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Russian War Games Spill Secrets, Spur Neighbors; 'Scared the Hell Out of NATO'

By Leon Mangasarian and Ott Ummelas
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Russian jets probing NATO airspace and supersized war drills are spilling Kremlin military secrets and scaring European nations into stiffening their armed forces.

The alliance said by late October it intercepted more than 100 Russian planes this year, more than three times the number in 2013. A report by the European Leadership Network, a London security research group, termed the incidents "a highly disturbing picture of violations of national airspace, emergency scrambles" and "narrowly avoided mid-air collisions."

Yet there are benefits for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

"Clearly, every time we come into contact with Russian forces and every time we see their tactics and how they deploy, we do learn about them," U.S. Air Force General Philip Breedlove, the 28-member NATO's top military commander, said in Tallinn on Nov. 19. "They are just happening more often and occasionally, the size of the activities is larger."

A worsening standoff is pitting Europe and the U.S. against Russia over Ukraine in the biggest crisis since the Cold War's end 25 years ago. Even German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier -- a persistent proponent of dialog -- said on Nov. 18 after shuttle diplomacy in Kiev and Moscow, that he sees little reason for optimism.

"The rapid mobilization of 20,000 to 40,000 Russian troops at the Ukrainian border scared the hell out of NATO," Karl-Heinz Kamp, academic director at the German government's Federal Academy for Security Policy in Berlin, said by phone.

'To Subjugate'

Russian President Vladimir Putin said the U.S. wants "not to humiliate, but to subjugate" Russia, in remarks at a Nov. 18 meeting of his People's Front party supporters in Moscow.

"We had such brilliant politicians like Nikita Khrushchev, who hammered the desk with his shoe at the United Nations," Putin said in an Oct. 24 speech. "And the whole world, primarily the United States, and NATO thought: this Nikita is best left alone, he might just go and fire a missile."

Monitoring drills and Russian aircraft flying along NATO or Finnish and Swedish airspace is yielding intelligence on command and control, communications and tactics, said Lukasz Kulesa, research director of the ELN in London and former deputy head of Poland's National Security Bureau that advises the Polish president. Non-NATO members Finland and Sweden upgraded their alliance ties in September.

'Complex Deployments'

"A Russian mission that sent planes on the same day to the Baltic, the North Sea and the Black Sea tells us what Russian capabilities have become," Kulesa said by phone. "It gives us a much better understanding of Russian readiness and their ability to perform more complex deployments."

After suffering initial setbacks in the 2008 Georgia War, Russia has continued investing in its armed forces. The Kremlin increased military spending by 50 percent since 2005 while NATO has cut spending by 20 percent, according to NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg.

NATO, at its Sept. 4-5 Wales summit, shored up its eastern defenses against Russia as the U.S., which makes up two-thirds of alliance military spending, urged European allies to pay more. The alliance agreed to rotate more troops through eastern Europe and to set up a 5,000-soldier rapid-reaction force.

The Baltic states are bolstering their armed forces with Estonia vowing more troops on its border with Russia after a security officer was snatched and taken to Moscow.

NATO Target

Estonia, which already meets NATO's military spending target of 2 percent of gross domestic product, plans to raise spending to 2.05 percent next year. Latvia and Lithuania -- both now spending less than 1 percent -- aim to reach the goal by 2020.

Alliance states including Denmark, Poland and Germany also plan to increase defense spending, though in the case of Germany only from 2016. Germany spends about 1.3 percent of gross domestic product on the military.

Denmark is poised to spend more than \$4 billion in its biggest air defense upgrade on either Lockheed Martin Corp. (LMT)'s F-35, Boeing Co. (BA)'s F-18 Super Hornet or Typhoon fighters, built by the Eurofighter consortium of BAE Systems Plc (BA/), Airbus Group NV (AIR) and Italy's Finmeccanica SpA. (FNC)

Poland, which shares borders with both Russia and Ukraine, will choose suppliers for helicopters and an air-defense system within a year as it begins a \$27 billion program to overhaul the military and replace Soviet-era military equipment, Defense Minister Tomasz Siemoniak said in an Oct. 24 interview. It's also bringing forward purchases of attack helicopters, drones and missiles for Lockheed F-16 jets.

'Wake-Up Call'

Charly Salenius-Pasternak, a security expert at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs in Helsinki, termed Russia's moves "quite a wake-UNp call" that makes it impossible for Finnish or Swedish politicians "who want to be taken seriously" to dismiss Russia's buildup as low-level rearming.

"Russia's armed forces can do things that they couldn't do 10 years ago," he said in an interview. "Russia has a much better ability to transport large units, long distances and have them arrive combat ready."

That's triggered a debate in both Finland and Sweden on whether to join NATO.

Putin, whose military has taken control of or hold territory that under international law belongs to Moldova and Georgia as well as annexing Ukraine's Crimea in March, noted in his Oct. 24 Valdai speech that when Prussian statesman Otto von Bismarck first appeared in the European arena in the 19th century "they found him dangerous because he spoke his mind."

"I also always try to say what I think," Putin said.