

# Putin Resorting to Cold War Threats

By J. MICHAEL WALLER

Russian President Vladimir Putin increases the KGB influence in his government and simulates a nuclear attack on the United States in his re-election campaign.

It was the ultimate campaign stunt: The president, clad in a navy uniform and white gloves, at sea on a sunny morning, standing on the deck of a giant titanium-hulled ballistic-missile submarine. He looked on smartly as the military began a week-long exercise to unleash its triad of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), submarine-launched ballistic missiles and strategic bombers in the biggest nuclear doomsday drill since the coldest days of the Cold War.

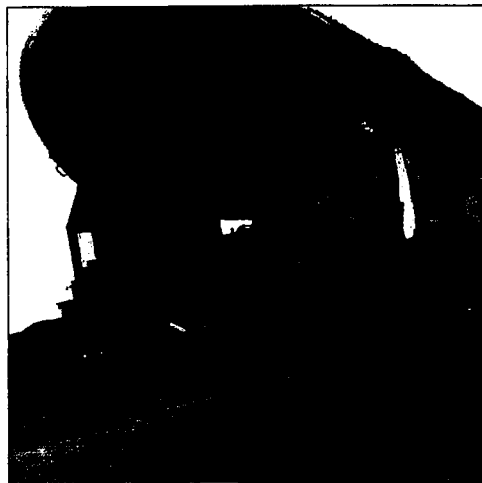
The president's administration officially billed it as an "antiterrorism" exercise. But as land-based missiles arched their way a third of the way around the planet to the warhead target range in the Pacific, and as the bombers followed their dreaded Arctic route to fire cruise missiles over the top of the earth, the reality of the massive exercise was clear: The threat of Cold War nuclear extermination is as real as ever.

An American president well could have been run out of office for personally commanding and celebrating such political theater. The commander in chief in this case, however, was Russian President Vladimir Putin. The date was Feb. 17, less than a month before the March 14 elections that everyone expected him to win. Bezopastnost-2004, as the strategic command and staff exercise was called, was a mock nuclear attack on the United States, the largest since Communist Party boss Leonid Brezhnev ruled from the Kremlin in 1982.

Weeks later, Putin further consolidated his already strong control of the country. According to

Jacques Amalric of the leftist French daily *Liberation*, Putin has placed former KGB officers in nearly 60 percent of all presidential administration posts. In early March he fired his prime minister and named to replace him a relatively anonymous technocrat with no political base but with a murky KGB background. Mikhail Fradkov has an incomplete official résumé that Russian critics say indicates an early KGB career. At the time of his appointment, he was head of the tax police, Russia's equivalent of the U.S. Internal Revenue Service. The Russian tax police, however, has a notorious past. Under Soviet rule, it was the dissident-hunting KGB Fifth Chief Directorate.

The White House expressed no concern with either development. Few American media commentators seemed to notice. The Kremlin had wanted the world to see Putin atop the conning tower of the *Arkhangelsk* nuclear submarine. *Pravda* loved the carefully orchestrated action, almost lovingly reporting on how



Putin personally inspected the nuclear-reactor control room and exhorted sailors in the mess to eat pancakes in observance of Shrove Tuesday.

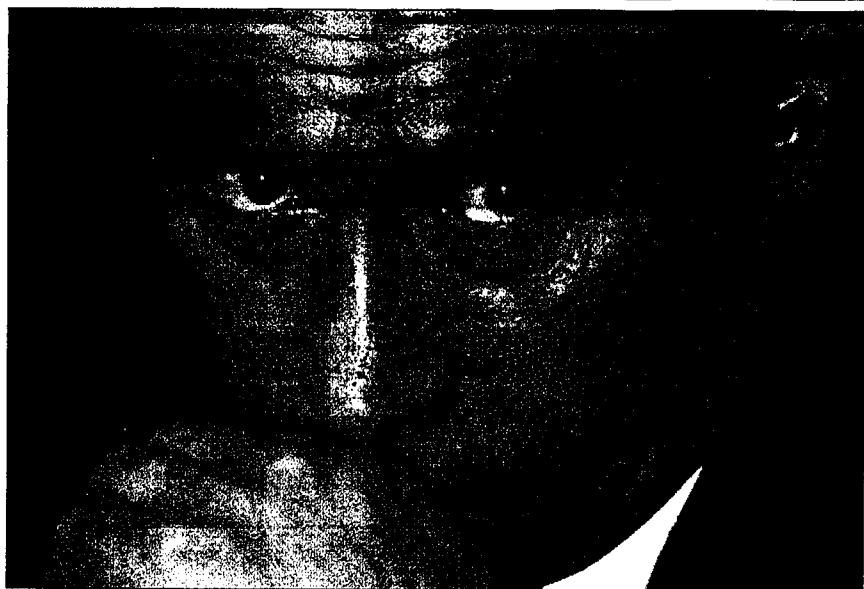
The Typhoon-class vessel, with the hatches of its 20 vertical missile tubes running the deck in pairs, was cruising on the surface of the Barents Sea off Russia's northwestern coast, waiting for an SS-N-23 strategic nuclear missile to burst through the ocean surface from another sub, the *Novomoskovsk*, which was lurking in the deep nearby. The missile's dummy warhead, according to the Russian military newspaper *Krasnaya Zvezda* (Red Star), was set to strike the Kura target range on the Kamchatka Peninsula, across the Eurasian landmass, 120 degrees around the world.

There was Putin, in front of the TV cameras, waiting for the geyser of the missile from below. But there was nothing. Word came up that the missile had stuck in the tube. The *Novomoskovsk*, an older Delta-IV hull, fired a second missile. Again, nothing. The test was a flop—a big embarrassment for the Northern Fleet, coincidentally not far from the August 2000 *Kursk* disaster when a submarine was lost along with its crew of 118 men. The Russian navy was humiliated by its failure to fire the missiles, but if Putin was, nobody could see. Russia's state-controlled TV networks made sure that the dapper tough guy Putin was seen in command—and that nobody knew the launches had failed.

For good measure, another Delta-IV sub, the *Karelia*, launched a missile the next day. The SS-N-23, which the Russians call *Sineva*, shattered out through the surface, veering wildly off course in a 98-second flight that ended when the missile blew up in midair. Putin wasn't there. He was back on land at the Plesetsk Cosmodrome with Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov, another KGB man, this time out of his navy gear and sporting green army fatigues for the campaign cameras. The Russian president witnessed the flawless launch of a Kosmos-2405 spy satellite aboard a Molnia-M rocket as part of the nuclear-war exercise. Talking to reporters at Plesetsk, Putin announced a bold initiative to modernize the Strategic Rocket Forces with next-generation weapons and, according to United Press International and Russian press accounts, said he might authorize an upgrade of the nation's Soviet-era missile-defense system.

The former Soviet republic of Kazakhstan, in Central Asia, provided a platform for Moscow to launch two more

**Nuclear family:** One of the several new intercontinental ballistic missiles that Russia has been testing.



VIKTOR KORONIEV/EP

ICBMs: an SS-19 and the brand-new SS-27 Topol-M, the latter aboard a mobile launcher. Their dummy warheads sailed across the continent to Kamchatka. The Russian government is deploying the modern Topol-M even as the United States provides Moscow with resources to dismantle its obsolete and deteriorating nuclear missiles — aid that allows the Kremlin to deploy the next-generation nukes and keep its arsenal within the limits set in arms-control agreements with Washington.

At least 14 strategic bombers fanned out to the west, north and south with supersonic Tu-160 Blackjack bombers heading toward the North Atlantic and old but dependable Tu-95 Bear bombers, the old Soviet Union's answer to the American B-52, firing cruise missiles at an Arctic target on Novaya Zemlya island, according to Nikolai Sokov of

the Center for Nonproliferation Studies.

Putin's nuclear political theater and choice of a KGB man as chief of government are only parts of his aggressive reelection campaign. The recentralized Russian state has squeezed the once-free news media into exercising self-censorship and prevented the rise of political parties or politicians who could challenge him. Members of the state Duma, or lower house of parliament, complain of harassment. Some allege that Putin or forces loyal to him were responsible for the 1998 assassination of Duma member Galina Starovoitova and the more recent mysterious death of journalist turned lawmaker Yuri Shchekochikhin.

Since becoming president in 2000, Putin has sacked parliament, forced governors out of office, driven opposition businessmen into exile and pressured the courts to rule on issues only in his

## Russian Journalist Describes Censorship Pressure

Few speak publicly about the censorship pressures in Vladimir Putin's Russia, but one of the country's most distinguished military analysts, journalist Pavel Felgenhauer, did so after trying to analyze the Feb. 17 submarine-launched missile events on Russian television. Below are excerpts from his essay in the *Moscow Times*:

"I was asked to comment on the mishap for Center TV and NTV, who reported the missile failure, but commented very cautiously on it. Off-air, both channels' news anchors told me how nervous they were, since Channel One and Russia [TV] had not reported the failure and there were phone calls from the

Kremlin with instructions to shut up.

"I was told that a request to appear on NTV live caused a squabble between management and the news staff. I was told the following quote: 'If Felgenhauer says anything critical of Putin live on air, the FSB [formerly known as the KGB] will come tomorrow and take over NTV.'

"The news anchors looked at me in horror as the cameras rolled, and I similarly at them — terrified at the prospect of causing the station's takeover. So I used the mildest words possible, but since the gist of my comment was so critical, I do not believe I will be reappearing anytime soon on national TV."

— JMW

**Cold warrior:** Putin is going on the offensive to increase Russia's global influence and crush his political rivals.

favor. "The character of Russia under Putin has been a steady gravitation toward a security state," according to Ilan Berman, a senior scholar at the American Foreign Policy Council. "Everybody talks a lot about Russia's oligarchs. What they don't understand is that Putin himself is an oligarch. His currency is not natural resources like oil or business, it's intelligence."

Anticipating the campaign, Putin cracked down on the main financier of the reformist, pro-Western opposition last year. Oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky, age 40, who openly funded the Yabloko and Union of Right Forces parties and who bought Moscow's prestigious and, in the last 15 years, openly pro-Western *Moscow News*, suddenly became a target of criminal investigations. He decided to finance his own campaign to replace Putin, only to disappear for several days and wind up, disheveled and disoriented, in Ukraine. He says he was kidnapped, drugged and forced to commit embarrassing acts that his captors videotaped.

It's not an accident that the teetotaling, athletic, notoriously foul-mouthed Putin is so popular. "The Russian people are very comfortable with the type of 'managed democracy' he brings to the table. After years of economic and political decline, they're very enamored with the type of assertive foreign policy that he's been pursuing," Berman says.

"Putin is espousing ideas larger than himself. He is espousing a Great Russia. Whether it's regional or ideological, it reestablishes Russia as a central player in the Middle East, in the Asian theater, even in places like Latin America," Berman says. "The idea is that Russia is reassuming its natural place as a great power. That is very appealing to Russians who have suffered from a decade of decline."

According to Berman, "Putin is really balancing between strategic partnership with the United States" and the priorities of selling weapons and technology to China, nuclear technology to Iran, and other issues. "There is a limit to the strategic partnership with the United States," he says. "The Russian-Iranian relationship, the Russian-Chinese relationship — these are geopolitical and inimical to American interests."

And what of the White House's policy toward Russia? Berman says, "This administration is enamored with the idea of partnership. And Putin is exploiting it."

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