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By John Vinocur

Putin's Nuclear Plan Is Working

Washington musters only an intermittently credible response as the Kremlin tries to undermine NATO.

*Ядерний план Путіна працює
Вашингтону лише ненадовго вдасться переконати, що Кремль намагається
підірвати НАТО*

Для Путіна виведення з ладу НАТО – пріоритетне завдання, вважає автор статті. На початку 80-х СРСР ледь не вдалося зіграти на страхах європейців перед розміщенням атомної зброї США в Європі, згадує він. Тепер дебати союзників про можливу модернізацію ядерних сил США дають росіянам нову можливість спровокувати обурення і зайнятися підривною роботою. На думку автора, Путіна підбадьорює той факт, що адміністрація Обами утримується від застосування зброї у відповідь на агресію проти України. "Україна не отримає гармат. Передбачуваний план США по розміщенню важкої бронетехніки і військовослужбовців США в прифронтових країнах НАТО, що межують з Росією, - це, схоже, вузький компроміс у відповідь на прохання цих країн про створення постійних військових баз НАТО", - пише автор. А курс США щодо Росії вселяє довіру лише ненадовго, вважає автор. Білий дім запевняв, що зумів ізолювати Москву, але висловлювання держсекретаря Керрі після візиту в Росію "межували з підлабузництвом", вважає автор.

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/putins-nuclear-plan-is-working-1434392929>



GROWING MENACE: Russia's nuclear threat exposes fissures in NATO. Photo: SERGEI CHIRIKOV/European Pressphoto Agency

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A Russian academic, often a disseminator of Vladimir Putin's designs for the future, offered up a message of nuclear provocation and intimidation concerning the West for a small group of European security-affairs specialists gathered at a Paris think tank last week.

"We now have the nuclear capacity to confront NATO in Europe," the Russian emissary said, according to an event participant. Here was a Russian insider's description of Moscow's intention to be a meaner, harsher problem beyond the dimensions of the confrontation in Ukraine.

The Russian nuclear boast was not new. But the timing—two days after the U.S. repeated its unheeded complaint that Russia has tested a cruise-type missile banned by a joint arms-control agreement—gave an in-your-face sense to Moscow's contention that it now has the nukes to neuter the superiority the U.S. and NATO still enjoy in conventional forces. This fits a portrayal of Mr. Putin by Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, as someone looking "for opportunities to discredit and undermine the Alliance."

Next week, NATO defense ministers will meet to discuss what a Brussels diplomat called "the Russian nuclear posture." That means the U.S. and its allies are searching for a riposte to an aggrandizing Russia whose strategy provides for regional conflicts using nuclear weapons alongside "little green men"—Russian troops that Moscow claims aren't really Russian soldiers—and conventional forces.

For the nostalgic Mr. Putin, disabling NATO is a priority with promising precedents. In the early 1980s, the Soviet Union nearly succeeded in turning allies' fears of basing U.S. atomic weapons into an Allied fold on countering existing Soviet SS-20 missiles with U.S. cruises and Pershings. German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt's Social Democratic coalition fell in 1982 over his party's resistance to their deployment. Soviet money and influence coursed through the antimissile movement.

Now Allied debate about possible U.S. nuclear updates offers the Russians a new occasion for rage and subversion. The updates, according to European sources, could involve the U.S. modernizing existing nukes, increasing its defensive capacities or even stationing new nuclear weapons in Europe. The Russians have every reason to relish recurrent indications of Europe's indecision and dissention.

A poll released last week reports public opinion in Germany, France and Italy opposes defending NATO border-states coming under Russian attack. German was the least-eager ally. These attitudes project a NATO whose foundations—shared risk and the Article 5 guarantee of defense to any member by all members—are wobbling.

If the Ukrainian experience shows anything, it's a real Russian capability to spin the notion of a Western military response against Russian aggression into an instant American threat to world peace. As his threats become more visibly nuclear, Mr. Putin will be encouraged by the fact that beyond the sanctions the Kremlin ignores, the Obama administration has skirted any armed response determined enough to give the Russians pause.

Guns for Ukraine are out. A reported U.S. plan to station heavy armored vehicles and U.S. troops with front-line NATO members at Russia's borders looks like a dosed compromise on those countries' request for the presence of permanent allied bases.

All the same, nuclear-armed France, no admirer of Barack Obama's handling of Syria or his fade on attacking Bashar Assad, considers the American president's giving nuclear thought to responding to Russian nuclear-bomber runs and movement of missile launchers as "an engagement beyond what he had planned."

"It's very important that the Allies integrate the idea of possible Russian nuclear weapons in regional conflicts," French officials told me. Still, they saw "no indication" of a new NATO doctrine of containment at hand, and found stationing of new U.S. forces in Europe "improbable."

Mr. Obama's tougher talk about Moscow still has the look of a minimalist reworking of a very hesitant approach—although one that he now describes to allies as "standing up to Russian aggression in Ukraine."

A fundamental problem is that there is no way for a new NATO line on nukes to exist and be compatible with the continuous electoral cold sweats of German Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union. It's next to impossible for a totally nuclear-averse Germany to effectively play European leader in NATO and the European Union in the face of a Russia turning its nuclear shadow into an everyday menace.

In the end, American credibility on Russia exists only for short periods. For months, the Obama administration had been unconvincingly claiming success in isolating Moscow. Then, five weeks ago, concluding a Russian visit, Secretary of State John Kerry spoke up from the edge of obsequiousness:

"I am particularly grateful and I want to express my appreciation to President Putin for the very significant and serious conversation that he engaged in for the very significant amount of time that he contributed to the discussion. And I express President Obama's gratitude for Russia's willingness to engage in this discussion at a time when the exchange of view could not be more important."

Presto change-o, the U.S. now wants to look semi-tough on Russia again. You may officially exhale.

Mr. Vinocur is former executive editor of the International Herald Tribune.