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## Not Everyone Has Forgotten Albania

By Eric Margolis

**T**ORONTO — Albania, the least well-known country in Europe, could be the setting for a significant change in the East-West balance of power.

Albania's strategic value, although virtually forgotten in the West, is understood in Moscow. At the nexus of Yugoslavia, Greece and Italy, Albania, with excellent deep-water ports at Vlore and Durres, dominates the Balkan Peninsula and the entry to the Adriatic Sea. The Italian coast is only 50 miles away, across the narrow Strait of Otranto.

In 1961 Albania became the only country to successfully evict Soviet "occupation" forces and their proconsular local establishment. The party leader, Enver Hoxha, a great admirer of Stalin, abruptly broke all ties with Moscow because of Nikita Khrushchev's de-Stalinization program.

The Russians were just finishing a complex of naval installations and underground submarine pens on the granite island of Saseno, known as "the Gibraltar of the Adriatic," in Vlore harbor. Saseno and its attendant air and logistics bases on the mainland were to have been the forward base from which the Kremlin would spread its influence across southern Europe and into the Middle East.

The Albanians seized the installations, evicting thousands of Soviet advisers and even taking two submarines. Although outraged, Moscow was unable to mount an effective military response because, 21 years ago, when the U.S. Sixth Fleet dominated the Mediterranean, the Russians lacked long-range air and amphibious forces.

The Russians have not forgotten this humiliation at the hands of 2.5 million people. The pattern of Moscow's anti-Albanian activities in the last two decades indicates that

restoration of control over Albania is an important goal of Kremlin strategy.

Tangible proof of the Soviet interest in subverting Albania has been evident. The KGB, using a pro-Soviet fifth column, has mounted at least three attempted coups.

Now events in Albania may present Moscow with the opportunity it has patiently awaited. Mr. Hoxha, 73, is reported to be in failing health. Albanian radio's report of the "suicide due to nervous depression" of Mehmet Shehu, Mr. Hoxha's second in command, in November suggests the presence of mounting pressures in the Albanian Communist Party as the day of succession nears.

The Soviets' sense of opportunity is doubtless heightened by Albanian isolation. Although capitalist America is Mr. Hoxha's number-one proclaimed enemy, it is followed by the Soviet Union. And after the death of Mao Tse-tung, Albania lumped China, once its sole ally, with America and Russia. The Yugoslavs and Greeks, traditional enemies of Albania, still have territorial designs on it. In the process of maintaining the ideological Marxist purity of his country, Mr. Hoxha has left it without friends or allies.

The Soviet scenario for action against Albania may well be predictable: a *coup de main* duplicating successful operations in Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan.

Unlike the situation in 1961, the Soviet Union today possesses ample forces for long-range intervention, and no longer lives in awe of the U.S. Sixth Fleet. Airborne forces could drop on Albania, seize key airfields and bring in heavy equipment and armor. Amphibious forces from the Black Sea and

Mediterranean squadrons could isolate and envelop Albania. Resistance by Albania's 50,000-man army and by the militia would certainly be quickly crushed.

Albania could become the Soviet Union's most important forward base, as crucial to its age-old ambition to control the Mediterranean and the Middle East as Hawaii is to U.S. domination of the Pacific.

The political consequences of the Red Army being 50 miles from Italy and a few hundred miles north of Athens can easily be imagined. But imagination seems in short supply in Washington. The absence of diplomatic relations with Albania since World War II has led the West into a sort of amnesia about its existence, and one wonders if there are any contingency plans at all for dealing with a crisis there.

Neither the United States nor NATO has ever officially supported the continued independence of Albania. This leaves the Soviet Union with the tempting target of a valuable strategic prize that may be seized without the danger of an effective Western response. If a Soviet airborne regiment landed at Tirana airport, the response in Washington would probably be, "Where's Tirana?"

If the West does not draw a protective diplomatic cordon about Albania, it seems possible that the country will again fall to the Soviet Union — an event that might well be the most drastic shift in the European balance of power since World War II.

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