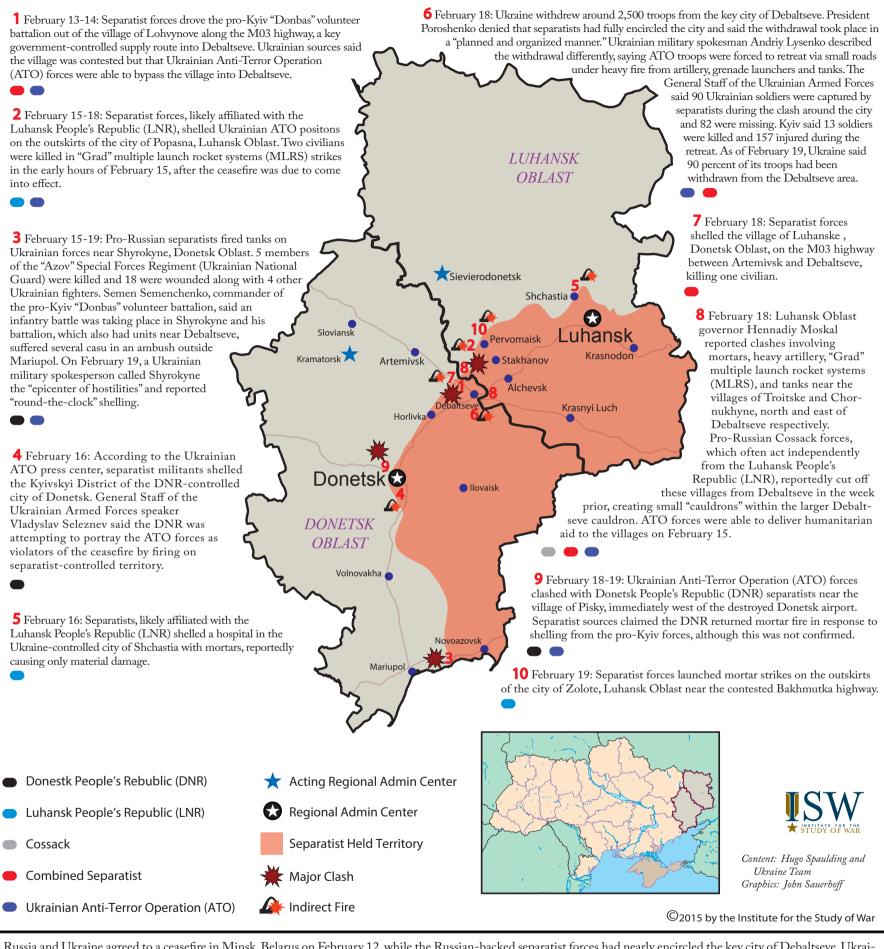
Ukraine Crisis Update: February 19, 2015



Russia and Ukraine agreed to a ceasefire in Minsk, Belarus on February 12, while the Russian-backed separatist forces had nearly encircled the key city of Debaltseve. Ukrainian forces have now withdrawn from the city, a major loss for the Anti-Terror Operation (ATO) only three days after the start of the newly agreed ceasefire. Because Debaltseve is a highway and rail junction between the separatist-held regional capitals, its capture will enable further military coordination between the pro-Russian separatist groups known as the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR). This cooperation may lead to the formation of a united Russia-backed proxy state under the name "Novorossiya," a long-stated goal of the separatists. Following the capture of Debaltseve, the separatists will likely turn their attention north of the city, toward the ATO headquarters in Kramatorsk and the former separatist stronghold of Sloviansk, and toward Mariupol in southern Donetsk Oblast.

The capture of Debaltseve represents a significant victory for Russia. Since the agreement was signed, Russian President Vladimir Putin has called on Ukrainian forces to surrender Debaltseve to the separatists surrounding the key city. While Ukraine and the West have condemned Russia's support for the offensive in the form of Russian military hardware and regular Russian forces, neither are likely to view the loss of the city as a violation that terminates the ceasefire and its corollary requirements. Accordingly, President Putin has the luxury of choosing to accelerate Russian and separatist offensives in the south and north of Donetsk Oblast or to strengthen separatist positions over a protracted period of time as was done in the months following the September 2014 ceasefire. Discussions of possible U.S. military aid to Ukraine and an unlikely UN peacekeeping mission will likely accelerate Russian operational planning and the execution of offensives toward Mariupol, Kramatorsk and Sloviansk, which would signal the end of Ukraine's presence in Donetsk Oblast.