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FORECAST SERIES: Putin's Likely Course of Action in Ukraine

UPDATED COURSE OF ACTION ASSESSMENT



FREDERICK W. KAGAN, MASON CLARK, GEORGE BARROS,
AND KATERYNA STEPANENKO



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Cover: The “Eastern” tactical and operation group of the Ukrainian army conducts a drill while military activity continues in the Donbas region, Ukraine, on April 14, 2021. (Photo by Armed Forces of Ukraine/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

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UPDATED COURSE OF ACTION ASSESSMENT

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Putin's Likely Course of Action in Ukraine: Updated Course of Action Assessment

By Frederick W. Kagan, Mason Clark, George Barros, and Kateryna Stepanenko

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Contents

Executive Summary:	3
Course of Action Summary—Overt Russian Deployment to Donbas and Air and Missile Campaign	7
Observed Indicators Supporting this Course of Action.....	8
Course of Action Evaluation—Overt Russian Deployment to Donbas and Air and Missile Campaign	9
The Trigger	10
Initial Operations of the Overt Donbas Incursion and Air and Missile Campaign	11
Likely Military Effects of Initial Operations	12
Likely Russian Demands of Ukraine in Return for Pausing or Ceasing Russia’s Attack.....	13
Likely Russian Demands of the West in Return for Pausing or Ceasing Russian Attacks on Ukraine	14
Subsequent Operations	14
Ceasefire	14
Ukraine after the Attack.....	15
Possible Western Actions to Deter or Defeat this Scenario.....	16
Military Actions.....	16
Non-military Actions.....	16
Appendix 1: Specific Indicators of Military Preparations for Donbas Deployment and Air Campaign Course of Action.....	18
Summary	18
Individual events.....	18
Appendix 2: Proxy Republics’ Information Operations Describing Supposed Ukrainian Preparations to Attack.....	25
Events	25

Executive Summary:

Russian President Vladimir Putin is using the crisis he created by mobilizing a large military force around Ukraine to achieve two major objectives: first, advancing and possibly completing his efforts to regain effective control of Ukraine itself, and second, fragmenting and neutralizing the NATO alliance. Russian military preparations can support a massive invasion of Ukraine from the north, east, and south that could give Putin physical control of Kyiv and other major Ukrainian cities, allowing him to dictate terms that would accomplish the first objective. Such an invasion, however, might undermine his efforts to achieve the second objective because it could rally the NATO alliance around the need to respond to such a dramatic act of aggression. An invasion would also entail significant risks and definite high costs. A Russian military action centered around limited military operations in southern and southeastern Ukraine coupled with a brief but widespread and intense air and missile campaign could better position Putin to achieve both aims as well as reduce the likely costs and risks to Russia.

We therefore currently forecast that:

- Russia will not conduct a full mechanized invasion to conquer all of Ukraine this winter (unchanged).
- Russian mechanized forces will overtly deploy into occupied Donbas on a large scale by mid-February (increased likelihood).
- Russia may launch an air and missile campaign throughout unoccupied Ukraine in conjunction with an overt deployment into occupied Donbas (newly identified course of action).
- Russia may conduct limited ground incursions north and west from occupied Donbas and/or north from Crimea.

Our previous forecast that Russia would deploy mechanized forces to Belarus in early 2022 (which we first made in December 2020 and last updated in December 2021) has transpired.¹

We have identified a new course of action since our previous examination of Russian options that Putin is preparing and may pursue in conjunction with an overt move into occupied Donbas: an air and missile campaign, possibly extensive, throughout unoccupied Ukraine. We have observed indicators that he is preparing this option. We assess that such an air campaign in unoccupied Ukraine is significantly more likely than an invasion intended to seize large areas of unoccupied Ukraine, including Kyiv and other major cities. Putin could initiate the air and missile campaign and/or limited ground incursions in southeastern and southern Ukraine before Russian forces have completed deployments to and preparations along the northern Ukrainian frontier and in Belarus. **We are not yet ready as of January 27, 2022, to forecast that Putin will actually order the air and missile campaign in conjunction with the move into Donbas, but policymakers must be aware of the conditions the Kremlin is setting for that contingency—separate from preparations for a major ground offensive.**

A Russian air and missile campaign that targets both occupied and unoccupied Ukraine could pose an even greater short-term challenge to the US and NATO than an invasion to occupy most of Ukraine in the same way that a live hostage situation creates more tension and complexity while in progress than a completed murder. Once Russian mechanized forces have seized Ukraine's capital and major cities, Putin's effective leverage on the West drops substantially, as he will have exercised the near-complete extent of his ability to damage Ukraine and left little for the West to try to deter by action or prevent by appeasement.

A partial attack that retains the visible capability to go further, however, increases the pressure on the West to meet some of Putin's demands to dissuade him from further violence. Holding back from the conquest of Kyiv and major Ukrainian cities allows Putin to continue to demand concessions from the West that transcend Ukrainian issues, such as blanket commitments not to expand NATO further. Russia's military conquest of Ukraine would seem to make such commitments irrelevant and reduce pressure on the West to make them.

An air and missile campaign that leaves the Ukrainian state nominally independent with a beleaguered and fearful government and people, however, allows Putin to protract the crisis. He can continue his efforts to maximize the tension and friction among Ukraine, the United States, and America's European allies (especially the Germans, given their extreme vulnerability to Russia's energy pressure) by using the threats of continuing air attacks, the economic devastation of Ukraine and Europe, or, finally, the invasion and occupation of Ukraine.

An air and missile campaign against unoccupied Ukraine would pose less cost and risk to Russia compared with an invasion and occupation of territory, although an air and missile campaign would incur more cost and risk than simply moving forces overtly into occupied Donbas without attacking beyond the current line of contact. The United States and NATO should prioritize developing a coherent response to this course of action in addition to their other efforts to deter and set conditions to respond to Russian threats.

The objectives of such a Russian air and missile campaign could include:

- Expanding wedges in the Western alliance;
- Increasing pressure on the West to make larger concessions regarding NATO expansion in general and the disposition of NATO forces in eastern Europe;
- Forcing Ukraine to make further concessions to Russian demands regarding occupied Donbas;
- Coercing Ukraine into accepting a new version of the Minsk Accords or an entirely different agreement making even more concessions that undermine Ukrainian sovereignty;
- Forcing Ukraine to amend its constitution to rule out NATO membership;
- Disrupting the Ukrainian government;
- Creating a governance and stability crisis in Ukraine by forcing concessions that infuriate Ukrainian patriots;
- Crippling the Ukrainian economy; and
- Severely degrading the Ukrainian military to set conditions for further demands or Russian military activities if Putin is not able to secure his objectives through this more limited campaign.

An air and missile campaign would be far more likely to achieve these objectives than simply moving Russian forces overtly into occupied Donbas. It would also be more likely to achieve these aims at a cost acceptable to Putin than a mechanized drive along the northern Azov Sea coast would alone.

If the Kremlin can protract the crisis on its terms, it can raise the costs to the United States and NATO. The United States and NATO must prioritize preventing Putin from protracting the crisis by rapidly increasing the risks to his forces and the cost to the Russian economy as soon as he initiates the conflict either by moving forces overtly into occupied Donbas or by attacking unoccupied Ukraine.

The United States and NATO could best deter or disrupt such an attack by deploying and using ground- and sea-based air- and missile- defense systems and stealth fighters to shoot down Russian manned

aircraft attacking targets in unoccupied Ukraine. The purpose of such Western military operations would be to impose high-enough costs on Russia to persuade Putin to avoid or terminate the operation.

Overt Russian deployments into Donbas with or without a Russian air campaign in unoccupied Ukraine should trigger the full array of US and European punitive sanctions on Russia. The United States and its allies should also define a threshold at which continued covert Russian deployments into occupied Donbas would trigger a response. But the Russian course of action considered in this essay, including the air and missile campaign, puts tremendous pressure on the US relationship with its reluctant partners, especially Germany, if it does not involve significant Russian forces invading unoccupied Ukraine. The United States and its more-committed allies must prepare now for this challenging contingency.

European responses to US attempts to rally the alliance to deter Putin thus far suggest that a more limited Russian attack is more likely to weaken and fragment NATO than the military conquest of most of Ukraine. A full Russian invasion and occupation of Ukraine including Kyiv and/or other major urban centers collapses the West's decision-space and is the likeliest Russian course of action to trigger a strong, coherent set of Western reactions. Russian military aggression short of a full-scale invasion, even including an extensive air campaign, however, gives Putin the initiative and creates uncertainty about how Putin will ultimately resolve the crisis. Putin has used this approach to great effect in Syria and elsewhere. It opens room for much debate and disagreement about responses among the United States, its European allies, and Ukraine. Continuing Russian economic pressure on Europe, especially Germany, amidst such a crisis may seriously erode alliance cohesion.

The United States and its other NATO partners must nevertheless accept the risk of serious strain and even damage to the US-German and NATO-German relationship to respond decisively to this more-limited form of Russian aggression. Allowing Putin to coerce major concessions from Ukraine or the West through limited aggression poses a greater danger to the NATO alliance's cohesion, credibility, and even survival than does antagonizing Germany and other recalcitrant NATO members by imposing tough economic penalties on Russia that hurt those allies economically. Repairing strains with Germany and other allies, especially those caused by bad decisions the German government has already made, is a more manageable problem in the long run.

Context: Russia's long, slow, and obvious build-up of massive forces along Ukraine's borders has had the predictable effects of prompting Ukrainian mobilizations and preparations to fight, including to fight in-depth and in an insurgent capacity if necessary. It has galvanized a US response that was likely more determined than Putin had anticipated as well as a US-led effort to energize a strong NATO response. The coherence of a NATO reaction remains in doubt, however. The German government has shown great reluctance to support any effort to help Ukraine defend itself.² French President Emmanuel Macron has rhetorically fed a narrative started in the European Union foreign policy team and fueled heavily by Russian information operations that Europe should devise its own response and negotiate with Russia directly outside the NATO framework.³ On the other hand, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the eastern NATO states have leaned in to helping Ukraine prepare to defend itself, exposing divisions in the alliance that Russian information operations seek to exploit and expand.⁴

The US response to the Russian build-up in October and November 2021 likely surprised Putin. US governments have not previously reacted dramatically to the massing of Russian forces on the Ukrainian border, and Putin may have expected a similarly muted response this time.⁵ As the United States moved from warning about a possible Russian invasion to threatening Russia with devastating economic responses, Putin issued a set of demands that amount to an ultimatum that the West cannot

possibly accept.⁶ Putin very likely intended to make the demands unacceptable. Russian information operations—following Putin’s lead—explicitly separated the non-negotiable demands from the situation in Ukraine and refused to coningle discussions about the two issues.⁷

Making the demands (and having the United States and NATO reject them) may have been part of Putin’s plan all along. He could intend to use the rejection of those demands as the excuse to launch military operations against Ukraine, up to and including an invasion to conquer and occupy Ukraine, although Russian public messaging on this point is confused by the constant denials by very senior Russian officials, including the Kremlin spokesperson, that Russia intends to invade Ukraine at all.⁸ It is also possible, however, that Putin’s demands were an unplanned reaction to the US response to the Russian mobilization. In this option, Putin may have seen an unexpected opportunity to use the demands as a wedge to split the Western coalition and to distract the United States and the West while he completes preparations for whatever he intends to do in Ukraine.

Putin is currently pursuing both the objective of weakening and splitting NATO and his aim of regaining control of Ukraine with roughly equal intensity, regardless of what his initial priorities might have been.

Russian information operations setting conditions for the movement of Russian forces into Belarus and occupied Donbas have continued almost unchanged from November 2021 through January 2022. Information operations regarding Belarus reached a crescendo in early January 2022, and Russian forces rolled into Belarus shortly thereafter.⁹ Plans for both the information operations and the deployment must have been completed in December 2021 at the latest, since the Belarusian Ministry of Defense announced on November 29, 2021, that exercises would occur in Belarus in early 2022 (confirmed on January 18, 2022, to run from February 10 - 20), and the forces deploying to Belarus from the Eastern Military District must have begun preparations for their movement some weeks in advance.¹⁰ ISW has long assessed that the Russians would deploy forces into Belarus and use an informational cover very like the one they produced in the winter of 2021-2022 for that purpose.¹¹ The deployment and its associated information campaigns moved smoothly along, largely unaffected by the larger drama of the non-negotiable demands Russia has made regarding NATO expansion.

A similar pattern holds in southeastern Ukraine. Russian information operations have been setting conditions for an overt deployment into occupied Donbas for months. That campaign is accelerating and intensifying. It continues to include memes and messages, as discussed in more detail below, that the United States and its partners have attempted to discredit. It has continued, as with the Belarus campaign, almost completely unaffected by the larger US-NATO-Russia negotiations and tensions. It appears to be reaching a culmination point that would justify (from Putin’s perspective) the overt deployment of Russian forces into Donbas and possibly an attack of some sort into unoccupied Ukraine. **The progression of this information campaign and Russian military preparations near southeastern Ukraine suggest that Putin will likely launch operations in and around Donbas in late January or early-to-mid February.**

Russian military preparations to attack south and southeastern Ukraine are more advanced than its preparations to attack from the north toward Kyiv.

Russian reinforcements to the Southern Military District (SMD), and especially toward the Ukrainian border within the SMD, appear to have been largely completed some time ago. They have generally involved the movement of whole regiments or brigades—units that are likely prepared to conduct large and complex mechanized maneuvers together.¹² The SMD has also been conducting a series of exercises at the multi-battalion, brigade, division, combined arms army, and military district level.¹³ Those exercises (see Appendix 1) have focused on the command and control of large multi-unit ground

formations and their coordination with large numbers of combat aircraft, air defense, and missile battalions. Russian units in the SMD seem to be on a road-to-war similar to what American forces would follow in advance of expected operations.

Russian forces are not yet organized or prepared to fight along Ukraine's northern border, which is adjacent to Russia's Western Military District (WMD). Russian ground forces units concentrating in the WMD consist mainly of individual battalion tactical groups (BTGs) drawn from many different brigades, regiments, and divisions from three different military districts.¹⁴ The Russian military has not prioritized sending whole regiments or brigades that would already have experience operating together to the WMD. The Russian Ministry of Defense has reported relatively few large-scale exercises among these deploying units in the WMD, indicating that they have not yet begun practicing the coordination they would need to conduct high-speed mechanized maneuver warfare. There is still time, of course, for these units to work out command-and-control relationships and then move through an exercise pattern before launching an invasion, and ISW will continue to watch closely for indicators that they are doing so.

The divergence in the preparations of the forces in the Southern and Western Military Districts is especially noteworthy because Putin has chosen the moment to mobilize and would freely choose the moment to attack—there is no exogenous factor forcing the Russian military to rush its deployments and preparations. There might, of course, be internal factors driving such a rush, particularly if Putin started with the idea of an operation in southern Ukraine and then decided to pursue an invasion from the north as well. But these observable indicators of concrete preparations suggest a higher likelihood of a limited Russian attack in the southeast, possibly coupled with a more expansive air, artillery, and missile campaign than a full attack from the north, east, and south aimed at fully conquering Ukraine. **These indicators also suggest that an attack in the south and east, with or without a larger air and missile campaign, could begin before preparations for an attack from the north are complete.**

Course of Action Summary—Overt Russian Deployment to Donbas and Air and Missile Campaign

This course of action is an expansion of Sub-COA 1b in our previous report, which considered the possibility of an overt deployment of Russian military forces into occupied Donbas.¹⁵ Moscow would announce that it must move into occupied Donbas to protect Russian citizens there from an imminent, large-scale Ukrainian invasion, possibly after one or more false-flag attacks ostensibly by Ukrainian forces or agents against targets in occupied Donbas. Russian forces from the 8th Combined Arms Army (CAA) and possibly other CAAs in the Southern Military District would then move overtly into occupied Donbas and establish defensive positions in conjunction with proxy militias along the line of contact. Before, during, or after this movement, Russian air, artillery, and missile forces would conduct a strike campaign from Russia and occupied territory to severely degrade the Ukrainian military throughout southern, eastern, and northern Ukraine. Russian ground forces could push beyond the current line of contact in Donbas to seize the remainder of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, and/or push north of Crimea, possibly as far as the Dnipro River, though that extended push runs the risk of significant Russian casualties and is somewhat less likely than them simply holding at the current line of contact. Putin may offer a ceasefire after the initial air, missile, and ground operations with more limited demands but conditions that he can easily accuse Ukraine of violating and thereby justify the resumption of military operations. Putin may demand a very wide demilitarized zone, possibly as far as the Dnipro River line, as the precondition for ceasing military operations and returning to diplomatic negotiations regarding the final status of Donbas in accord with the Minsk II Accords. Moscow may

make other demands of Kyiv such as amending the Ukrainian constitution to grant autonomous status to the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) and, in the process, revoke the constitutional commitment to joining NATO. Putin could demand the removal of all NATO forces and equipment from Ukraine. Russia could threaten further interventions along the northern Ukrainian border if Kyiv does not accede to its demands. That threat could also draw Ukrainian forces away from the southeast and pin them along the northern frontier.

Observed Indicators Supporting this Course of Action

- The Kremlin has not prepared the domestic Russian information space for a grand invasion of Ukraine that could entail many casualties. But, it has set information conditions in Russia for a limited war in response to a supposed Ukrainian attack on Donbas or Crimea.¹⁶ Putin would likely be able to adjust information conditions in Russia for a bigger war rapidly once a limited conflict began. Russian messaging continues to repeat that Russia plans no invasion of Ukraine but will respond with “military technical means” to threats to Russian citizens in Donbas. The Kremlin’s use of that phrase in explicit contrast with words such as “attack” or “invasion” suggests that Putin may be planning forms of military action such as air or missile strikes.
- The Russian information operation claiming that the Ukrainians are preparing to attack Donbas has continued unaffected by US and NATO efforts to expose false-flag operations, disinformation campaigns, and agents. This Russian campaign has continued and expanded in late January. It began accelerating following the introduction of a draft bill in the Russian Duma to recognize the independence of the DNR and LNR from Ukraine.¹⁷ It gained more steam with statements by Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov on January 24.¹⁸ A growing number of Russian parliamentarians and officials have begun calling for Russia to provide weapons and other assistance to the DNR and LNR since then.¹⁹ The DNR and LNR, supported by many Russian voices, are warning of a supposedly imminent Ukrainian attack with increasing shrillness and more detailed misinformation.²⁰
- Russian military forces in the Southern Military District have been ready to conduct the ground phase of this operation for many weeks or months. SMD ground, air, naval, and air defense units have been exercising extensively and at battalion and higher levels in December and January. See Appendix 1 for details.
- Russian advanced Su-35 fighters and Iskander missile systems have deployed into and near Belarus, supporting Russia’s ability to conduct air and missile attacks deeper into Ukraine and from Ukraine’s northwestern frontier.²¹ Russian S-400 air defense systems have also moved into Belarus, offering cover from NATO interference in a strike campaign.
- Russian messaging has consistently separated the Donbas conflict from Russia’s negotiations with the United States and NATO about NATO expansion, which is why the military action forecast above is not predicated on any particular stage in the US-Russia negotiations being reached.²² Putin could attack Ukraine to “preempt” an “imminent” Ukrainian invasion of Donbas even during an ongoing diplomatic process with the United States without breaking off negotiations over NATO expansion. Neither does he need to claim that such negotiations have failed to justify attacking Ukraine.
- Russian messaging has continued to emphasize Russia’s demands that Ukraine abide by its Minsk Accord commitments, along with the constant accusations that Ukraine is hopelessly in violation of those commitments and lacks any interest in or willingness to fulfill them.²³

Course of Action Evaluation—Overt Russian Deployment to Donbas and Air and Missile Campaign

Most detailed discussions of a possible Russian invasion of Ukraine assume it would begin with a relatively brief but intense air and missile campaign as a prelude to a ground attack. This essay explores the possibilities Putin could see in a somewhat more protracted air and missile campaign not as immediate preparation for a ground offensive but rather as an effort to achieve his objectives without having to invade and occupy large swaths of Ukraine. Such an independent air campaign would also set conditions for a subsequent ground offensive, to be sure. But it could avoid several of the most serious challenges such a ground offensive poses to the Russian military, especially the challenge of seizing and controlling multiple large cities and handling a likely proto-insurgency. Putin would likely continue to prepare for and threaten a ground invasion to reinforce the pressure his air campaign would put on President Volodymyr Zelensky to capitulate. A well-designed and executed air campaign might well convince Zelensky to surrender to demands that would probably not be as onerous as those Putin would impose following a ground invasion and military conquest of Kyiv but would nevertheless satisfy Putin's core objectives in Ukraine.

Current Efforts

Moscow is working to provoke Ukraine into taking some sort of action that can be presented as an attack against occupied Donbas. The bill proposed in the Russian Duma calling on Putin to consider recognizing the independence of the DNR and LNR is a recent example of such provocation.²⁴ The Ukrainian Rada promptly took notice of that bill, and Russian media seized on statements by the speaker of the Rada.²⁵ Putin likely does not intend to recognize the Donbas republics at this time (the Duma has delayed consideration of the bill into February), but rather to use the threat of doing so to prompt Ukrainian reactions that support Russian information operations.²⁶ The Rada response is not likely sufficient for Putin's purposes, however. He may continue to prod Kyiv along these lines or he may pursue more-promising approaches to creating a pretext for his attack.

Russian deployments around Ukraine's borders have naturally caused the Ukrainian military to begin mobilization and deployment to its borders and to the line of control. Russian media presents these deployments as preparations for an attack.²⁷ The ostentatious threat to Ukraine's north has pulled some Ukrainian forces away from Donbas and Crimea, where they would otherwise have concentrated in a time of escalating tension. This dispersal of Ukraine's limited combat capability could facilitate Russian operations in southeastern Ukraine. Russian information operations paint Ukrainian defensive responses as preparations for aggression. Putin will likely use these absurd allegations as part of his pretext for attacking.

Western intelligence services have exposed numerous Russian plans to conduct false-flag operations. The Russian information operation has changed hardly at all in response to these exposures, however. Russian and proxy officials and media continue to claim and report on Ukrainian infiltrations and other false-flag operations as though their veracity had never been questioned.²⁸ Their doggedness in this information operation suggests that they are deeply committed to it. Their stubborn adherence to by-now tired and partially discredited lines could indicate that the Russians would find it difficult to adjust a hybrid operation in which information operations are closely integrated with military, intelligence, paramilitary, and possibly cyber operations. These phenomena strongly suggest that Putin intends to launch a military operation in Donbas based on these narratives and the military preparations he has been making.

Western intelligence services have also reported on Russian preparations to replace Zelensky in various scenarios, while Russian media discusses the likelihood that a new (pro-Russian) Maidan would follow the supposed Ukrainian attack and subsequent destruction of the Ukrainian military.²⁹ Preparations for a coup d'état in Kyiv or a pro-Russian "Maidan" would not likely be necessary if Putin intended to seize Kyiv and install a new government. Those preparations could be indicators that he may first try more-limited military options, such as those considered in this essay. Coup d'état preparations may also be intended to prompt unwise actions by Kyiv that Putin could seize upon as justifications to attack.

Russia has also restricted gas supplies to Europe to raise energy prices and pressure Europeans, especially Germany, not to support harsh responses to Russian actions in and around Ukraine, as well as to press for approval of Nord Stream 2.³⁰ This long-term Russian effort has contributed to German reluctance to join the strong American stance against Russian threats to Ukraine and will sustain popular pressure on the German government to avoid taking or supporting actions that might trigger further reductions of Russian energy supplies during the winter.

Russian military deployments in Belarus and along Ukraine's northern borders could of course be preparations for an invasion and occupation of northern Ukraine and Kyiv. Those deployments would also serve many purposes in the more-limited course of action (including the air and missile campaign) considered in this essay, however, in which the Southern Military District would deliver the main blows. Those purposes include:

- Creating the crisis in the first place;
- Seeking concessions from the West that further compromise Ukraine's sovereignty;
- Forcing Ukraine to divert defense resources to its northern borders and away from the east and south;
- Building a military force that could invade Ukraine and can plausibly threaten to do so;
- Threatening NATO, thereby straining the alliance and also provoking the movement of NATO military forces to Poland and Romania, which the Russians can cast as preparations for a NATO attack; and
- Creating a deterrent against any NATO efforts or the efforts of individual NATO states to intervene in a conflict in Ukraine.

The Trigger

Putin would likely prefer to be able to seize on a Ukrainian action that can be presented as a provocation with some plausibility, although Kyiv is unlikely to make such a mistake. Russia could instead produce a fake "captured" Ukrainian plan to invade Donbas and manufacture "evidence" of concrete preparations to execute that plan.³¹ Such a fake plan might include the supposed encouragement of a Ukrainian attack on occupied Donbas or promises of support by the United States or NATO member states to Ukraine. Moscow could also conduct one or several false-flag operations that it portrays as Ukrainian attacks on occupied Donbas. Russia has worked hard to create the impression that Western military aid to Ukraine has emboldened Zelensky (the Russians have used the phrase "carte blanche") to attack Donbas and that Zelensky has mobilized sufficiently to conduct a large-scale attack on Donbas.³² The false-flag operations may include chemical attacks, which the Russians and their proxies constantly warn of.³³ Moscow may also claim that NATO has begun deploying (or prepared to deploy) to Ukraine missiles or other "offensive" systems that Putin has described as red lines.³⁴

Russian and separatist information operations seem focused on a combination of false flag and simply fictitious stories of an impending Ukrainian attack as of January 27, 2022. See Appendix 2 for details.

Initial Operations of the Overt Donbas Incursion and Air and Missile Campaign

Ground forces from the 8th Combined Arms Army consisting of multiple tank and motorized rifle regiments of the 150th Motorized Rifle Division—possibly augmented by other Southern Military District mechanized forces and possibly accompanied by airborne troops—would move into occupied Donbas.³⁵ Tube-, rocket-, and missile-artillery units would either accompany them or move into firing positions near the Russian border depending on range. Mechanized forces might move directly to the line of contact, displacing or reinforcing the militia units already there, or they might initially hold in reserve positions.

Russian air, long-range artillery, and missile units would strike Ukrainian command-and-control elements, weapons depots, high-end systems, and some front-line units for a considerable distance into unoccupied Ukraine. Separatists have already claimed they identified warehouses 15-20 kilometers behind the line of contact that are supposedly being prepared to receive weapons and ammunition to support the alleged Ukrainian offensive.³⁶ Attacks on the immediate rear of the line of contact would likely rely on tube- and rocket-artillery units along with ground-attack fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft. These strikes would likely not rely heavily on precision munitions and would be intended to do great damage to Ukrainian defensive positions and front-line units, destroying vehicles and artillery and killing many soldiers.

Russian long-range aviation; fighter-bombers staging from bases around northern Ukraine, Crimea, and Belarus; and intermediate-range missiles (such as the Iskander) would attack deeper into Ukraine. Moscow will likely attempt to use precision systems for these deeper strikes to avoid causing large numbers of civilian casualties.³⁷ These strikes will seek to cripple the Ukrainian military's ability to mount an effective conventional defense against a Russian ground invasion and to destroy enough weapons and ammunition to hinder the preparation of an irregular war or insurgent campaign. These strikes are unlikely to aim to kill many Ukrainian soldiers, at least at first. Russian doctrine and lessons-learned discussions suggest that these strikes would target civilian infrastructure such as power plants and communications facilities.³⁸

This air-and-missile campaign would likely intend, among other things, to shock and demoralize Ukrainians who expect renewed conflict to look like 2014. As other analysts have pointed out, it would showcase Russia's capacity to conduct a "Desert Storm"-style air campaign for both domestic and international benefit.³⁹

Russian attacks will likely seek to avoid killing NATO military personnel in Ukraine, or to seem to have done so accidentally and despite best efforts not to.

A possible branch of this plan could involve the "accidental" destruction of gas pipelines, particularly the one that runs north of Luhansk. The intent of such an attack would be to compel the Germans to begin operating Nord Stream 2 immediately. Depending on where the "accident" befell the pipeline, Russian forces could advance into unoccupied Ukraine to seize the damaged location and repair the damage—especially if Germany delayed in opening Nord Stream 2 beyond Russia's ability to bear the economic costs of shutting off the flow of gas. Putin would likely order such an attack only if Berlin appeared willing to support strong US and UK economic or military measures against Russia.

Another possible branch plan would include expanding Russian control to the whole of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, beyond the current line of contact, through mechanized advances following intensive localized airstrikes and artillery/rocket preparation of the battlefield. This branch would pose two significant problems for Putin, however. First, it would likely lead to significant Russian casualties, as Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts are the most heavily defended and war-ready in Ukraine. Second, it

would generate many casualties among Russian speakers living in those provinces, a phenomenon that could undermine Putin's narrative that he is driven by concern for their lives. Russian military forces could attempt to mitigate the first problem by combining a drive from occupied Donbas with a mechanized drive by the 3rd Motorized Rifle Division that is permanently based at Boguchar and Valuiky to the northeast and northwest and thus likely more ready for mechanized maneuver war than the ad hoc formations coming together further west in the WMD and Belarus.

Russian forces based in and around Crimea could additionally attack to the north, ostensibly in response to a Ukrainian attack on the peninsula (for which information conditions have already been prepared). This attack, likely relying heavily on airborne/air assault forces, would probably drive north to the Dnipro River, almost incidentally securing the North Crimean Canal and expanding the lodgment north of the Perekop Isthmus to the east.

The COA considered here does not involve a full Russian mechanized drive along the northern Azov Sea coast to create the Rostov-to-Crimea land bridge although Putin could order such a drive either at the outset of this operation or as a subsequent phase. The drive along the Azov coast, considered as COA 1c in our previous report, increases the risk to Russian forces by obliging them to take and hold the heavily defended city of Mariupol.⁴⁰ If the rest of the military operation is intended, as described in this COA, to move quickly, then the drive to Crimea might have to fight through Mariupol rather than encircling it and waiting for it to capitulate. The main point of establishing the land bridge, moreover, is to hold it permanently, thereby easing the supply problems Russian Crimea faces.

But committing to the permanent occupation of additional Ukrainian territory destroys the geopolitical framework based on the Minsk II accord within which Putin has been demanding Ukrainian concessions because it renders that agreement irrelevant. Putin could accept all these risks and challenges, but we regard that possibility as relatively less likely at this time.

Russian forces in Belarus and along the northern Ukrainian border take up jumping off positions for an invasion but do not cross the frontier. Additional reinforcements continue to arrive all along the northern border and into Belarus. Russian forces in these areas will likely launch air- and missile-strikes as part of the larger operation. They may also conduct artillery strikes against Ukrainian forces opposite them. They could feint attacks or even launch limited incursions either to pin Ukrainian forces or to draw reinforcements away from the southeast to defend Kyiv or other major cities.

All these combat operations would likely be planned to last from a few days to a few weeks.

Likely Military Effects of Initial Operations

The air/missile campaign can likely destroy the Ukrainian air force and helicopter forces, as well as runways and hangar facilities housing Ukrainian (Turkish-supplied) drones. It can also likely severely degrade Ukrainian ammunition stockpiles and tank and mechanized vehicle parks, especially those not dispersed in combat formations. It can likely do considerable damage to Ukrainian command, control, and communications infrastructure, coupled with cyber operations against those targets both to identify and locate and to disable them. It can likely destroy prepared defensive positions along the line of contact in places.

An air/missile campaign cannot destroy the Ukrainian military or its ability to continue to fight, but it can likely degrade Ukraine's military capabilities severely. ISW lacks sufficient information about the disposition of small arms, ammunition, small-caliber artillery and mortars, and other weapons to evaluate how much such an attack could degrade Ukraine's ability to wage irregular/insurgent war against a subsequent Russian mechanized invasion.

Russian forces would take losses in such an attack. The Russians would lose some fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft to Ukrainian air defenses and to accidents and other failures. Ukraine would likely capture some pilots; others would be killed. Ukrainian forces near the line of contact would return fire, killing some Russians in occupied Donbas. An intense localized Russian artillery, rocket, and air attack could likely reduce such losses significantly, however.

An attempt by Russian mechanized forces to drive north and west from the current line of contact in Donbas might produce much more serious losses for Russia. Determined Ukrainian defense can likely survive even intense air/artillery attack enough to inflict notable casualties on Russian troops. Moscow could attempt to mitigate the domestic political cost of these losses by having DNR or LNR militias conduct the advances, or at least the most dangerous parts of them, with Russian mechanized forces mopping up. Such a mitigation effort is unlikely. The overarching narrative is more likely to be “Russia coming to the defense of its citizens” than “Russia supporting its proxies.” The militias are not likely good enough, moreover, to conduct quick and clean offensive operations even after an extensive air and artillery preparation; they are also probably not good enough or sufficiently coordinated with Russian air and artillery units to operate under the immediate cover of such an attack.

Likely Russian Demands of Ukraine in Return for Pausing or Ceasing Russia’s Attack

Moscow will have framed the attack as a defense against Ukrainian aggression. Russia may not attempt to set informational conditions for the airstrikes before launching them. States commonly seek to achieve at least tactical surprise when launching air campaigns, for one thing. The air campaign may well follow the movement of Russian forces into occupied Donbas, for another, in which case any information justification for it would evolve rapidly but presumably smoothly from the information campaign justifying the entire undertaking. Russia will likely defend the extensive air/missile strikes *ex post facto* as necessary to eliminate Kyiv’s ability to threaten its forces and Russian citizens in Donbas and Crimea following Ukraine’s “demonstrated” determination to attack them. The Kremlin could also claim that it observed Ukrainian reinforcements heading for the front lines, preparations to deploy and use long-range missiles (possibly supplied by NATO), or other “provocations” justifying precision strikes. Russian proxies are already building the dossier to justify these false claims (see Appendix 2).

Putin will continue to proclaim his commitment to the Minsk Accords framework as the only possible resolution of the conflict and portray his attack as a necessary step to persuade Kyiv to shoulder its obligations. He may imply that Russian forces would withdraw from all or part of occupied Donbas if Ukraine fully accepts his conditions.

Moscow would certainly demand that Kyiv immediately fulfill its Minsk obligations, including by passing necessary laws and amendments to the Ukrainian constitution. Putin would almost certainly add the demand that Ukraine’s constitution be stripped of the article committing Ukraine to NATO integration and replaced either with a permanent commitment to neutrality or to the specific language that Alexander Lukashenko has introduced in the proposed new Belarusian constitution, which removes the constitution’s clause about Belarus being a “neutral” state, opening the door to deeper integration with Russia.⁴¹

Russia would likely also insist on a greatly expanded demilitarized zone in eastern Ukraine, perhaps as far as the Dnipro River bend and curving northeast from Dnipro city to the Russian border and likely all along the Azov Sea coast to the mouth of the Dnipro River. He could insist on the withdrawal of all Ukrainian heavy weapons, combat aircraft, armored vehicles, and so on, from such a zone to ensure the

safety of Russian citizens in Donbas and Crimea. He would likely demand that Ukraine expel all foreign forces and equipment.

Likely Russian Demands of the West in Return for Pausing or Ceasing Russian Attacks on Ukraine

Putin would likely insist on the following:

- The withdrawal of all Western military advisors and equipment from Ukraine;
- A German and French recommitment to the principles of Minsk II and agreements to press Ukraine to honor its commitments, i.e. that Ukraine give in to the Russian demands above; and
- An expansion of the Minsk agreements or concluding of new agreements recognizing Russia's demanded demilitarized zone and agreeing to terms for monitoring it, with specific sanctions to be imposed on Ukraine for violating it.

He would continue to insist on guarantees that NATO will never expand to the east, that Germany will approve Nord Stream 2, and so on, but he may make clear privately that conflict will end (for now) if the West agrees to the conditions above.

Subsequent Operations

Putin could launch subsequent operations throughout Ukraine using forces he is amassing in Belarus, along the northern Ukrainian border, and in and around Crimea. ISW described and evaluated courses of action including these operations in our previous report.⁴²

Ceasefire

Putin would likely continue military operations until Zelensky either capitulated or agreed to some specified ceasefire conditions. Zelensky is unlikely to capitulate quickly. He will feel pressure (and no doubt desire) to resist and will spend some time desperately trying to persuade Western partners to help him.

Putin might accept conditions less than his final demands in return for temporarily ending his air campaign and any ground operations he may have launched into unoccupied Ukraine. Protracting the crisis could benefit his efforts to strain the NATO alliance, give Zelensky and other Ukrainians time and space to realize that no help is coming and thereby further erode their will to resist, allow his own forces to reorganize and prepare for further operations, and continue to set informational conditions to his advantage if and when he restarts the attack. Offering a ceasefire would take advantage of the instinctive Western reaction to conflict, namely that the first priority is to “stop the fighting.” It even could create Western pressure on Zelensky to make concessions to keep Putin from resuming the attack.

Putin would likely define intermediate ceasefire conditions in such a way that he could always accuse Ukraine of violating them and thereby providing him a pretext to resume military operations. He might, for example, agree to ceasefire terms requiring the Ukrainian military to withdraw from specified areas in an unreasonable period of time or along routes the Russian military will have damaged too badly to support military movements. Ceasefires are inherently complex negotiations and can be difficult to enforce even on one's own forces and difficult to monitor precisely. The Russian manipulation of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) monitors of the current “ceasefire” demonstrates the ease with which Putin could claim that Ukrainian forces violated any ceasefire he imposes after his initial attack, thereby sustaining the risk of further attacks almost indefinitely.⁴³

Ukraine after the Attack

An attack of this variety would likely devastate and transform Ukraine. Russian reliance on airpower would shock most Ukrainians, who are preparing to resist a ground incursion that many expect to look like 2014. Ukrainians have not suffered large-scale air and missile attacks since the Second World War and are not physically or psychologically prepared for them. Attacks on critical infrastructure in the dead of winter could focus many Ukrainians on immediate problems of survival. Targeted strikes against convoys moving toward Donbas or Crimea would likely deter or disrupt the efforts of volunteers to flood the only actual ground combat zones. Ukrainians would find themselves furious but largely helpless victims at least for a time.

The psychological and physical effects of an air campaign wear off relatively quickly, however. People adapt mentally and find workarounds to problems of food, medical care, communications, and essential services. Ukrainians would likely therefore rally after a time and attempt to harness their fury. Relatively few would have any actual Russians to fight, however, given that airpower can interdict vehicular movement for a longer time and to a much greater degree than it can sustain psychological or systemic effects.

Zelensky would find himself in a very unpleasant situation. Without a military to fight back or allies willing to fight for him and facing a huge Russian military force still unengaged but threatening north of his capital as well as an air campaign either continuing or ready to be renewed if he does not capitulate, he would have to be a hero to refuse Putin's terms. He might indeed be a hero for a time out of his own patriotism and pressure from other Ukrainian patriots to resist, but it is hard to see how he could hold out for very long if the West makes it clear that no real help is on the way and Putin makes it clear that no end to the attack is in sight.

Sooner or later, therefore, Zelensky will likely agree to some version of Putin's demands. His capitulation will infuriate Ukrainian patriots and could well turn them against him, even to the point of provoking protests.⁴⁴ Putin may orchestrate armed provocations against the Ukrainian government during such protests to discredit the Ukrainian response in Russian and Western media. Certainly, Putin would likely allow such protests to threaten Zelensky. Putin would then be in a position to claim that Zelensky has lost control of his armed forces and even of the government of Ukraine and make further demands.

This devolution of Ukrainian governance could happen gradually over time. The air attack will have devastated Ukraine's economy, likely over the long term as foreign investment is withdrawn and withheld. The West will need to commit to helping Ukraine rebuild rapidly, but Russia will attempt to interfere with such efforts while ostensibly offering its own assistance (in all likelihood with conditions that amount to further concessions). Disorder, the likely discrediting of Zelensky, and further stories about Ukrainian corruption and misgovernance may reduce Western enthusiasm for reconstruction. Conditions may emerge to support a coup attempt, possibly by someone ostensibly committed to a Western course for Ukraine claiming to replace the traitor-Zelensky.

The West, and NATO in particular, will also have been disastrously discredited in Ukraine even though the desire for integration into the West and even into the alliance will remain strong. If NATO countries withdraw their advisors and trainers as the Russians attack or before it occurs, the optics of that retreat coupled with total failure to defend Ukrainian cities under air attack will be a devastating scar on NATO's image in Ukraine and around the world. It would reinforce the narrative of fecklessness launched by the American retreat from Afghanistan and spread it to the alliance as a whole. Pro-

Western Ukrainians are far more likely to be angry at the alliance and demoralized than they are to embrace a pro-Russia position, but they will feel deeply betrayed and will make their feelings known.

The one outcome that is very unlikely, therefore, is that the air attack unifies Ukraine around a strong anti-Russian leader and a strongly pro-Western position.

Possible Western Actions to Deter or Defeat this Scenario

Military Actions

The United States and a coalition of willing partners could take military action sufficient to cause Putin to rethink the wisdom of initiating this scenario. The scenario is attractive to Moscow because it offers many significant benefits at a relatively low risk of cost and casualties. If the United States and some partners visibly and vocally committed to fighting the Russian air/missile campaign, Putin would have to re-evaluate the risks and possible costs and might conclude that it was not worth it at this time.

The presence of NATO military personnel in Ukraine would be sufficient justification for the defensive military involvement of the United States and affected partners. They could deploy and use their own advanced air defense systems along with fighter aircraft to defend their advisors against possible Russian attack by downing Russian aircraft over Ukraine. Air defense systems would have to be moved into Ukraine or by ship into the Black Sea before or during the attack and would be vulnerable to Russian air and missile strikes. Manned aircraft would be vulnerable to Russian air defenses and Russian manned aircraft, although using small numbers of stealth fighters would materially reduce the risk of losses. The United States and its partners would have to be prepared to lose both aircraft and personnel, however, and would also have to be prepared for possible Russian escalations outside Ukraine. But Putin would have to take very seriously the risk of losing many aircraft and pilots or else having to rely only on missile strikes, which would likely significantly reduce the damage he could inflict on Ukraine. The optics of having the United States and partners fighting even in the air over Ukraine, moreover, would seriously undermine many of Putin's objectives.

The United States and its NATO partners can and should accelerate efforts to deploy forces of all services to NATO's eastern members, but such deployments will not likely deter Putin from launching this scenario absent a commitment to at least the air defense of Ukraine.

Deploying conventional ground forces to Ukraine would not be appropriate or necessary in this scenario. Such forces would need to deploy to NATO's eastern members, however, as the Biden Administration is already preparing to be able to do.⁴⁵

Non-military Actions

Putin would initiate this scenario against the backdrop of repeated US and European threats to impose dramatic economic costs on him for an attack on this scale. The Russian approach laid out in this scenario would thus likely aim at breaking the will of the Europeans and especially the Germans to support any such dramatic economic actions by the United States. Putin would be deploying the fear of catastrophic reductions in energy flows during a very cold winter, fear of an ever-escalating war that could end with the full occupation of Ukraine, and messaging about how Western-encouraged Ukrainian adventurism caused the entire conflict to pressure European governments. He could shift to a narrower message, in fact, that the "Anglo-Saxon powers" (a term the Kremlin uses to refer specifically to the United States and the United Kingdom) provoked the war, but that the continental states' cooler heads can bring peace.⁴⁶ He will be more likely to initiate the operation if he believes that pressure is likely to succeed in neutering a European response and thereby reduce the US response to something he can handle or else drive a deep wedge between the United States and Germany and France.

The West can mitigate this problem by forming a united front against this scenario and Russian aggression in general as the Biden Administration is attempting to do, but German and French actions and comments are not encouraging in this regard.

The United States can attempt to mitigate that problem by making clear to Putin that it will adopt devastating economic countermeasures on its own if necessary, and even at the expense of seriously straining relations with Germany. Washington needs to establish a commitment to respond to a Russian attack independent of the responses of its allies and must persuade Moscow that it is serious.

Putin would likely try to use his tremendous leverage on the United States by withholding or threatening to withhold energy supplies to Europe—or threatening other actions—if the United States imposes or retains harsh economic measures in response to this scenario. European fears of that threat and of the economic consequences to Europe of devastating US sanctions on Russia would also advance Russia's efforts to split the NATO alliance, which is why the Biden Administration has been very careful to try to remain in lock-step with its NATO partners.

The United States would naturally need to increase its own and others' gas supplies to Europe to offset the loss of Russian supplies to the greatest possible extent. The Biden Administration has apparently put much effort into preparing to do precisely that and has briefed its efforts and their prospects for success in detail.⁴⁷

But the United States must be prepared in the end to risk damaging its relationship with Germany and France even over a Russian attack short of a grand invasion and occupation of Ukraine. Allowing Berlin's desire to appease Putin and Paris's instinct to pursue its own policies and strategies at a moment of such dire crisis would destroy NATO even more surely than straining ties with either or both states. A Russian undertaking of this scale, combined with the deployment of Russian forces to Belarus and the general mobilization of Russian forces, would mark the crossing of a Rubicon. If the West does not respond decisively to it, as the United States has promised to do, then NATO will be seriously and possibly fatally injured. Tensions and resentment between eastern and western NATO states will grow. Putin will be emboldened to press on with efforts to reincorporate the Baltic States or at least drive them from NATO. And the Germans will have committed themselves to permanent hostage status, paralyzing any alliance response to Russia in the future. Xi Jinping of China and Iran's leaders will also draw devastating conclusions about America's willingness to resist aggression.

The danger this scenario poses to the United States is precisely the degree to which Putin can turn it so that nearly the full weight of any American response rests on Germany. If Berlin demonstrates that it will not bear that weight and the United States shows that it is unwilling to let Germany be crushed by it, then future Russian aggressions are certain. Worse still, the United States will have lost the credible ability to use economic leverage as a deterrent and will be left in the future to choose between war or further surrender. The United States must confront that reality now and must force Berlin (and Paris) to face it as well.

Appendix 1: Specific Indicators of Military Preparations for Donbas Deployment and Air Campaign Course of Action

The Russian Southern Military District has been preparing to conduct large-scale military operations throughout December 2021 and January 2022. The scale and complexity of exercises have steadily increased and are approaching levels that would support an air, artillery, and missile campaign in coordination with large-scale movements of mechanized, airborne, and SPETSNAZ units.

Summary

Russian forces in the Southern Military District (SMD) appear to have begun intensive preparations for a possible ground, air, and maritime attack against unoccupied Ukraine in early December 2021. Ukrainian intelligence reported that the new training pattern began on December 1, 2021. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) reported that SMD Commander Army General Alexander Dvornikov led a command-post exercise possibly combined with a commanders' conference for 300 senior officers of the district, down to the regimental level. Russian artillery, aviation, air defense, and mechanized forces have conducted many exercises since then, mostly at the battalion level and above.

Another round of large-scale exercises began on January 12, 2022, when the Russian MoD announced activities involving more than 10,000 Southern Military District troops at 20 different training areas in the district. The 34th Motorized Rifle Brigade (Mountain) of the 49th Combined Arms Army conducted exercises with more than 1,500 personnel involved. The exercises likely occurred over several days between January 17 and January 21, 2022. Multiple Russian artillery units in the SMD and the Western Military District have conducted battalion-level exercises in January 2022.

The Southern Military District announced yet another round of large-scale exercises involving more than 6,000 personnel on January 25. These exercises included more than 60 combat aircraft drawn from SMD aviation units and the Black Sea Fleet. They involved elements of the 58th Combined Arms Army as well.

The district announced deployments to training areas of unspecified elements of the 150th Motorized Rifle Division and the 20th Motorized Rifle Division on January 25.

Individual events

Over 20 Black Sea Fleet vessels—including frigates, landing ships, patrol ships, small missile ships, missile boats, and anti-submarine ships—conducted exercises in the Black Sea on January 26.⁴⁸ The Russian MoD stated the exercises would practice communications, maneuvers “with intensive navigation,” and air defense at sea. The Black Sea Fleet minesweepers *Ivan Golubets*, *Ivan Antonov*, and *Valentin Pikul* conducted anti-mine and escort tasks as part of the exercises.⁴⁹

Russia's Southern Military District announced that unspecified units of the 150th Motorized Rifle Division began deploying to unspecified training grounds in Rostov Oblast for live-fire exercises on January 26.⁵⁰ This mobilization is likely a component of larger SMD readiness exercises announced on January 25.

Russia's Southern Military District announced that unspecified elements of the 20th Motorized Rifle Division began deploying to the Prudboy Training Ground for live-fire exercises on January 26.⁵¹ This mobilization is likely a component of larger SMD readiness exercises announced on January 25.

More than 20 helicopters of Stavropol army aviation conducted exercises with motorized rifle elements in Stavropol Krai on January 26.⁵² Mi-28N and Mi-8 helicopters provided air support cover to

unspecified motorized rifle elements and practiced escort and heliborne deployment tasks. Helicopter crews practiced preparing aviation equipment to operate from airfields away from their home stations.

The Southern Military District announced large combined arms exercises of over 6,000 personnel on January 25.⁵³ The SMD stated that the district's combined arms armies, the 4th Air Force and Air Defense Army, Black Sea Fleet, and Caspian Flotilla are participating. Independent Russian news outlet *Interfax* reported on January 25 that the SMD stated that over 60 SMD aircraft of both army aviation and Black Sea Fleet naval aviation, including Su-27SM and Su-30SM2 fighters and Su-34 fighter bombers, will conduct missile strikes against targets in training grounds in Crimea, Rostov, and Krasnodar.⁵⁴ The SMD stated that elements of the 58th Combined Arms Army will deploy to unspecified training grounds in the North Caucasus and that the exercise includes more than 20 mobile field command and control posts across the SMD.⁵⁵

Battalion-sized artillery elements (approximately 500 personnel) likely of the 236th Artillery Brigade (20th Combined Arms Army) conducted live-fire exercises in Ryazan on January 25.⁵⁶

Elements of the Russian 1st Guards Missile Brigade using Iskander-M ballistic missiles deployed to the Kapustin Yar Training Ground in Astrakhan for fire exercises against air defense systems, command posts, and communication centers at ranges up to 300 kilometers on January 24.⁵⁷

Western Military District airmobile and army aviation helicopter elements conducted heliborne fire and landing exercises at unspecified locations in the military district on January 24.⁵⁸

Over 200 personnel of the Southern Military District army aviation units in Krasnodar conducted exercises with Su-25 close air support fighters to overcome an air defense system and strike targets at an unspecified training ground in Kuban on January 24.⁵⁹

Unspecified elements of the Russian 6th Air and Air Defense Forces Army conducted electronic fire control exercises with S-400 anti-air missile systems to destroy enemy cruise missiles and aircraft in Pskov Oblast on January 23.⁶⁰

Battalion-sized artillery elements (500 personnel) of the 58th Combined Arms Army conducted counter-battery fire with 122-mm self-propelled artillery and Grad multiple launch rocket systems at an unspecified training ground in Chechnya on January 23.⁶¹

1,500 personnel from the 34th Motorized Rifle Brigade (Mountain) of the 49th Combined Arms Army conducted exercises in Karachay-Cherkessia on January 21.⁶² The troops leveraged “the experience of modern armed conflicts,” referencing Russian lessons learned in Syria and Ukraine, in an exercise simulating a defensive battle.

Ukraine's Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported on January 21 that Russia has sent 7,000 tons of fuel, several tank and self-propelled artillery units, and unspecified other ammunition and supplies to Donbas since the start of January 2022.⁶³

Southern Military District and Black Sea Fleet Pantsir air defense crews conducted exercises to practice intercepting low-flying targets and changing firing positions in Crimea on January 20.⁶⁴

Four hundred personnel from unspecified 49th Combined Arms Army Special Forces units conducted exercises at the Molkino training ground in Krasnodar on January 20.⁶⁵ The forces practiced parachute landings in the rear of enemy forces and conducting reconnaissance operations.

Iskander crews from the Southern Military District conducted a deployment exercise from their unspecified home stations to the Kapustin Yar training ground on January 20.⁶⁶

Twenty Mi-24 and Mi-8 helicopters (and over 400 personnel) of Southern Military District army aviation conducted transportation and ground attack exercises in the Stavropol region on January 19.⁶⁷

Signal elements of the Southern Military District conducted brigade-sized exercises (over 3,000 personnel) to deploy a communication system for command posts and battalion tactical groups on January 18.⁶⁸ The exercise occurred across multiple unspecified training grounds in Rostov, Stavropol, Kuban, Volgograd, Dagestan, North Ossetia, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Armenia. This exercise could support preparations for Russian combat operations against Ukraine.

Over 1,500 personnel of Russia's 34th Mountain Motorized Rifle Brigade (49th Combined Arms Army) conducted live-fire exercises in platoons at the Kobu-Bashi Training Ground in Karachay-Cherkessia on January 17.⁶⁹

Russia's Black Sea Fleet announced command staff exercises in Crimea on January 17.⁷⁰ The exercises focus on executing tasks in a "unified information space." Black Sea Fleet commander Igor Osipov is presiding over the exercise with over 200 Black Sea Fleet command staff personnel.

Ukraine's Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) claimed that Russia's proxy militias in the Donetsk and Luhansk Peoples' Republics increased their exercise intensity on January 18.⁷¹ The GUR claimed that proxy militia artillery elements and company commanders began training exercises on the week of January 16.

Over 10,000 troops of the Russian Southern Military District (SMD), Black Sea Fleet, and Caspian Flotilla began battalion tactical group exercises on January 12.⁷² Unspecified elements of the SMD, Black Sea Fleet, and Caspian Flotilla are conducting exercises in battalion tactical groups at unspecified training grounds. The battalion tactical groups will practice reconnaissance tasks, fires, counter-battery fire, aviation strikes, and sniper tasks. Pre-exercise training for these exercises occurred in over 20 training grounds across the SMD in Crimea, and Kuban, Rostov, Stavropol, Volgograd, Astrakhan, North Ossetia, Chechenia, Karachay-Cherkessia, Ingushetia, Dagestan, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Armenia.

Naval infantry and sapper elements of the Russian Black Sea Fleet and artillery elements of the 22nd Army Corps began conducting battalion-sized exercises in Crimea on January 11.⁷³ Over 500 servicemen deployed to unspecified training grounds in Crimea for the exercises.

Russia's Black Sea Fleet and elements of the 4th Air Force and Air Defense Army conducted air defense exercises with S-400 and Pantsir-S air defense systems in Crimea on January 9.⁷⁴ Air defense units practiced detecting and tracking aircraft at low altitudes.

Ukraine's Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported on January 4 that Russian forces reinforced the advanced positions of its Donetsk and Luhansk proxy forces in occupied Donbas during the New Year holidays.⁷⁵ The GUR reported that Russian forces deployed more reconnaissance systems and sniper pairs to the front lines in Donbas and conducted artillery exercises.

The Russian Ministry of Defense announced on January 3 that Northern Fleet naval aviation pilots will conduct training in Crimea at an unspecified future date.⁷⁶ Su-33 and MiG-29K pilots of the Northern Fleet will deploy to Crimea for these exercises.

An unspecified number of Southern Military District Su-25SM fighter-bombers conducted 360 bombing runs and rocket launch exercises in Stavropol on December 28.⁷⁷

Ukraine's Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported on December 24 that Russian forces in command of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics militias are increasing exercises to improve coordination between combat and support units.⁷⁸ GUR claims that the DNR and LNR are increasing small arms, artillery, tank, and combat vehicle exercises to improve coordination of motorized infantry units, tank crews, and artillery and mortar units. GUR claimed that Russian personnel are meeting with DNR and LNR artillery units to conduct exercises to fire 152-mm howitzers and 122-mm Grad multiple rocket launchers.

More than 1,000 servicemen—likely of the 439th Artillery Regiment—and a tank battalion of an unspecified motorized rifle unit likely of the 8th Combined Arms Army conducted fires exercises at the Prudboy Training Ground on December 23.⁷⁹ The exercises practiced command and control cohesion in destroying targets and adjusting fire using unmanned aerial vehicles.

Russia deployed an unknown number of Su-34 aircraft from Novosibirsk to Lipetsk on December 22.⁸⁰ Lipetsk is approximately 300 kilometers from Ukraine's northeastern border with Russia. The number of Su-34 aircraft in this deployment is unclear.

Battalion-sized artillery and tank elements of the 49th Combined Arms Army conducted fire and maneuver exercises in Stavropol on December 22. Approximately 400 personnel used T-72 tanks and 152-mm self-propelled artillery to practice destroying enemy armor at distances up to 12 kilometers.⁸¹

Unspecified artillery elements of the Russian 150th Motorized Rifle Division conducted indirect fire exercises with 122-mm howitzers in Rostov on December 21.⁸²

S-400 anti-aircraft missile system crews conducted air defense exercises in Crimea on December 15.⁸³ Military personnel practiced measures to launch missiles at simulated enemy targets. Su-24M aircraft acted as the simulated enemy.

The Ukrainian Navy reported that Russian forces blocked 70 percent of the Sea of Azov on December 10. The Ukrainian Navy claims that the Kremlin issued navigation warnings to restrict movement in large areas of the Sea of Azov in order to prepare for Russian artillery fire against Ukrainian positions near Mariupol, Berdyansk, and Henichesk.⁸⁴ Russian artillery did not fire into unoccupied Ukraine.

Ukraine's Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported on December 7 that Russia is reinforcing the front line in Donbas with an unspecified number of 122mm self-propelled artillery, tanks, and infantry fighting vehicles.⁸⁵ The GUR also stated that Russian forces increased proxy sniper readiness through increased training.








Over 300 senior officers of the Southern Military District (SMD), including regimental commanders, began training for multi-domain operations with missile and air strikes on December 6.⁸⁶ SMD Commander Army General Alexander Dvornikov is presiding over videoconference training with SMD commanders down to the regimental level. The training includes conducting complex multi-domain operations to conduct air and missile strikes in multiple operational directions.

Ukraine's GUR reported on December 3, 2021, that Russia's 8th Combined Arms Army began new operational and combat training exercises and preparations for forward artillery in occupied Donbas on December 1.⁸⁷ The GUR claims these exercises seek to raise the combat readiness of DNR and LNR units. The GUR claims that Russian-controlled forces in the DNR and LNR are rotating units to forward positions and preparing indirect fire assets to attack Ukrainian positions. The DNR and LNR have not yet mobilized at scale as of December 3.

Russian Proxy False Claims of Ukrainian Preparations to Attack



The following markers represent Russian proxy allegations about Ukrainian preparations to attack Donbas, Belarus, or Transnistria. These claims are false. This disinformation combines completely false allegations with miscontextualizations of Ukrainian defensive measures. It may be meant to set information conditions for an unprovoked Russian air campaign.

-  Alleged Ukrainian Sabotage Activity
-  Alleged Ukrainian Recruitment Drives for Offensives
-  Alleged Ukrainian Offensive Logistics Activity
-  Alleged Ukrainian Offensive Deployment Preparations
-  Alleged Ukrainain Offensive Force Deployments
-  Alleged Ukrainian Staging Areas to Attack Donbas
-  Russian-Controlled Ukrainian Territory

Map by George Barros
 Institute for the Study of War © 2022

Russian Proxy False Claims of Ukrainian Preparations to Attack



0 255 510 1,020 Kilometers

Spatial Reference: WGS 1984 Web Mercator (auxiliary sphere)

The following markers represent Russian proxy allegations about Ukrainian preparations to attack Donbas, Belarus, or Transnistria. These claims are false. This disinformation combines completely false allegations with miscontextualizations of Ukrainian defensive measures. It may be meant to set information conditions for an unprovoked Russian air campaign.

- | | |
|---|--|
| Alleged Ukrainian Sabotage Activity | Alleged Ukrainian Offensive Force Deployments |
| Alleged Ukrainian Recruitment Drives for Offensives | Alleged Ukrainian Staging Areas to Attack Donbas |
| Alleged Ukrainian Offensive Logistics Activity | Russian-Controlled Ukrainian Territory |
| Alleged Ukrainian Offensive Deployment Preparations | |

Map by George Barros
Institute for the Study of War © 2022

Appendix 2: Proxy Republics' Information Operations Describing Supposed Ukrainian Preparations to Attack

The leaders of Russia's proxy republics in occupied Donbas frequently claim Ukrainian violations of the ceasefire terms and preparations to conduct false-flag attacks or even invasions. They have continued to make such claims even after the United States and allied governments have exposed their preparations to conduct false flag operations. An inflection occurred in the proxy republics' narratives shortly after Kremlin Spokesman Dmitrii Peskov's alarming statement of January 24, 2022, suggesting that a Ukrainian attack on Donbas could be imminent. Starting the next day, the proxy leaders began to describe very specific alleged Ukrainian preparations for an offensive and identified specific Ukrainian units throughout Ukraine, not just near Donbas, as readying for war. Both the increasing specificity of their accusations and the geographical range they cover may be indicators that the information operation is entering its final stage and that Russian military operations may hit targets across Ukraine on the pretext of needing to stop Kyiv from reinforcing its supposed offensive against Donbas.

Events

The leaders of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR), Denis Pushilin and Leonid Pasechnik, supported Secretary of United Russia General Council Andrey Turchak's proposal to supply Donbas with military equipment on January 26.⁸⁸ Pushilin said Russian weapons would allow the DNR to "resist impending aggression on the part of Ukraine" and strengthen "defensive capabilities" against implied Western military equipment. Pasechnik said that if Ukraine does not come to its senses, Luhansk will be "very grateful" for Russian military support. Pasechnik urged against forgetting that Ukraine's "overseas partners" continue to supply Kyiv with large volumes of weapons.

The Donetsk People's Republic claimed on January 26 that the Ukrainian Armed Forces are actively preparing an armed group for an offensive in Donbas.⁸⁹ The DNR claimed that Ukraine deployed fuel, lubricants, and ammunition to the Pokrovsk, Druzhkivka, and Zachativka railways stations in Donetsk Oblast to supply forces near the line of contact. The DNR added that Ukrainian brigade commanders are preparing to receive ammunition 15-20 kilometers from the line of contact by setting up field warehouses. The DNR also claimed that Ukraine began preparing military hospitals by deploying additional beds, training medical personnel for wound treatment, and storing donor blood. The DNR claimed that Kyiv ordered civilians to evacuate from government-controlled frontline settlements and began recruiting members of radical organizations with experience in combat in Donbas at recruitment points in Kharkiv, Bila Tserkva, Kherson, and Dnipro.⁹⁰ The DNR reported that Ukraine set up training camps for recruits and launched fundraising campaigns "to buy transport and equipment for nationalist assault groups." The DNR also claimed that Ukraine will negotiate with NATO countries like the Czech Republic to receive their old Soviet equipment, such as 152 mm artillery shells, to address ammunition shortages.

The Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) on January 26 accused Ukraine's Security Services (SBU) of planning a series of sabotage and terrorist acts to destabilize the proxy republic.⁹¹ The DNR claimed that SBU agents amassed 1.6 kilograms of TNT, 20 hand grenades, and 15 shots for grenade launchers in abandoned houses in Dokuchajevs'k, Donetsk Oblast

The Luhansk People's Republic claimed that the current situation in Donbas "is more like a pre-war situation" on January 25.⁹² The LNR claimed that the "Ukrainian army is preparing for the transition to active hostilities" and that they recorded "active [Ukrainian] military activities... not only in Donbas...

but also in general throughout the entire territory of Ukraine.” The LNR claimed that Ukraine’s 35th Separate Marine Brigade assembled in Odesa to “destabilize the situation on the Ukrainian-Transnistria border.” The LNR claimed that the Ukrainian 121st Separate Signal Brigade deployed equipment from Dnipropetrovsk to Donbas. The LNR also claimed that Ukraine’s 55th Separate Artillery Brigade is conducting military exercises near Orlivka Village, Odesa Oblast, after which the brigade will head to Donbas. The LNR stated that elements of the Ukrainian 93rd Separate Mechanized Brigade are in “constant combat readiness” in Kharkiv Oblast, preparing for deployment to Donbas. The LNR claimed the Ukrainian 156th Anti-Aircraft Missile Regiment deployed to the Ukrainian-Belarusian border from Chernihiv Oblast. The LNR also claimed to have recorded intensified signals activity in Ukrainian forces’ radio networks and at reserve command posts. The LNR stated that hospitals in Severodonetsk, Luhansk Oblast, and Chasiv Yar, Donetsk Oblast, and mobile crematoriums in Kramatorsk, Donetsk Oblast, are preparing for an offensive. The LNR claimed that five unspecified British-trained Ukrainian special operations forces groups arrived in Lysychans’k, Luhansk Oblast, to conduct sabotage on civil infrastructure facilities, including water filtration stations. The LNR stated that the Ukrainian Armed Forces are “carefully” hiding their deployments from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe Special Monitoring Mission (OSCE SMM) and suppressed OSCE SMM drones with electronic warfare systems 57 times in an unspecified recording period.

The Luhansk People’s Republic claimed that Ukraine deployed two infantry armored vehicles to Schastia, Luhansk Oblast on January 25.⁹³ LNR claimed that proxy forces are ready to “promptly respond to changes in the situation.” Ukraine’s 79th Air Assault Brigade operates in the vicinity of Schastia.

The Luhansk People’s Republic accused Ukraine’s 79th Air Assault Brigade of expelling civilians from their homes in Lopaskyne Village, Luhansk Oblast, to quarter Ukrainian military personnel on January 25.⁹⁴

The Donetsk People’s Republic claimed that Ukrainian Armed Forces deployed multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS) and tanks to unspecified locations in Donbas to form assault groups on January 25.⁹⁵ The DNR reported spotting “the arrival of multiple rocket launchers, armored units, and equipment for destroying mine barriers.

The Donetsk People’s Republic Intelligence claimed that Ukrainian “Right Sector” militants arrived in Donbas on January 25.⁹⁶ The DNR stated that Ukrainian “nationalist” battalions could act as military detachments or as ethnic cleansing groups.

The Donetsk People’s Republic accused the Ukrainian government of preparing to send mechanized units to Donbas on January 24.⁹⁷ The DNR additionally accused Ukraine of deploying 40 special forces soldiers to Avdiivka, Donetsk, and claimed it confirmed the presence of Javelin anti-tank weapons near Donbas. The DNR accused Ukraine of preparing to use force to resolve the conflict in Donbas.

The Donetsk People’s Republic accused Ukrainian forces of increasing drone reconnaissance and sniper deployments to prepare for an “active phase of hostilities” against Donbas on January 22.⁹⁸ The DNR continued to propagate claims from January 21 about Ukrainian forces deploying multiple launch rocket launchers and snipers to Donbas.

Kremlin-sponsored TV and online outlets amplified the Donetsk People’s Republic’s claim that the Ukrainian Armed Forces deployed two “Uragan” and six “Smerch” multiple rocket launchers (MLRS) and sniper units to Pokrovsky, in government-controlled Donetsk Oblast, on January 21.⁹⁹ The DNR claimed that Ukraine’s Security Service deployed snipers from its “Alpha” special unit to “unleash active

hostilities in Donetsk.”¹⁰⁰ The DNR also claimed that the Ukrainian 25th and 95th Airborne Brigades will use anti-tank weapons provided by the United Kingdom “to seize settlements of the [DNR] and Luhansk People’s Republic.”¹⁰¹

Kremlin-sponsored media claimed that Ukraine’s National Guard conducted aviation, artillery, and drone combat readiness exercises in Donetsk, Luhansk, Kharkiv, and Sumy on January 19.¹⁰² Russian media alleged that Ukrainian forces intensified shelling and used mortars for anti-sniper warfare. Russian media claimed that the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s Special Monitoring Mission (OSCE SMM) observed a Ukrainian howitzer 20 kilometers from Donetsk. Russian media claimed that OSCE SMM also observed Ukrainian howitzers, “Grad” multiple launch rocket systems, and S-300 air defense systems near Mariupol, Donetsk Oblast.

The Luhansk People’s Republic accused Kyiv of deploying three pairs of Lithuanian-trained Ukrainian snipers to Svetlodarsk to “commit provocations” in Donbas on January 16.¹⁰³

The Donetsk People’s Republic claimed that Ukrainian forces deployed six heavy weapon systems near three villages in Ukrainian government-controlled Donetsk on January 13.¹⁰⁴ The DNR claimed that Ukrainian forces deployed a 9K33 “Osa” air defense system to Andriyvka, Donetsk, a BM-21 “Grad” multiple launch rocket system and three 152mm self-propelled howitzers to Mangush, Donetsk, and a S-300 air defense system to Volodarske, Donetsk.

The Luhansk People’s Republic accused Ukrainian forces of deploying armored vehicles near the villages of Popasnaya, Zolote and Vrubovka on January 7.¹⁰⁵ The LNR accused Ukrainian forces of deploying four MT-LB armored personnel carriers and four armored combat vehicles near Popasna, Luhansk, three MT-LB armored personnel carriers near Vrubovka, and two BMP-2 infantry fighting vehicles near Zolote. Ukraine’s 24th Mechanized Brigade operates in this vicinity.

The People’s Militia of the Luhansk Republic reported that Ukrainian Armed Forces deployed additional armor and artillery to the front line in Donbas on December 16.¹⁰⁶ The LNR said that Ukrainian Armed Forces deployed a Strela-10 anti-aircraft missile system, four T-72 tanks to the Novookhtyrka, Luhansk, and three T-72 tanks to the Severodonetsk, Luhansk. Ukraine’s 57th Motorized Rifle Brigade operates in the vicinity of these locations.

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