

Putin Watches War Games, Tells Soldiers to Boost Russian Defense

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Putin observing maneuvers during the Kavkaz 2012 military exercises. **Alexei Druzhinin**

President Vladimir Putin oversaw Russian military exercises and warned soldiers that more conflicts around the world meant they had to "keep their powder dry" and improve Russia's defenses.

Speaking to soldiers at maneuvers in the North Caucasus region, near where Russian troops invaded neighboring Georgia in a five-day 2008 war, Putin said the use of military force was rising worldwide.

"You are all educated people; you see what is happening in the world. You see, unfortunately, that the use of force is increasing in international affairs," said Putin, wearing a beige jacket, flanked by Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov and the General Staff head, Nikolai Makarov.

"That all speaks to the fact that we should keep our powder dry and that Russia's defenses must improve," he said Monday, his eyes fixed on soldiers in uniform.

Putin has been the primary force behind plans to revamp Russia's fighting forces, injecting the defense budget with 23 trillion rubles (\$752 billion) over the next decade, at a time when Western counterparts are tightening their belts.

Ahead of the presidential election earlier this year, Putin said enemies were trying to provoke conflicts around Russia's borders and with the country's allies, arguing that the country needed better weapons.

Putin, who returned to the presidency in May after serving as prime minister for four years, has repeatedly criticized Western intervention in Libya last year and has stymied attempts to introduce harsher United Nations sanctions on embattled ally Syrian President Bashar Assad.

He has said that events connected to the Arab Spring uprisings have diminished the stature of international law, making Moscow more reliant on a strong army.

Monday was the first day of training exercises named Kavkaz 2012, the Russian word for the Caucasus Mountains.

The troubled region has emerged as a focus of hostilities, not only within Russia, where insurgents wage near-daily violence to carve out an Islamist state, but also between Armenia and Azerbaijan, where border skirmishes sporadically occur.

The firefights still flare nearly 20 years after a cease-fire stopped fighting between Azeri forces and ethnic Armenians over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh territory.

Putin handed out medals to soldiers and watched the exercises, which will run through Sunday and involve 8,000 security personnel using air defense, artillery and some of Russia's most powerful rockets.

The war games will use dozens of aircraft and nearly 50 helicopters, simulating an invasion of Russian territory.

Pro-Western Georgia criticized the exercises, saying they could destabilize the region.

Russia sent troops into Georgia in 2008, routing the small country after Georgia's U.S.-trained military attacked the pro-Russian rebel region of South Ossetia. The conflict also enveloped breakaway Abkhazia, on the Black Sea.

Moscow recognized both regions as independent countries following the war. A handful of nations have followed Russia's lead, despite insistence from Tbilisi that the areas are part of its sovereign territory.

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