Avenues of Russian Military Intervention in Moldova

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Key Points

- Given Moldova’s complicated history, divided identity, and meager defense capabilities, the country is extremely vulnerable to Russian intervention.

- The Russian-supported separatist enclave of Transnistria has threatened Moldova’s stability since the country’s independence in 1992, and Transnistrian and Russian forces in the region pose serious security risks.

- Ironically, an outright military intervention is unlikely because Russia can use several nonmilitary tools to influence political developments in the country more covertly.

Throughout its history Moldova has been a geopolitical playground for larger actors in the region, and its newly acquired independence does not appear to have changed this. As many imperial powers do, Russia consistently undermines the sovereignty of independent countries it perceives to be in its sphere of influence. In Moldova’s case, Exhibit A is Moscow’s support for the separatist regime in Transnistria before, during, and after the full-scale war that erupted on March 2, 1992, the day the Republic of Moldova was accepted into the United Nations as a member. That tragic event haunts Moldova to this day, as Russia has entrenched itself in the region despite commitments at the 1999 Istanbul Summit of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe to withdraw its military presence from Moldova’s Transnistrian region.

Due to Moldova’s meager defense budget, which rests on the pretense of military neutrality, the country cannot possibly withstand Russia’s hybrid warfare tactics, let alone a full-scale Russian military intervention. Considering the country’s declared constitutional neutrality, Moldova’s options for bolstering its defense are severely limited. Thus, Moldova’s bilateral military cooperation agreement with Romania, signed in 2012, covers only personnel training and military infrastructure cooperation. Nevertheless, Moldova benefits from assistance under the aegis of the EU’s Common Defense and Security Policy: It was the first country where the EU deployed a security sector reform adviser to guide the implementation of a national security strategy, help develop national capacities, and facilitate Moldova’s participation in international missions and operations. Further security and defense cooperation with the EU is vital to advancing the country’s goal of political integration with the EU.

Of course, given the EU’s own shortcomings in defense against a powerful actor such as Russia, the only effective structure in this regard would be NATO. Moldova’s relationship with NATO is currently based on an Individual Partnership Action Plan for 2017–19. It stipulates Moldova’s interest in developing further cooperation with...
NATO to reform and modernize its armed forces and address emerging security challenges.

However, NATO can do little if Moldova is not willing to help itself. For example, the position of defense minister remained vacant from December 2016 until October 2017 due to a deadlock between the government and the president. In the meantime, Moldova’s National Defense Concept, adopted in 2008, is outdated, and so is the National Security Strategy of 2011. The new security strategy draft from former President Nicolae Timofti will likely be significantly revised by President Igor Dodon, who is known for his pro-Russian outlook, open admiration for Vladimir Putin, and critical views of NATO, Romania, and the West in general. He is adamantly opposed to opening a NATO liaison office in Moldova and has promised to cancel the bilateral military cooperation agreement with Romania if his fellow Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM) gains a majority in parliament in the elections scheduled for the end of 2018.

**The Continued Threat of Russian Military Intervention from Transnistria**

In early 1992, Transnistrian elites, mostly ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking directors of the local industrial enterprises, refused to accept the authority of the new leadership in Moldova’s capital Chisinau and instead pledged their loyalty to Moscow. The 14th Soviet Army, headquartered in Tiraspol, Transnistria’s capital, sustained and ultimately decided the conflict, which lasted for four months and left about 1,000 dead on both sides. (The 14th Army was reorganized in 1996 into the Operational Group of Russian Forces in Moldova and currently has about 1,000 troops stationed in the Transnistria.)
The risks of aggression from Transnistria are generated not just by the Russian troops stationed there, but more so by the well-trained Transnistrian military. In fact, experts view the 1,000 Russian troops and the about 8,000 Transnistrian forces as an integrated force with a command center in Moscow. The large supply of pro-Russian mercenaries further exacerbates this threat.\(^8\)

To mitigate the threat, Ukraine closed Russian resupply routes for its troops in Transnistria in 2015.\(^9\) Additionally, rotating Russian military personnel were forced to travel through Moldova’s International Airport in Chisinau, which resulted in arrests and deportation of several Russian soldiers (non-peacekeepers).\(^10\) Ultimately, Russia has started recruiting locally as military service is an attractive option for many Transnistrians with Russian citizenship because of the region’s soaring unemployment.\(^11\) Chisinau has constantly sought Kiev’s support in enforcing stricter control over the Transnistrian segment of the Moldovan-Ukrainian border.

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In the past few months, Moldovan and Ukrainian governments have acted more decisively to jointly control the 13 border checkpoints, starting with the strategic Pervomaisc-Cuciurjan crossing on the Transnistrian part of the border.\(^12\) Transnistria views the presence of Moldovan customs and border officers at the Ukrainian checkpoints as a blockade and a source of instability.\(^13\) The so-called Transnistrian minister of foreign affairs even alluded to inviting Russian representatives to ensure security at the border.\(^14\) Ukraine, in turn, threatened to completely close the border.\(^15\) Transnistrian leaders’ repeated calls for Russia to provide security at the checkpoints\(^16\) could lead to a dangerous escalation of the precarious situation along the border because any conflict between Russian and Transnistrian forces and the Moldovan or Ukrainian forces could lead to a regional conflict similar to the 2008 war in Georgia.\(^17\)

Beyond the immediate challenges in the Russia-Moldova-Ukraine tensions over Transnistria, frozen conflicts are by definition extremely dangerous because they can ignite at any moment. Since 1992, Moldova has managed to avoid military escalation, despite getting dangerously close on at least two occasions. The first major incident took place on January 1, 2012, when a Russian peacekeeper shot and killed a Moldovan citizen at the Vadul lui Voda checkpoint for not stopping his car when ordered.\(^18\) A year later, on April 26, 2013, Transnistrian authorities attempted to unilaterally set up two new checkpoints in Varnita village, on the “border” with Moldova. After resistance from Moldovan police, the installations were evacuated shortly thereafter.\(^19\) Moldova interpreted the incident as a deliberate provocation aimed at testing the reaction of Moldovan law enforcement and as part of a larger plan to destabilize the country and preclude it from signing the all-important association agreement with the European Union.\(^20\)

At the same time, Russia’s potential use of Transnistria as a base for destabilizing its region is made plausible by the worsening economic conditions in Transnistria. As the cash-strapped Kremlin is less able to prop up the separatist regime, local elites are likely to blame Moldova and Ukraine for conspiring against Tiraspol. As long as the Moldovan-Ukrainian joint checkpoints are labeled as an economic blockade by the separatist regime, tensions will continue to rise.

**The Configuration and Limits of Russia’s Potential Aggression**

The only mitigating circumstances of this brewing tension lie in Moldova’s internal politics. The existence of major pro-Russian forces in the political arena limits Russia’s options for aggressive actions against Moldova. Yet this unlikely benefit of political polarization between the pro-western Democratic Party government and the pro-Russian president, exacerbated by a divided opposition with both pro-European and pro-Russian parties, offers little hope for a coherent and credible national strategy to guide reintegration efforts with Transnistria.
The Kremlin is known for harsh retaliatory measures against perceived misbehavior by its satellite states in the post-Soviet space. Moscow has employed a wide array of tools to sanction Moldova for acting against Russia’s interests: a trade embargo on Moldovan agricultural products (particularly wine), deporting Moldovan migrant laborers, and raising prices on natural gas imported from Russia. However, Moscow had to show restraint since the current Moldovan Ambassador to Russia Andrei Neguta is a former member of the strongly pro-Russian PSRM and a former adviser to PSRM leader Igor Dodon. According to polls, the Socialists currently have the best chance to gain power in the 2018 parliamentary elections, and any escalation by Russia that would result in punitive economic actions against Moldova would reflect poorly on the PSRM and damage its prospects of acceding to power.

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Yet if the PSRM fails to achieve its projected electoral success—due either to the incumbent Democratic Party’s government use of “administrative resources” or to a shift in electoral preferences—its benefactors in Moscow may intervene to avoid what they would likely perceive as another Western plot to curtail Russia’s sphere of influence in the region.

Earlier this year, a prominent Ukrainian security analyst raised concerns about a potential plot by Moldova’s largely ceremonial President Dodon to take power away from the government in the context of mass anti-government protests organized by the PSRM on September 24, 2017. Although these concerns proved to be an overreaction, days later the Moldovan president warned the public of a potential revolution if the government continued to obstruct the president and his power. For now, Dodon’s statements amount to mere political posturing, but his threat could actually materialize if, for instance, violence follows the 2018 parliamentary elections as in April 2009. Relying on the high public mobilization capacity of the Russian media in Moldova, the Kremlin may employ hybrid tactics to stage a Maidan-type revolt, this time against a nominally pro-European government in Moldova. “Little green men” (masked Russian soldiers in unmarked green army uniforms) from Transnistria may attempt to restore order with the aim of organizing “fair” elections, ensuring the victory of pro-Russian forces.

Still, a blatant Russian military offensive is unlikely as long as the Kremlin can achieve its goals through other means. Lacking a direct border with Russia makes Moldova less prone to a Russian military intervention, since an air offensive or an attempted naval incursion through Giurgiulesti, Moldova’s only international port, would inevitably violate either Ukrainian or Romanian territory. Following the annexation of Crimea, the security situation in the Black Sea region changed dramatically. Ukraine has moved S-300 missile systems to the Odessa region to better protect its airspace, while Romania is looking to invest $3.9 billion in seven Patriot missile defense systems. Thus, any Russian aircraft attempting to defy the sovereignty of Moldova and its neighbors would face serious risks. Russia’s stakes in Moldova may prove not high enough to justify such a costly endeavor.

However, if the situation escalates, nearly all Moldovan experts believe the much better trained and equipped Transnistrian army with the Russian contingent could easily overwhelm Moldovan defense forces, despite the comparable sizes of the Moldovan and Transnistrian armies (about 7,000–8,000 active-duty personnel). The more than 20,000 tons of military equipment and ammunition at the Soviet-era munitions deposit at Colbasna offer the separatist regime a huge advantage.

Short of outright invasion, less abrasive covert Russian operations could seriously destabilize the country and present major risks. Thanks to Russian state media, the Russian Orthodox Church, Russian-speaking ethnic minorities, pro-Russian political parties, and a large intelligence network, the Kremlin enjoys a high mobilization capacity in Moldova, much of which will likely be on display in the run up to the 2018 parliamentary elections to ensure
the success of pro-Russian parties. Other options include cyber operations, including social media propaganda, disinformation campaigns, and hacking political opponents of the pro-Russian parties.

**Conclusion**

The steadfast commitment to “defend” Russian speakers anywhere in the world is official Russian foreign and defense doctrine. To this end, Moscow has employed hybrid warfare tactics around the world, most notably in Georgia and Ukraine, but also in Estonia, Germany, France, and even the United States. Regrettably, Moldova is probably one of the easiest targets for this type of campaign.

Given Moldova’s complicated history and divided identity, meager defense capabilities, and no option to enter into bilateral or multilateral defense arrangements due to the straightjacket its of neutrality status, the country is extremely vulnerable to Russian intervention. At the same time, the probability of a military intervention is lower than might be expected simply because Russia can use several highly effective nonmilitary tools to influence Moldovan political developments.

Still, considering what happened in Georgia in 2008 and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, the threat of a direct or covert military intervention should not be discounted, particularly since Russia has repeatedly refused to withdraw its military from Transnistria. As long as the Transnistrian conflict remains unresolved and Russian troops remain in the region, possible Russian military intervention will always pose an existential threat to Moldova’s sovereignty, independence, and stability.

**About the Author**

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**Notes**

8. Moldovan mercenaries fighting on Russia’s side in Ukraine and Syria are a potential destabilizing factor in the regions, including Moldova if the country finds itself in direct conflict with Russia. However, to the surprise of many observers, most of the several dozen Moldovan mercenaries identified by the Moldovan Security Services came from Moldova proper, not from the separatist region of Transnistria or the autonomous regions of Gagauzia. The fact that Moscow can mobilize fighters from the rest of Moldova, not just from the pro-Russian regions, poses a major security threat to the country’s defense planning and capabilities.


