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US military in no shape to face the grandsons of Red Army

By Eric Margolis

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War fever is in the air. Fifty thousand Russian troops and armor are massed on Ukraine's eastern border. Europe and Washington worry that the reborn Red Army may sweep west across Ukraine, Moldova, the Baltics – even into Poland.

The West is suffering from a bad case of Cold War chills.

Not only are the Western powers worried, they are discovering that they likely lack the means to stop possible Russian incursions into what was the former Soviet Empire.

They should not be at all surprised that Russia is again showing signs of life.

Frederick the Great, the renowned Prussian warrior-king, warned: “he who tried to defend everything, defends nothing.”

Every young officers should have Great Fredrick's words tattooed on his right hand. Soon after the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, a small number of strategists, this analyst included, warned NATO, “do not move east. It's a bridge too far.”

Soviet chairman Mikhail Gorbachev had agreed to let rebellious East Germany escape Soviet control – but in exchange for NATO’s vow not to push east in previously Soviet dominated areas of Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. The US and NATO agreed, then quickly broke their pledge.

NATO’s advance into Eastern Europe, the Baltic and the Caucasus – not to mention former Soviet Central Asia – that brought the US-led alliance right up to Russia’s borders. US anti-missile systems were scheduled to go into Poland, close to Russian territory. New US bases were set up in Bulgaria, Rumania and Central Asia.

Unsubtle US efforts to bring ex-Russian Ukraine and the vital Sevastopol naval base in Crimea under NATO control – no doubt to punish Russia for supporting Syria and Iran – proved the last straw for the Kremlin.

Talking tough is easy. Defending Eastern Europe from a possible Russian invasion will not be. The main problem is that while US/NATO guarantees have been advanced to Russia’s sensitive borders, their military capabilities have not. In short, commitment without capability.

Russia’s military could take over the Baltic states of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia in an afternoon. Sizeable portions of their populations are ethnic Russians.

NATO is not deployed or equipped to go to war over Ukraine: its troops are far to the west, without supply systems or air cover. Besides, European powers, aside from the little Nazis in Denmark and Ukraine’s nationalists, want no part of war with Russia – that’s left to the war hawks safely at home in Washington.

The barrage of trade sanctions Washington is imposed on Russia is an act of pre-war. We should remember that US sanctions imposed on Japan in 1941 that led Tokyo to attack the Western powers.

During the Cold War, the US had some 400,000 troops in Europe, 800 warplanes and potent naval forces. Today, the US has only 43,000 troops left in Europe: two combat brigades and the rest air force and logistics personnel. The old days when the Soviet Union had 50,000 tanks pointed at Western Europe are long gone, but Russia’s modernized armed forces still pack punch.

Meanwhile, the US has scattered forces all over the globe in what Frederick the Great would call an effort to defend everything. Most notably, US troops have gone to Afghanistan, Iraq, then Kuwait, and many home. America’s strongest divisions are now guarding Kansas and Texas instead of German’s Fulda Gap and Hanover.

America’s military power has been dissipated in little colonial wars, just as Britain’s were in the 19th century. When British imperial troops had to face real German soldiers, they were slaughtered. Similarly, the US military, reconfigured after Vietnam to wage guerilla wars, is in no shape today to face the grandsons of the once mighty Red Army.

Cautious, patient Vlad Putin is not about to invade Poland. The real danger is what would happen if the ethnic Russian inhabitants of the Baltic states, Ukraine and Moldova rise up and demand reunification with Mother Russia?

Would Russia go to their aid? Would Europe and the US be ready to risk nuclear war for obscure places like Luhansk, Kharkov, Chisinau or Kaunus?

In Ukraine and Crimea we are now seeing the results of overly aggressive Western geopolitics. Russia was woefully underestimated. A crisis between nuclear-armed powers should never have been allowed to occur. It's sheer madness. Like nuclear-armed children fighting over a toy.

Columnist and author Eric Margolis is a veteran of many conflicts in the Middle East, Margolis recently was featured in a special appearance on Britain's Sky News TV as "the man who got it right" in his predictions about the dangerous risks and entanglements the US would face in Iraq. His latest book is American Raj: Liberation or Domination?: Resolving the Conflict Between the West and the Muslim World