



# The First Time Putin Tried to Invade a Foreign Country

By John Norris March 13, 2014

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‘We don’t have to ask NATO for permission’

On June 10, 1999, President Bill Clinton addressed the nation from the Oval Office as he declared victory in the Kosovo war: “Tonight for the first time in seventy-nine days, the skies over Yugoslavia are silent. The Serb army and police are withdrawing from Kosovo. The one million men, women, and children driven from their land are preparing to return home. The demands of an outraged and united international community have been met.”<sup>1</sup> For President Clinton, success after the many missteps and miscalculations in the early stages of the war vindicated his leadership and willingness to embrace a combination of force and diplomacy.

The terms accepted by Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic had been set after weeks of grueling shuttle diplomacy between a troika of negotiators: U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari, and Russian Special Envoy Viktor Chernomyrdin. Although these diplomats still had to finalize an agreement on how—and if—Russian forces would participate in the NATO peacekeeping mission in Kosovo, and the Russian team had often seemed split during the contentious final days of negotiating, the mood back in the Clinton White House was buoyant. Everyone felt like they had dodged a bullet.

But back in Russia, U.S. negotiators woke up to a much darker turn of events. At 1:00 in the morning on June 11, the quiet of General George Casey’s hotel room at the Moscow Marriot was shattered by the ringing of the phone. The urgent news: A Russian battalion of 186 peacekeepers in Bosnia was preparing to move, and it seemed like they might be headed for Kosovo, hoping to steal a march on NATO peacekeepers poised to enter the province. The move sparked furious contingency planning at NATO headquarters. “The danger was that if the Russians got in first, they would claim their sector,” said NATO’s military commander General Wesley Clark about the potential for the Russians to partition Kosovo, “and then we would have lost NATO control over the mission.”

At a morning meeting between Russian and U.S. military officials, the Russian officers were in turn smug and belligerent, with one general declaring, “We don’t have to ask NATO for permission. We have the right to act. If NATO intends to bring in 50,000 people to Kosovo, we will bring 10,000.” When U.S. officers mentioned the troops on the move in Bosnia, the Russian generals looked like the cat that ate the canary.

At the very same moment, Russian diplomats approached the Ukrainian and Hungarian foreign ministries with a low-key request for over-flight clearance for six Russian IL-76 transport planes headed for the Balkans. The Russians conveniently neglected to inform their diplomatic counterparts that the planes were filled with elite Russian paratroopers to be deployed in Kosovo. Hungarian officials granted what they thought was a routine request, but the Ukrainians were immediately suspicious.

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‘It will be done before you reach the airport’

At the Russian Foreign Ministry, Talbott and his team sat down with Vladimir Putin. As national security advisor, Putin had been almost invisible during much of the Kosovo war, but his intelligence background would prove particularly pivotal in the hours and days that followed. Although an old Russia hand, Talbott had not had many chances to interact with Putin previously and found that he certainly made a more positive presentation than many of his contemporaries. He was fit and urbane, and he began his remarks by graciously praising Talbott’s role in the diplomacy.

Talbott acknowledged the heavy strain the NATO air campaign had placed on U.S.-Russian relations, but noted the “strange and ominous” signals that he was getting in regard to a potential unilateral Russian deployment in Kosovo. Talbott was slated to fly out of Moscow around noon, and he asked Putin for clarification regarding Russia’s stance.

Putin was reassuring, stressing that “Military cooperation will continue to be 100 percent.”

Talbott called Putin’s comments “music to my ears,” and again pressed for a clarifying position, as he was scheduled to brief NATO ambassadors later in the day. Putin promised to see that a statement was released: “It will be done before you reach the airport,” he said.

At 12:30 that afternoon, the U.S. plane lifted off from Moscow. As one of the U.S. negotiators remarked, “It was my first taste of Vladimir Putin. We had been told by Putin an hour before that by the time we reached the airport, he would issue a statement that assured the world that they would not go into Kosovo. I’m still waiting for that statement.”

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## ‘Sir, I’m not starting World War III for you’

The situation quickly escalated. As the Yugoslav military began to pour out of Kosovo, NATO and the Russians prepared to move in. The convoy of Russian troops crossed from Bosnia into Serbia, flashing traditional three-finger Serb victory signs as they were escorted down the highway; they were headed for the Slatina airfield in Kosovo. The Russian military and intelligence services had clearly decided that pushing in their own forces and changing the facts on the ground were the best ways to recapture what had been lost at the negotiating table.

To make matters even worse, when President Clinton phoned Russian President Boris Yeltsin to raise his concerns about the move, Yeltsin was rambling, repetitive, and almost incoherent. He said again and again that he and Clinton, with no others present, should meet on “a boat, a submarine, or some island so that not a single person will disturb us ... No one else can do it.” A disturbed Clinton was left rolling his eyes. “It was the most bizarre Yeltsin-Clinton call in six and a half years—and that’s saying a lot,” said Talbott. The administration feared that Yeltsin had lost control of the government, and Talbott’s plane made a U-turn for Moscow midflight.

In Europe, General Clark pushed to block the runway at the airfield in Slatina with Apache helicopters and wanted authorization to intercept and shoot down Russian planes if they tried to bring in paratroopers against NATO’s will. British General Michael Jackson, who wanted simply to surround the Russian forces at Slatina and isolate them, disobeyed Clark, famously telling him, “Sir, I’m not starting World War III for you.”

And thanks to the help of Ukrainian and Hungarian delays, the Russians did not get timely overflight approval, so they were unable to reinforce their positions, and the small Russian contingent was largely marginalized at the airfield until a deal was struck for their participation in the broader peacekeeping mission. The situation did not explode.

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## Putin’s prestige

Vladimir Putin would become Russia’s president just months later, and the effort to push troops into Kosovo ahead of NATO became something of a template for his future actions in the Near Abroad. Instead of concluding that the operation had been a dangerous fiasco, he saw a plan that would have worked if it had not been thwarted by the need for overflight clearance from what had once been reliable satellite states such as Romania, Hungary, and Ukraine. He seemed to conclude that even though Russia was weak at the negotiating table compared to the United States and the European Union, it could still achieve its strategic aims by being willing to embrace the adventurism that had always been the hallmark of the KGB and its successor, the FSB.

As Putin argued to Talbott in Moscow to justify the showdown over the airfield several days later, the damage to U.S.-Russian relations was “far less than what NATO had done to President Yeltsin’s prestige.” And prestige means a great deal to Vladimir Putin. His entire career up to that point had been built on backlash against the demise of the Soviet Union, the stumbles of economic and political reforms under Yeltsin, and the sense that Moscow had slipped to become a second-rate power. For Putin, the surest return to Soviet-era greatness was through authoritarian rule and power centralized around himself. Putin wanted to make a sequel to a movie, the Soviet Union, despite the fact that no one had enjoyed the first.

Clearly, the Kosovo experience directly shaped Putin’s willingness to intercede on behalf of breakaway forces in Moldova and to invade Georgia in 2008. If Russia could almost put NATO on its heels with several hundred troops in Kosovo, just think of what it could do across poorly fortified borders. President Putin seems to calculate that the only way to slow the gravitational pull of the West and continued European integration is to use Russian-speaking enclaves within its Near Abroad as levers to push these countries backward into Moscow’s not-particularly-warm embrace.

These tactics have been crudely effective in the short term, but for a one-time intelligence analyst, Putin’s moves have been curiously bereft of long-term thinking. Will it really benefit Russia’s economy or political system to be encircled by a ring of ill-functioning quasi-breakaway provinces estranged from their respective national capitals? Does it really behoove Moscow to convince a wide swath of Europe that modernity and prosperity lie to the West and crude force and social division lie to the East? And what happens to Russia’s coercive economic and political power when oil prices turn down sharply?

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## What the United States can learn

Russia’s botched Kosovo invasion should offer insight to the United States and its NATO allies on how to deal with Putin. General Jackson had the right approach, not General Clark. Washington should not try to outgun Russia in Ukraine or Georgia. A hot war is in no one’s best interest. But Russia can be isolated—and the best way for the West to isolate Putin is to use modern tools. Washington should aggressively pursue the oligarchs that ring-fence Putin’s leadership with sanctions and investigations into their taxes, transactions, and financial safe havens. We should more carefully circumscribe the opulent world they inhabit. Russia’s robber barons should think twice before getting on a plane and heading for a weekend at the foreign casino, and they should understand that Putin’s choices cost them both money and opportunities.

Washington should deny Russia the prestige of belonging to the G-8 or hosting major international gatherings. This would be a symbolic step, but we know that Putin cares about symbolism and how Russia is seen on the world stage. Pretending to casually retrieve ancient artifacts from the Black Sea and posing bare-chested in hunting gear for photographers are hardly the actions of a man who does not care what others think about him and his country.

Finally, the United States and the European Union need to embrace the modernity, democracy, and temperance of response that made them a beacon for Eastern Europe in the first place. Putin may eventually seize Crimea, but he has likely lost much more in the process. And for the record, the last Russian troops left Kosovo in 2003, five years before that country's independence.

*John Norris is the Executive Director of the Sustainable Security and Peacebuilding Initiative at the Center for American Progress.*

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## Endnotes

- 1 This issue brief includes some modified excerpts from the author's 2005 book on the subject, *Collision Course: NATO, Russia, and Kosovo*. The author was present for negotiations in Moscow at the end of the Kosovo war and conducted several quoted interviews personally. See John Norris, *Collision Course: NATO, Russia, and Kosovo* (Westport, CT: Praeger Press, 2005).