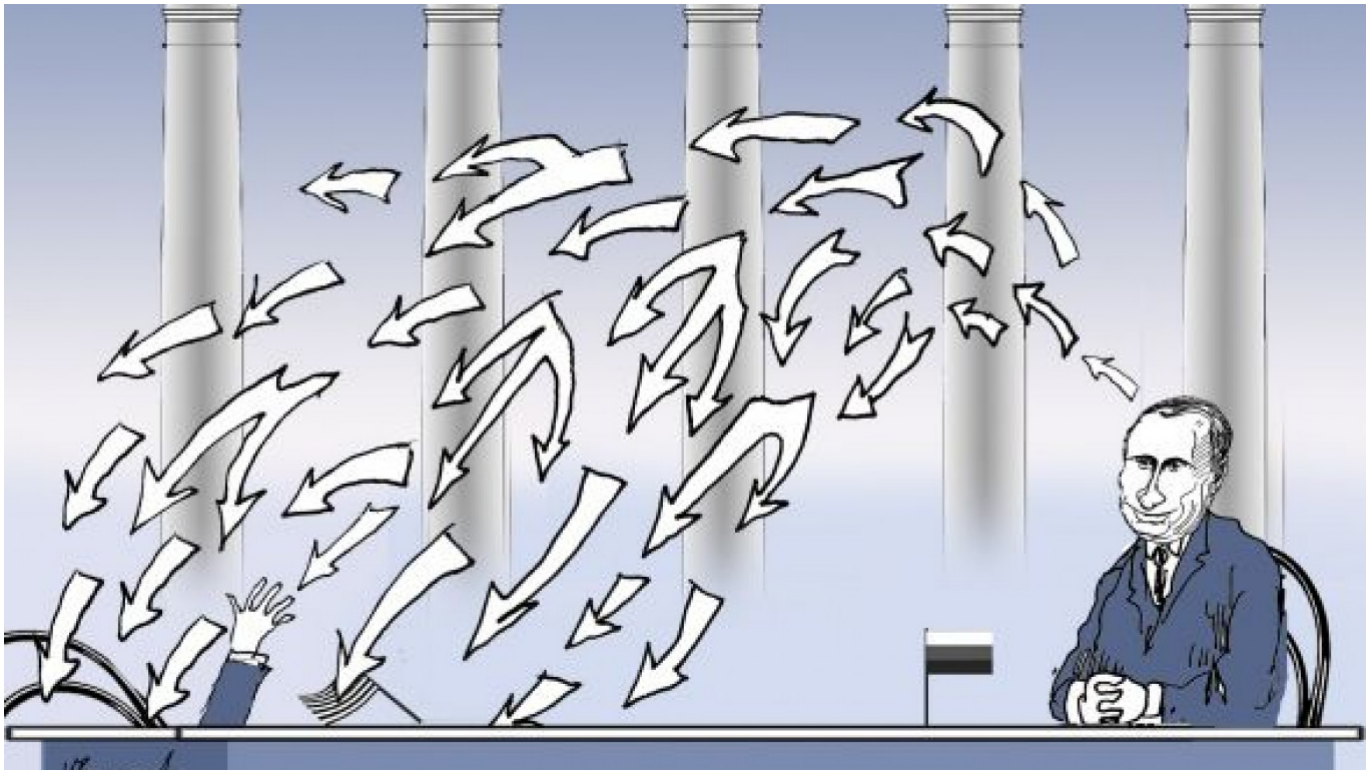
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

North Korea and Russia Flex Their Muscles

By Alexander Golts

April 01, 2013



What could Kim Jong-un, the leader of North Korea and international pariah, have in common with President Vladimir Putin? At first glance, not much. But both have initiated provocative military actions recently. Of course, the top honors go to Kim, who late last week decided to escalate tensions on the peninsula to the limit of nuclear apocalypse. In response to military exercises by the U.S. and South Korea that involved U.S. strategic bombers, Pyongyang said it would strike U.S. territory with a nuclear missile. He issued orders to his generals against the backdrop of a map that was clearly labeled "Plan of Attack on the United States." We have heard similar irrational threats of pre-emptive nuclear attacks before, but this time Western satellites detected movements at North Korean missile launch facilities.

Coincidentally, Putin decided to move its troops at the same time the North Korean tyrant was threatening the U.S. After flying in from the BRICS summit in Durban, South Africa, Putin ordered the deployment of troops in the Southern Military District on the Black Sea coast. The order went out to the 45th Airborne regiment as well as the 106th Airborne Division and Special Forces of the Main Intelligence Directorate. Military transport aircraft

successfully transferred the troops to the Black Sea region. A simultaneous deployment order went out to the Black Sea Fleet and amphibious ships with marines on board set out to sea. Other troops stationed in the area also began moving into the area of troop concentration.

The activity is proof that Putin fully supports Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu's recommendation to test the combat readiness of troops through surprise inspections. In exactly the same way, a month ago Shoigu ordered a surprise deployment of troops in the Central Military District. Such checks enable the country's leadership to obtain a realistic assessment of the army's battle readiness.

The only difference is that the latest movements are designed to test Russian troops that are mostly stationed in a foreign country — in Ukraine. Authorities in Kiev claim that Moscow gave them ample warning in advance of the maneuvers, but the Ukrainian opposition used the exercises as an opportunity to express its dissatisfaction with the Kharkov Accord that permits the Russian military to maintain a presence in Ukraine. This time, the sudden maneuvers served as a reminder to Kiev that Moscow could deploy its troops for war at any moment without consulting Ukraine. Such a development would effectively force Ukraine to indirectly participate in hostilities against its will.

Perhaps this is Putin's response to joint U.S.-Georgian military maneuvers now under way near Tbilisi. A Foreign Ministry representative has already denounced those maneuvers, stating on March 22 that "any foreign military cooperation with Tbilisi, no matter what motivates it, complicates the prospects for peace and stability in the region."

But that statement conveniently overlooks the fact that Russia's maneuvers on the Black Sea involve seven times more troops than those near Tbilisi. According to Deputy Defense Minister Anatoly Antonov, the exercises in the Southern Military District will increase the battle readiness of the Black Sea Fleet, something in which "all of the coastal states have an interest." I highly doubt that all of those coastal states share that view.

The real problem is that Russia's military exercises were conducted without due warning. All of the treaties and agreements governing the control and deployment of conventional weapons in Europe aim at preventing a sudden escalation of interstate tensions from turning into a military conflict. That is why the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe — a treaty that Russia withdrew from in 2007— sets regional ceilings on certain types of weapons, thus preventing troop concentrations large enough to conduct offensive operations. The Vienna agreement on confidence-building measures requires advance warning of maneuvers involving more than 9,000 troops. It was on this basis that Moscow chose not to issue an advance warning of its current maneuvers involving 7,000 soldiers and officers. In this way, Russia violated the spirit, if not the letter of that agreement.

The most recent war on the European continent, the Russia-Georgia war of 2008, also took place in the Black Sea region. Now, Russia has suddenly begun moving large numbers of troops near that region. Of course, NATO, using its satellite reconnaissance, saw these movements and asked, "What will those Russians think of next?" And this much is certain: the surprise maneuvers do nothing to promote stability on the continent.

The military component of the current maneuvers has also given rise to a number of questions. The Russian army is 30 percent short of the number of soldiers it said it needed

to form a formidable force, and roughly half of those serving have been in uniform less than six months. It is therefore inconceivable that within only a matter of hours and without significant advance warning, such units could have managed to deploy in the required direction and that the marines could have been sailing aboard ship. Recall that during the Russia-Georgia war, the marines were still trying to deploy on ships when the conflict had already ended.

The military exercises in southern Russia reveal certain similarities between the behavior of Putin and North Korea's Kim. Both ordered military exercises to impress or intimidate foreign powers and to reinforce their authority at home. That being said, they differ greatly in intent, of course. Kim threatens nuclear war, while Putin simply stages maneuvers.

German military theorist Carl von Clausewitz argued that war is merely a continuation of politics. In Russia's case, the senseless military maneuvers are a continuation of equally pointless government policy.

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