



Eurasia Center's International Security Program

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Ukraine – Will Russia Invade?



Ukraine's Armed Forces fire US Javelin Anti-Tank Missile
Photo Credit: Ukrainian Defense Ministry Press Service/AP

Nicolas Camargo

The Eurasia Center

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Eurasia News

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Seven Days to the Dnieper; will Putin push beyond the Donbas?



Ukraine and Russia – Relative Military Might of each Nation Image Credit: The Sun

For all of the talk in Western capitals and on international media for the past few years of a “New Cold War” between the West and Vladimir Putin’s revanchist, nationalist Russia; recent developments on the Russo-Ukrainian border may finally be bringing some substance to this rhetoric. Arguably for the first time in at least seven years there are legitimate concerns that Russia may go beyond merely perpetuating the low-level conflict

between pro-Russian separatists and Ukraine's central government. According to the head of Ukrainian Military Intelligence (GUR MOU) Brig. General Kyrylo Budanov, almost 100,000 Russian Army ground troops have been building up along with large supplies of heavy artillery, tanks, and sophisticated anti-aircraft weaponry along the Russo-Ukrainian border. These deployments are under the command of the 4th Guards Tank Army and 1st Guards Army, both of which are the vanguard of Russia Western Military District. These are regarded by Western analysts as some of the best conventional forces within the Russian Army including commanders who have had recent experience directing the 2014 proxy war in Ukraine. With concerns in Western capitals met with characteristic denials and counter accusations from Moscow, it is important to understand the facts on the ground to determine how a hypothetical Russian attack would play out; what would be their motivation to invade Ukraine and how they would carry it out.

Following the humiliating and shambolic performance of the Russian military in the ill-fated 1st Chechen War (1994-1996); Vladimir Putin's Administration exerted a considerable effort to modernize and reform Russia's military force into a 21st Century force fighting force. Russian troops improved markedly better during the Second Chechen War (1999-2009). This gradual improvement continued in the 2008 Georgian War, where despite continued poor coordination between service branches, (especially the Air Force) the Army performed well enough so that Western military analysts started to take notice. Putin's decades long reforms finally bore fruit during the Annexation of Crimea and subsequent Donbas War, and most impressively in Moscow's military intervention in the Syrian Civil War which all but secured victory for Russia's client Syrian Dictator Bashar Al-Assad. These victories have cemented the army's reputation as a modern, powerful force; both on par with the West and a centerpiece of the new Russia. The reforms focused heavily on better coordination between the Air Force, Special Forces, and regular Army, with new modern urban tactics coupled with tactical drones to reduce the brutally high infantry attrition rates of Chechnya. This has extended down from Army Group to the most basic infantry platoon; with standardization of uniforms with Kevlar vests, the new AK-103 assault rifle, and modern communication equipment. All of this is to make the Russian Army look and perform more like professional Western troops deployed on the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) and not like the ramshackle, ill-prepared conscript force it had in the early post-Soviet era.

Not only has the Russian Army dramatically overhauled its Soviet era hold-over tactical doctrine, but its strategic one as well. It has spearheaded the usage of hybrid warfare to destabilize Ukraine prior and during the 2014 war. Russia embraced hybrid warfare in its 2014 operations in Crimea and Ukraine and modified its execution during the Syrian campaign. Russia will most probably use this method against Ukraine as opposed to a conventional invasion. In 2014 Russia exploited long festering tensions among the Russian minority of Eastern Ukraine, pro-Russian politicians, divisions within Ukrainian military and security forces in the East, and the significant power vacuum in Kyiv following the Maidan Revolution of 2014, to annex Crimea and start the separatist war in the Donbas. Ukraine has undertaken various government reforms and expanded its counter-intelligence abilities to reduce future risks. However, the reported plot of a coup d'état against President Zelensky, who has accused powerful oligarchs angry with anti-corruption efforts, shows internal chaos will still be a key part of the Russian playbook. Before the first Russian regular even crosses the border, Russia is using methods ranging from coup plots, migrant waves, fake government scandals, and allegedly supporting anti-vaccine protests to worsen Ukraine's COVID-19 problems all with the primary goal of distracting and softening up Ukrainian resistance.



Proof of Russia's military buildup in neighboring areas. Satellite Photos: Maxar Technologies

Ukraine of course is well aware of the Russian troop buildup and deception tactics, being the first to report the Russian troop build-up last March, before they later withdrew.

However, Ukraine is determined not to be caught flat footed like it was in the fall of 2014. The past seven years have given Ukraine's Armed Forces combat experience it never gained in the previous 21 years since independence, and with extensive NATO training and weapon sales it is a far better force than it was in the past. Back then the initial frontline defense was left to local police, hastily raised National Guard units, and volunteer paramilitary outfits, some of whom like the Right Sector and Azov Battalion have far right ultra-nationalist links. Ukraine now mans the majority of the frontline with professional soldiers, not ill prepared conscripts, and brigades are rotated out for constant training by NATO forces in Western Ukraine or Germany. Ukrainians have learned from the terrible defeats at places like Ilovaisk and Debaltseve in late 2014/early 2015 where ill-prepared Ukrainian forces were throttled by the sudden arrival of regular Russian troops. Today, the frontline defense is in-depth with multiple deep trench systems ironically following Cold War era Soviet doctrine designed to fight against NATO. In addition, the most important lesson Ukraine took away from the initial Russian intervention was a necessity to counter Russian armor, leading to the purchase of large amounts of Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones and American FGM-148 Javelin anti-tank missiles. Purchases of both of these sophisticated weapon systems have greatly angered Moscow, and they have singled out the Turkish drones in particular as justification for their troop buildup on the border.

As to the question if the Russians will invade, beyond the punditry on cable news and speculation in Western capitals, we can guess what would Russia benefit or more specifically Russian President Vladimir Putin's United Russia regime from such a war? There are obvious benefits from an attack, a land connection with already annexed Crimea, pushing the frontline back to secure the area already controlled by the pro-Russian separatists, and of course as a domestic political value to redirect the attention of the Russian public from concerns such as the economy, the spread of Covid-19, or an increased authoritarianism and to appease the ultra-nationalist/far-right constituents of his government. Russian nationalism, along with full-throated support of the Russian Orthodox Church, central pillars of Putin's governing ideology, the value of a war to "protect Russian minorities" or to "liberate rightful Russian lands" cannot be underestimated.

The Donbas region was one of the most industrialized in all of Europe, securing it entirely would mean its economic potential would now be solely benefiting Moscow,

however it would require significant funding to rebuild the area. At the same time, Putin knows that if he overplays his hands he may find his already COVID saddled economic pushed over the edge by crippling Western sanctions. If a Russian attack starts to seriously threaten Ukraine's hinterlands or approaches the Dnieper, there may very well be a NATO intervention with all the dangers of escalation that entails. The biggest worry to Putin, and to his regime especially, is that any operation against Ukraine gets bogged down and Russian losses start to pile up fast. The collective memories of Afghanistan are still etched into the mindset of the Russian public, as Russia cannot afford a long slog of a campaign without undermining the regime. It was intolerably high losses that forced his predecessor, President Yeltsin, to humiliating end the First Chechen War, and rows of steel caskets with Russian flags draped on top will create more public anger than any rigged election or detained dissident would.



Presidents Biden and Putin discussing crisis in Ukraine, Photo Credit: Faz.net

Reaction in Europe and in the United States to any Russian move on Ukraine is guaranteed to be hostile, the question rather is what can the West do? Already there is a proposed amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act (NADA) FY 2022 spearheaded by Senators Rob Portman (R-OH) and Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH) that increases US aid to the Ukrainian military to \$350 million, including \$125 for lethal weapons. There is also pressure on both sides of the Atlantic to stop the Nord Stream II pipeline from going online from Russia to Germany, bypassing Ukraine. It would remove one of the few areas of leverage Kyiv has against Moscow in threatening to block Russian gas exports to Western Europe. Economic sanctions designed to cripple Russia and increased weapon sales

to Ukraine are at this point the extent the West is willing to go, however if Russia were to extend the scope of its operation beyond merely the Donbas, for example, by striking from Belarus in the North or attacking the key port of Odessa from the breakaway state of Transnistria, the West could respond with attempting to implement a NATO no fly-zone or deploying “advisors” to assist Ukraine’s Army in the field.

With all of these preexisting factors and recent historical context, I believe that the most likely course of action Russia will take is to attack Ukraine but do so carefully. They will most likely manufacture an “incident” in eastern Ukraine as justification, and they will use the separatist force twofold: as a shield of plausible deniability and as infantry cannon fodder. Then a possible limited offensive by regular Russian troops from the north under the guise of “separating the warring sides” or “protecting Russian minorities” could begin with the goal of inflicting the most pain possible on Ukrainian troops as possible. Ultimately the length and breadth of such an offensive would depend on the Russian domestic reaction, the effectiveness of Ukraine’s resistance, and how aggressively the West responds. On the other hand, Putin may be using the troop buildup as leverage for what he sees is an important turning point for the West to halt NATO expansion. Putin has brought up the fact that NATO was not supposed to expand to Eastern Europe/Baltic States and that promises were made to Gorbachev during that time period. The only promise NATO made was that NATO would not place missiles or expand into East Germany. In fact, over the years, NATO did not place troops in Eastern Europe except after Russia invaded Crimea. Much to Putin’s dismay, he created the situation Russia is now in, an expansion of NATO eastwards because of the division of Ukraine. This frozen conflict is only destroying Russia’s trading partnerships with Ukraine and Eastern Europe and forcing Russia to ultimately fear that Ukraine and Georgia would join a NATO Alliance surrounding Russia. The situation could have been avoided earlier during the Maidan Revolution. However, Europe/America and Russia refused to sit down and negotiate, the war ensued and it has led to this point. Putin and Biden are left trying to determine a new strategic architecture which would avoid war. What is clear however is that any attack remotely similar to this scenario would represent the gravest escalation in international tensions probably since the end of the Cold War.

