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Kremlin Outfoxing NATO in Information War

By Alexander Golts

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It was a UN Security Council session for the history books: U.S. Ambassador Adlai Stevenson II pointed to the photographs of Soviet missile launching sites in Cuba taken by aerial reconnaissance aircraft and demanded that bewildered Soviet Ambassador Valerian Zorin answer his question: Do you acknowledge the deployment of those missiles or not?

More than 60 years have passed since then. Reconnaissance conducted by several groupings of satellites and drone aircraft have seemingly dissipated the so-called "fog of war" — that is, not knowing the exact location of enemy troops with any certainty. This high-tech reconnaissance enabled the U.S. military to destroy enemy units from the air before they could even reach their marshaling areas during the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

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Today the world press is brimming with reports that Russian military equipment has crossed the Ukrainian border and is moving to support separatists in Donetsk. However, a U.S. State Department spokeswoman only stated the fact that military equipment had been deployed, without identifying who had deployed it.

"In the last three days, a convoy of three T-64 tanks, several BM-21 or Grad multiple rocket launchers, and other military vehicles crossed from Russia into Ukraine near the Ukrainian town of Snizhne," the spokeswoman stated.

But if Russia sent these weapons, the U.S. reaction is very weak to this case of direct aggression. "We call on Russia ... to demonstrate its commitment to peace, to stop weapons and fighters from crossing into Ukraine, and to cooperate with Ukraine in the peace plan's implementation. A failure by Russia to de-escalate the situation will lead to additional costs," the spokeswoman said.

The reaction by NATO was similar. Its Allied Command Operations website posted somewhat unconvincing evidence showing that Russian tanks had moved to a military base just 75 kilometers from the Ukrainian border. But NATO analysts have not ventured to claim that the three T-64 tanks positively identified in the eastern Ukrainian town of Makeyevka had deployed from that base in Russia — perhaps because the Soviet-era T-64 tank is no longer in active service in Russia's Armed Forces.

So why did the West level only a limited and extremely vague accusation that Russia could easily deny, instead of nailing Moscow to the wall with conclusive evidence as Stevenson did 60 years ago? Why have none of the NATO member countries ventured to set the case before the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, whose Vienna Document provides the mechanisms for initiating public proceedings to investigate a possible act of aggression?

There are two possible answers to that question.

First, those who accuse the Kremlin of supplying weapons to the separatists may lack firm evidence that Russia is conducting secret operations in Donetsk and Luhansk. In this case, observers might have greatly overestimated the capabilities of information technology for use in warfare.

Although U.S. reconnaissance satellites once managed to pinpoint the launch site of Ukrainian missiles that in 2001 mistakenly shot down a passenger airplane, they seem to be incapable of constantly monitoring the 1,500 kilometer border between Ukraine and Russia. It is impossible, consequently, to identify exactly when and where tanks and multiple rocket launchers crossed over from Russian onto Ukrainian territory.

NATOs uncertainty, in turn, means that Russian President Vladimir Putin can always claim that the separatists bought their tanks and multiple rocket launchers at the same shop around the corner where he claimed the "little green men" in Crimea had obtained their ultra-modern battle gear.

This new type of low-intensity conflict, unlimited by the West, would enable Putin to turn back the clock and correct the undesirable consequences of what he termed "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century" — the collapse of the Soviet Union.

After all, Moscow could easily wage a proxy war in many of the former Soviet republics. They all have lower standards of living than Russia, and each has a Russian-speaking population that is not especially happy with its status and would readily vote for annexation to Russia. It would be easy enough to smuggle weapons in wherever needed and nobody could prove Russia's involvement.

All of that is bad enough, but the situation is decidedly worse if the West actually does possess the necessary evidence but lacks the will to make it public for the simple reason that Western leaders do not know what to do once they have incriminated the Kremlin in conducting secret operations against a neighboring state.

But how should they behave with a nuclear power that conducts subversive operations?
The rules were clear during the Cold War: As soon as one of the superpowers brought another country into its sphere of influence, the rival superpower began its own proxy war by recruiting and arming their own mercenaries. That happened in Angola, Cambodia, Nicaragua and Afghanistan in the 1980s.

However, the Western states have grown unaccustomed to such Cold War games. Is it possible they must revive those skills now?

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