

1252 - 68h

Soviets in landmark military exercises

by Konstantin George

January 28, Washington: The originally scheduled date for President Reagan's State of the Union Address, and, symbolically, the date inaugurating the new Gramm-Rudman era of massive cuts in the U.S. defense budget and U.S. military capabilities.

January 28, Moscow: The Soviet News Agency TASS announces, in three dispatches, three large-scale military maneuvers, two Soviet and one Warsaw Pact, to take place before the Feb. 25 beginning of the 27th Party Congress.

The contrast between the two superpowers' development of warfighting capabilities could not be greater.

Regarding the European theater, TASS announced that major Warsaw Pact military exercises would begin in the following days in western Hungary, near the Austrian border, involving Soviet ground combat and staff units, plus combat aircraft and helicopters from the Central Group of Soviet Forces in Czechoslovakia, and the Southern Group of Soviet Forces in Hungary. The Russian forces will be joined by Czech and Hungarian ground and air force units, including reservist ground units, specially called up to take part in the exercises.

Largest Baltic exercises in five years

Then came the next TASS announcement: that the largest combined land, sea, and air exercises in the Baltic region in five years would be held in mid-February—right before the Party Congress. TASS reported that "more than 50,000 troops" will take part, including ground forces and air force units drawn from the Baltic Military District and military districts of the western U.S.S.R., along with units of the Baltic Fleet.

Behind the terse TASS wording stands a military shock of major proportions. What will take place in the Baltic will be a landmark exercise, comparable to the famous *Zapad-81* (West-81) military exercises of Sept. 4-12, 1981. These were the largest maneuvers ever held in the Baltic. Then, for the first time in history, every element of Soviet ground, sea-borne, and airborne invasion capability were brought together in one, coordinated exercise. *Zapad-81* was also the first time Marine Infantry amphibious assault forces, an entire airborne division, the elite 103rd Guards Airborne Division based in Byelorussia (one of whose regiments had participated in the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan), ground forces, and air and naval units, all operated together in a coordinated manner. Tested was a major component of a surprise attack in the European theater—Baltic amphibious and airborne

invasion against West Germany, Denmark, and Sweden.

The 1981 exercises also marked the operational debut of Russia's largest amphibious landing ship, the 13,000-ton *Ivan Rogov*, which can carry a battalion of Marine Infantry with armored vehicles and equipment.

Since then, Russian Baltic amphibious landing capability has been even further upgraded through the addition of numerous modern high-speed hovercraft. Also, regarding the two airborne divisions which could theoretically participate—the 7th Guards Airborne Division at Kaunas, Lithuania, and the 103rd Guards Airborne Division in Byelorussia—all of their troops, following the rule that every Soviet airborne soldier is rotated through Afghanistan, are now combat veterans.

The third maneuver announced by TASS will take place in "the second half of February" in the Soviet republics of Georgia and Azerbaijan, near the border with Turkey and Iran. The maneuvers involve "more than 25,000" army and air force troops from the Trans-Caucasian Military District. While February maneuvers in the Trans-Caucasian Military District are an annual event, there is no reason for complacency. One should not forget that any Soviet decision to fly airborne units into South Yemen, for example, would mean airborne units from Trans-Caucasia.

There is more. Recently, Moscow has quietly made a significant move regarding its forces assigned to the Wartime High Command, Strategic Direction Southwest (headquarters Kiev), that augurs a crisis-ridden future for Turkey, the Balkans, and Middle East.

'Lion of Afghanistan' arrives in Odessa

In early January, *Krasnaya Zvezda* confirmed that Gen. Boris Pyankov, a veteran of years of combat command in Afghanistan, and, according to sources, nicknamed the "Lion of Afghanistan" in the Russian army, has been named First Deputy Commander of the Odessa Military District. Pyankov has been the commander of the 3rd Shock Army, headquartered at Magdeburg, one of the five Soviet Armies in East Germany. The 3rd Shock Army, an all-armored army of four tank divisions, is the most powerful of the Soviet armies in East Germany, and forms the invasion spearhead for any surprise attack into West Germany.

Pyankov was sent to East Germany from Afghanistan, as part of a program in which Russia's best young combat generals, all advocates of the high-speed offensive surprise attack doctrine dating from articles they wrote beginning in 1977, were moved into East Germany to oversee the transformation of the Soviet armies to war-readiness status. Pyankov's arrival confirms that Soviet forces stationed in the Odessa Military District will be upgraded to the same level of war-readiness now existing in East Germany.

The wartime mission of the forces based in the Odessa Military District was shown in the March 1984, *Soyuz-84* Soviet-Bulgarian military exercises, a rehearsal of a seizure of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles.