Despite Cold War's End, Russia Keeps Building a Secret Complex

By MICHAEL R. GORDON

MOSCOW, April 15 — In a secret project reminiscent of the chilliest days of the cold war, Russia is building a mammoth underground military complex in the Ural Mountains, Western officials and Russian witnesses say.

Hidden inside Yamantau mountain in the Beloretsk area of the southern Urals, the project involves the construction of a huge complex served by a railroad, a highway and thousands of workers.

The project, some Russian officials say, was begun during the era of Leonid I. Brezhnev, when the Soviet Union was locked in an arms race with the United States, the Communist Party ruled the country and the military budget seemingly knew no bounds.

Russia's decision to proceed with the costly venture underscores the continuing influence of the military at a time when the Government is struggling to pay its workers back wages and to cope with a growing budget deficit. The construction of the project, which has been observed by United States spy satellites, mystifies American specialists, who speculate that it may be anything from an underground nuclear command post to a secret weapons production plant.

But while there is uncertainty over its purpose, it has already become a politically delicate issue for the Clinton Administration.

The United States is spending hundreds of millions of dollars to help the cash-starved Russian Government dismantle old nuclear weapons. To win Congressional approval for the money, the Clinton Administration has had to certify that the Russians are not undertaking new military projects that go beyond their defensive needs.

The project is also being carried out despite complaints from members of Russia's Parliament that the

Continued on Page A6, Column I



Cold War Is Over, but Russia Keeps Building Secret Complex

Continued from Page Al

Government does not have the money to comply with new treatles that slash strategic arms and mandat net destruction of chemical weapons. "We can't say with confidence what the purpose is, and the Russians are not very interested in having us go in there," a senior American official said in Washington. "It is being built on a huge scale and involves a major 'investment of resources. The investments are being made at a time when the Russians are complaining they do not have the made at a time when the Russians are complaining they do not have the resources to do things pertaining to arms control."

The Russian Defense Ministry re-

The Russian Defense Ministry re-fuses to say anything about the project, which is proceeding with vir-nually no public debate. Asked to respond to written que-tions, the Defense Ministry replied that, "The practice does not exist in the Defense Ministry of Russia of informing foreign mass media about facilities, whatever they are, that are construction in the interests of strengthening the security of Rus-sia".

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The Defense Ministry also declined to say whether Parliament has been informed about the details of the project, like its purpose and cost, saying only that it receives necessary military information.

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For-all the secrecy surrounding the Yamantau project, it is too vast to escape notice by the local press, through the nature of the installation has generally remained unclear.
The project has been variously de-scribed by present and former Rus-stan officials as a mining site, a repository for Russian treasures, a dod storage area, a dump for nucle-ar materials and a bunker for Rus-sia's leaders in case of nuclear war. A report in Sovetskaya Rossiya said the project involves construc-tion of a railroad, a modern highway



Russia is building a huge military complex in Yamantau mountain.

and towns for tens of thousands of workers and their families.

"The complex is as big as the Washington area inside the Belt-way," said an American official familiar with intelligence reports.

Whether the project is worrisome from a military perspective is a question that divides American specialists.

Senior Pentagon officials say they believe that it will serve as a com-mand and control center for nuclear weapons and a bunker for military leafur.

military's worries about a surprise attack me to Ollinton Administration officials are more worried, assenting that the Russians have returned to the project. Recalling the underground sites that North Korea has built, those officials say they fear that the Russian, project may encompass weapons production sites as well as other military programs that the Russian military wants to keep from Ameri-

Pullout From Chechnya

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MOSCOW. April 15 (Reuters) —
Russia pulled out two battalions
from the mutinous republic of Chechnya. today as a part of President
Boris N. Yeltsin's latest peace plan,
but fighting continued and the rebels
shot. down a helicopter, killing four
Russian soldiers.
Russian television sald the units
witudrew from bases in the Sholkovskoi district, about 100 miles
nonivesst of the regional capital of
Gruzny, and were heading back to
batsacks in Sibertia.
Russial's military commander in
Chechnya, Lieut. Gen. Vyacheslav
Tikhomirov, said on Saturday that
troops would start pulling out on
Morday from some quieter parts of
the North Caucasus region unless the
separatist forces provoked serious
clashes.



can spy satellites.

"It is a possible command and control center," a senior Administration official said. "It is a possible to the control of the control o

politically powerful lawmakers: Senators Sam Nunn, Democrat of Georgia, and Richard G. Lugar, Republian of Indiana.

To prevent the Russians from taking advantage of millions of dollars in American assistance to subscilled their military programs, the law requires that the Administration certify that the Russians are "forgoing any military modernization program that exceeds legitimate defense requirements," "forgoing the replacement of destroyed weapons of mass destruction," and complying with arms control treaties.

The Administration recently re-

newed the certification, but the Russian secrecy surrounding the project worries American advocates of the ald.

"The toughest question we can get from the Congress when we ask them for funds to help disarm and dismantle the Russian strategic arsenal is why are they using their meager rubles to build such a thing as Yamantau mountain," a Pentagon official said.

The project was also a concern for the Bush Administration and was raised in diplomatic channels by

James A. Baker 34, who was then secretary of State.
Some enterprising Russian journalists have sought to puncture the official secrete.
The local press reported that Gen. L. Tsirkunov, the director of the project, said in 1992 that he was building an enterprise named the Ural Mining and Ore Dressing Combine.

Dine.

That set off fears that it was a nuclear waste site, prompting an open letter from local ecologists, religious figures and politicians.

While the Russian military was not forthcoming, a former Communist official in the region insisted that the project was an underground shelter for Russia's, leadership in case of

nuclear var.

And in 1994, a journalist from a local newspaper described how he climbed through the splendor of birch forests and carpet of green moss only to stumble across a huge hole in the ground and a vast construction site, including barracks and a helicopter landing pad.

"There was so much iron junk down there, from water mains to rail car wheels," the journalist, N. Starkov, wrote in the local newspaper Beloretsky Rabochy. "Good Lord. Hyw did it get there? The scale was enormous."

Referring to the mountain by its nickname, he added, "It sounds crazy, of course, but we visited the yard that today crowns Yam



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