

Cold War Redux?

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In December 1991, with the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Moscow grounded its air force, particularly its strategic bombers, due to a lack of fuel, spare parts, and the will to project power. The Soviets, returning to their traditional identity as Russians, began to look inward. The nation flirted with a form of democracy, endured a period of sparring oligarchs, and with the rise of Vladimir Putin as president, returned to a form of governance that it has historically favored: the strongman.

It took some time, but Putin has restored Russian power to the point that he feels comfortable going toe-to-toe with opposing nations both small and great. Under the guise of supporting Russian separatists, Putin won a military victory over Georgia in August 2008, receiving control over the breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In March 2014, after Crimea broke away from Ukraine, Russia annexed it, and more recently, Putin has indicated that the Kremlin would not allow a military defeat of the ethnically Russian partisans fighting in eastern Ukraine. While America and the European Union protested and imposed sanctions, they did nothing substantial to curb Russian power.

Putin has warned the U.S. against taking action in Syria, saying Russia has plans in place should American forces cross that line. He also thumbed his nose at America when he granted asylum to traitorous National Security Agency leaker, Edward Snowden. When the European Union implemented its most recent energy package, which requires pipelines and the natural gas in them to be owned by separate concerns, the Russian president announced that his country would no longer pursue building a pipeline through the Black Sea into Bulgaria, and further, all future natural gas would be piped through Turkey rather than Ukraine. This move has sent European nations scrambling to find new ways to import natural gas reliably.

Perhaps his most concerning moves have been to threaten cyberattacks if NATO continues its build-up of a rapid-reaction force in the Baltic States, and to hint at a spectrum of offensive options, including nuclear World War III, if NATO tries to reverse his annexation of Crimea. In a March meeting between Russian generals and American officials, Moscow warned that it would respond “forcefully including through the use of nuclear force” should Western nations aim to wrest the region away from Russia. “The Russian people,” Putin’s deputy warned, “would demand a forceful response,” if NATO sent arms to Ukraine.

Further, the delegate added, “[T]he same conditions that existed in Ukraine and caused Russia to take action there” exist now in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, which have significant numbers of citizens who identify ethnically as Russian. Putin hopes to entice these ethnic Russians toward the Motherland without giving NATO grounds to send troops to the region. If NATO did so, it would make the military alliance “a potential co-aggressor against Russian-speaking minorities in Baltic states,” a situation described as “potentially more dangerous” than the one in Ukraine.

Russia’s aggressive actions in the area have been ongoing for at least a year already. NATO warplanes had to scramble 400 times in 2014 in response to an increase in incursive Russian air activity not seen since the Cold War. In March 2015, a group of eleven Russian military aircraft was

spotted by NATO's Baltic Air Police Mission flying in international airspace near Lithuania. They were intercepted and turned away. More recently, the Swedish military identified and pursued two Russian bombers and two fighter planes near the islands of Gotland and Bornholm off the country's east coast. Another group of four Russian planes flew over the Baltic Sea south toward the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad north of Poland and was intercepted by scrambled NATO jets.

Its games are not just aerial. Last October, Sweden sent minesweepers out onto the Baltic Sea to search for a suspected Russian submarine patrolling waters near its capital, Stockholm. Early this spring, Russian ambassador Mikhail Vanin warned Denmark that its warships could become the target of Russian nuclear missiles if the nation decided to participate in NATO's missile defense. In recent months, Moscow has enhanced Russia's military presence in the Arctic by arming the Northern Fleet, based in Murmansk, with new nuclear submarines; establishing a line of bases along its immense northern coast; and resurrecting mothballed Soviet-era military bases like the one at Alakurtti, close to Finland.

In response, Norway, which has slashed its defense budget in recent years, will increase military spending this year by 3.3% despite economic troubles caused by the collapse of the price of oil, Norway's principal export. It is also restructuring its military to deal better with these new risks. Nonaligned Finland has floated the idea of joining NATO, a once-unthinkable notion that is gaining public support. With Russia's Cold War behavior returning, all of its nearby European neighbors are having to shift out of their "rich, fat, and happy" mode to a more watchful posture.

It is uncertain what this means in terms of biblical prophecy—perhaps only confirming the turmoil and military aggression that the Bible predicts for the time of the end (Matthew 24:6). It certainly spotlights the current weakness of the U.S., as the Obama administration has no answer for the bold belligerence displayed by Putin. Yet, in the worst-case scenario, it could mean a return to Cold War hostilities that progress to a far more explosive and deadly conclusion.