PUTIN'S NEXT OBJECTIVES IN THE UKRAINE CRISIS

Russia's campaign in eastern Ukraine has reached an inflection point. Five months after signing a ceasefire agreement, Russian and separatist forces have moved from a preparation phase to a maneuver offensive launched by the separatist victory at the Donetsk airport on January 21, 2015. This new phase of the conflict presents a fresh set of operational decision points for the governments in Moscow and Kyiv. Will Russian-backed forces stop at the boundaries of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts [Provinces] and consolidate their gains? Will they seize Mariupol and then drive west to build a land-corridor to Crimea? Or will they prepare for much larger battles to take the pivotal cities of Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk, and Zaporizhia, whose capture would put the survival of the Ukrainian state in grave doubt? Will the Kyiv government commit reserves to defend against any of these contingencies? These decisions, much like the decision to seize the airport, will shed light on Moscow's strategic objectives in Ukraine and Kyiv's capacity to withstand them. They will also shape the evolution and quite possibly the outcome of this war.

RUSSIAN OBJECTIVES IN KYIV

Russia's strategic interest in controlling Ukrainian political affairs reflects Russian President Vladimir Putin's belief in the need to maintain a buffer between NATO, the European Union, and Russia. The collapse of former President Viktor Yanukovych's pro-Russian regime in February 2014 forced Putin to re-evaluate his strategy for controlling Ukraine, particularly as it became clear that Ukraine's new government was likely to be pro-Western and eager to join the EU and even NATO. Unable to rely on a proxy government any longer, Putin replaced his policy of economic coercion with one incorporating military coercion through successive operations.[1] Both approaches pursued the same strategic goal of dominating Ukraine's internal and foreign affairs.

Limited military escalation brought Kyiv's West-leaning administration to the negotiating table on several occasions throughout the conflict, serving most notably as the catalyst for the September 2014 ceasefire agreement.[2] Russia's successive operations in Ukraine have driven Kyiv to bargain with the separatists, but they have not succeeded in dissuading the Ukrainian government from pursuing membership in the European Union and NATO. On the contrary, Russian intervention and separatist success has generally driven Kyiv closer to alignment with the West.[3] Putin has made it clear that he regards a Western-aligned Ukraine as unacceptable and that he is willing to use force to prevent such a situation from occurring. If his attempts to manipulate Kyiv's foreign and domestic policy in this direction fail, he may change his strategy from economic and military coercion to military conquest. Putin probably has not yet made the decision to conquer Ukraine by force, and

may well be reluctant to undertake it. Unless he can either achieve his goals by means short of conquest or be persuaded to accept lesser objectives, he is likely to be planning for and considering the prospect of a conventional attack to destroy the current Ukrainian government. Current Russian and separatist operations in eastern Ukraine appear to show that Putin has not yet decided to accept any moderate or negotiated outcome to this conflict.

PHASES OF RUSSIAN STRATEGY

Putin's first response to the rise of a potentially pro-Western government in Kyiv was to seize the Crimean Peninsula by force. This invasion, justified as a defensive action, was meant to put pressure on Kyiv as well as to secure Russia's most immediate security interest in Ukraine — the permanent retention of the home port of the Russian Black Sea Fleet. Ukraine did not fight for Crimea and has ceded the territory to Russia in all but rhetoric, yet the invasion seemed only to harden Kyiv's will to fight further Russian pressure.

Putin then turned his attention to the east, by promoting the apparent political legitimacy of separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts and building their military power to combat Ukrainian military forces and volunteers. Putin has largely succeeded in establishing the separatists as the de facto political leadership in much of Donetsk and Luhansk by supporting separatist elections in the areas controlled by separatist militias with Russian support in what have become known as

PRO-RUSSIAN SEPARATIST CONTROL IN EASTERN UKRAINE: CURRENT AND PROJECTED BOUNDARIES

KEY

- Area of Separatist Control
- Key Separatist Targets
- Aspirational Boundaries of Separatist Control
- Critical Line of Ukrainian Defense
- Administrative Centers

the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR, Donetskaya Narodnaya Respublika and Luhanskaya Narodnaya Respublika).[4] An effort to consolidate disparate separatist battalions into a united army also served this end.[5] Russia preserved the integrity and combat power of the separatist territories by providing humanitarian and likely military aid in a series of supply convoys.[6] Following Kyiv's decision to cut off government services to the separatist-held regions in November 2014, this Russian assistance proved crucial to the survival of the separatist administrations.[7]

Putin has also deployed Russian military forces to support the separatists, particularly with high-end capabilities that militias cannot hope to develop rapidly. The limited Western discussions of this direct Russian intervention have generally focused on the presence or absence of Russian tanks, aircraft, and other advanced weapons systems. A careful examination of the pattern of maneuver conducted by the combined Russian-separatist forces, however, suggests that the Russians have been providing critical assistance in the development and execution of sophisticated operational-level campaign planning.

The separatists' maneuvers bear some of the signatures of classic Russian and Soviet operational design, albeit on a smaller scale, and clearly show the Russian hand in formulating the campaign. The operations consist of preparatory phases to soften Ukrainian defenses (conducted with hybrid means including artillery, special operations, and terrorism), a penetration battle,[8] maneuvering to force the adversary into a classic Kesselschlacht or "cauldron-battle" (the characteristic envelopment of enemy forces that occurred on the Eastern Front in World War II, often precisely in this area of eastern Ukraine), maneuvering by armored columns along multiple axes to the next set of objectives, followed by taking sufficient terrain to begin to set new conditions for a subsequent offensive. The penetration and maneuver phases of the contemporary case seem to be deliberately designed to be short enough to transpire from beginning to end before Kyiv, NATO, or the United States can make a decision to reinforce Ukraine.

PREPARATION FOR OFFENSIVE MANEUVERS PHASE (SEPTEMBER 5, 2014 - JANUARY 14, 2015)

Kyiv signed a ceasefire agreement with pro-Russian separatists in September 2014 after two significant defeats in two days: a cross-border armored incursion from southwestern Russia into Novoazovsk on August 28, 2014 and a separatist envelopment at the railroad hub of Ilovaisk east of Donetsk on August 29. The Russians began a new preparation phase for future combat against Ukraine as this ceasefire began. The ceasefire agreement,

known as the Minsk Protocol, drew a line of demarcation between Ukraine and separatist-controlled portions of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts in the southeast of the country.[10] The Minsk Protocol required both Ukraine and the Russia-backed separatists to withdraw heavy weaponry 15 kilometers from this demarcation line in order to create a demilitarized buffer zone. The establishment of this line, as well as the fact of the separatists' participation in its negotiation, provided partial legitimacy to the separatists, a key Russian objective during this phase. The use of rapid successive operations to push Kyiv into a peace deal with the separatists that facilitated preparations for the current offensive shows the continuity of Russian strategic planning since the summer of 2014.

Heavy separatist bombardment of the old terminal at the Donetsk airport in early December 2014 also drove Ukraine's President Petro Poroshenko to announce a new "regime of silence," under which he forbade the army to return fire unless under direct attack.[11] President Poroshenko said the move allowed Ukraine to rearm and strengthen its line of defense, but the regime of silence reflected Ukraine's inability to effectively target separatists firing from urban areas.[12]

MANEUVERING PHASE (JANUARY 15-PRESENT)

The battle for the Donetsk Airport has assumed a significance out of all proportion to the size of the forces engaged. The airport is on the outskirts of Donetsk city, which the separatists have long controlled. The limited pro-Kyiv forces there have not posed any meaningful threat to rebel control of Donetsk, although their retention of the airfield could have been important if Kyiv had decided to try to send reinforcements by air to fight to retake Donetsk. The airport itself was also designed by the Soviets to be a formidable obstacle, with many miles of deeply-dug tunnels and bunkers to facilitate a resolute defense.

Since May 2014, a mixture of Ukrainian paratroopers and volunteers stationed at the airport, known collectively as the "cyborgs" for their almost super-human resilience, endured near-constant shelling and repelled numerous attempts to storm the airport.[13] Russia-backed separatists supported by heavy armor finally broke through their defenses and stormed the new terminal of the Donetsk airport on January 15, 2015.[14] After the assault, the separatists claimed to have cleared the last of the Ukrainians from the airport.[15] Pro-separatist LifeNews filmed an interview with a DNR battalion commander from the new terminal on January 16, 2015 to support this perception, although the "cyborgs" continued to hold positions in the new terminal until January 21, 2015.[16]

In response to the attack, the Ukrainian government deployed tanks in what it called a "massive operation" to open up an evacuation corridor for its wounded soldiers and hold its remaining positions in the new terminal.[17] While the evacuation proved partially successful, separatists had trapped the remaining Ukrainian forces in the new terminal from floors above and below.[18] A documentary shot by separatist news agency NewsFront shows pro-Russian militants from an upper floor dropping thermite grenades, a pyrotechnic weapon capable of burning down metal structures.[19] On January 19, 2015 one of the floors of the new terminal collapsed on Ukrainian forces below, injuring and killing as many as 50 Ukrainian paratroopers.[20] The remaining Ukrainian troops withdrew or were captured after separatists destroyed the roof of the new terminal on January 21.[21]

Much like the rapid maneuvers at Novoazovsk and Ilovaisk in August 2014, the separatist victory at the airport drove Kyiv to pursue ceasefire negotiations in Minsk, Belarus, where its representatives met with the separatists on January 31, 2015.[22] Talks broke down due in part to separatist demands that Ukraine send an official representative from the current administration instead of former President Leonid Kuchma.[23] Earlier, rebels had demanded Kyiv send pro-Russian oligarch Viktor Medvedchuk in former President Kuchma's place.[24] Medvedchuk, whose daughter's godfather is Vladimir Putin, has been a key figure in the Kremlin's plans to keep Ukraine within its sphere of influence since at least 2013 and has served as a mediator in several instances throughout the current conflict in particular over POW negotiations.[25] Medvedchuk attended the Minsk meeting, but the separatists still blamed Kuchma's presence for the collapse of negotiations. The capacity to escalate fighting at short notice will continue to give Moscow an advantage over Kyiv in eastern Ukraine. Such an approach will succeed until Kyiv gains the capacity to defend itself through force.

Following the capture of the Donetsk airport, Donetsk People's Republic head Aleksandr Zakharchenko said his army was equipped to fight "in three directions simultaneously" highlighting Russia's intention to coordinate successive offensives before consolidating separatist-controlled territory.[26] Naming the former separatist stronghold of Sloviansk and the strategic port city of Mariupol as his targets, Zakharchenko vowed to attack "up to the borders of Donetsk Oblast."[27] Given the current positions of separatist forces in the region, the three fronts likely refer to offensive campaigns against Ukrainian forces in three locations: northwest of Donetsk city, the transport hub of Debaltseve, and the port city of Mariupol.

DONETSK

A dramatic escalation in hostilities followed Ukraine's withdrawal from the ruins of the new terminal at Donetsk airport. On January 22, 2015 an artillery or mortar shell hit a bus full of civilians in the southern Leninskyi District of the separatist stronghold of Donetsk. The attack, which left 13 dead and 20 wounded, prompted the DNR to shame publically a group of POWs captured at the airport in front of an angry crowd, implying Ukrainian responsibility for the attack. International observers from the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) assessed that the shells were fired from the northwest, near the Ukrainian artillery positions that supported the Donetsk airport defense. The Ukrainian Ministry of Defense, however, blamed the attack on the separatists. DNR head Aleksandr Zakharchenko seized the moment to proclaim that the separatists would no longer pursue ceasefire talks.[28]

Operationally, the destruction of the new terminal pushed Ukrainian forces away from Donetsk city, the biggest and most important urban center in separatist-held territory. Pro-Ukrainian forces remain in artillery range of the city from areas between Avdiivka (north) and Pisky (northwest), and also from Marinka (west), however, so the loss of the new terminal at the Donetsk airport did not alter the front line of separatist advance substantially. While other flashpoints such as Debaltseve and Mariupol represent key maneuver objectives for Russia and the DNR, the operations around Donetsk reflect consolidation for defensive purposes in the short-term. As long as the front line runs through the outskirts of Donetsk city, the separatists will not be in a position to coordinate wider offensive operations from the city.

This offensive capacity is key to Russia's creation of a viable breakaway state within the preexisting Donetsk and Luhansk Oblast lines. The creation of secure Russian proxy states in southeastern Ukraine will also extend the Kremlin's ability to influence Kyiv's foreign policy outcomes. As long as Russian proxy states exist within the internationally recognized borders of Ukraine, NATO is unlikely accept Ukraine as a member. Given the obligation of treaty signatories to defend one another, Ukrainian membership would bring NATO into direct confrontation with Russia as long as the proxy states continued to exist. The creation of defensible proxy states, or a single united state, thus serves Russia's grand strategic objective of creating a security buffer between its own borders and NATO.

DEBALTSEVE

Debaltseve is a key rail and road hub between the separatist-held cities of Donetsk and Luhansk. It constitutes the most forward position of pro-Ukrainian forces at the front line of separatist control between the DNR and the LNR. It is surrounded on three sides by separatist forces along the Minsk Protocol demarcation line. As many as 8,000 Ukrainian soldiers and volunteers are trapped in Debaltseve, according to separatist reports.[29] Volunteer units such as the "Donbas" battalion, a mechanized battalion under the Ministry of Internal Affairs, are operating there alongside formal Ukrainian forces represented primarily by the 128th Mechanized Brigade.[30] It was on the verge of falling under separatist control as of February 2, 2015. While separatist elements from both the DNR and LNR have subjected the outlying areas of Debaltseve to regular shelling since Ukrainian forces recaptured it on July 28, 2014, this Ukrainian stronghold was not directly contested until late January 2015.[31] Flanked by the Russia-backed separatists from the west, south, and east, the government-held city of Debaltseve faces complete encirclement in early February 2015.

The DNR leadership has described the city as a "cauldron" referring to maneuvering the pro-Ukrainian forces into a Kesselschlacht or "cauldron battle."[32] The Soviet Union conducted such envelopments against the Germans in World War II, in the successive operations following the breakout from Stalingrad. More recently, the Russia-backed separatists used this maneuver in August 2014 to win the battle for Ilovaisk, another important rail hub, over largely volunteer forces.[33] In that instance, the DNR encircled an estimated 600 Ukrainian soldiers and volunteers, including members of the "Donbas" battalion, before ambushing them in an agreed-upon humanitarian corridor.[34] The hundreds of casualties and POWs that resulted from the defeat drove Kyiv to agree to a ceasefire just three days later. Ukrainian forces at Debaltseve look to be facing a similar fate.

Despite reassurances from Kyiv that the "Debaltseve cauldron" remains a separatist-inspired myth, several recent events suggest the separatists are close to trapping thousands of Ukrainian forces in a pocket.[35] On January 21, 2015 Russia announced its intention to withdraw its delegation from the Debaltseve-based Joint Center for Control and Coordination (JCCC), a bilateral forum between Ukrainian and Russian military leaders, citing security concerns.[36] On January 28, Ukraine moved its civilian checkpoint 50 kilometers northwest out of Debaltseve to the city of Artemivsk, Donetsk Oblast. On January 29, after a week without electricity, heat and water, volunteers began evacuating civilians out of the city in buses.[37] On February 1, the National

Security and Defense Council (NSDC) in Kyiv said Ukrainian forces had destroyed a "large amount of Russian equipment," including tanks and artillery systems aiding the separatist maneuver in Debaltseve.[38] The NSDC also reported that Ukraine had "full control" over both the city and the highway to Artemivsk, its last remaining evacuation corridor.[39] The same day, separatists fired "Grad" multiple rocket launcher systems on the city council building, where civilians were convening for evacuation.[40] These events add evidence to DNR head Aleksandr Zakharchenko's claim that the separatists have nearly "closed the cauldron" around 8,000 Ukrainian soldiers, despite reassurances from Kyiv.[41]

Debaltseve has become the Russian and separatist main effort since the Donetsk airport fell on January 21, 2015. Separatists launched the maneuver in January with the support of tanks and armored vehicles from the east (LNR) and west (DNR).[42] This maneuver was likely planned for months, however, with indirect fire used to soften Ukrainian forces in the surrounding areas. Ukrainian forces in Debaltseve expressed fears of a "cauldron battle" in September 2014, in the immediate wake of the severe losses at Ilovaisk; an LNR mechanized brigade discussed preparations to encircle the city as early as November 2014.[43]

Ukraine's control of Debaltseve has represented a major hurdle for the creation of a united "Novorossiya" territory from the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR). The two Russia-backed separatist territories declared a union in May 2014 under the name Novorossiya, a term translated literally as "New Russia" which refers to a historical region of the Russian empire in modern-day southern Ukraine. Although it remains a stated goal, separatists have openly admitted the failure of the unification.[44] The seizure of Debaltseve would create a direct rail and road connection between the separatist-held provincial capitals, allowing for further political integration and military coordination. While this operational objective has long been surmised, DNR head Aleksandr Zakharchenko confirmed active unification efforts on January 26, 2015. As he described it, the DNR and LNR are trying to create a united front in order to "free up at least a brigade."[45] This indicates that the separatists are consolidating with the intent to allocate forces for further expansion.

The collapse of the Ukrainian defense at Debaltseve will leave Russia in a stronger position to coordinate future offensives, the basis of its military strategy in Ukraine. The unification of the military or political structures of the two separatist territories does not in itself achieve this since the offensive capacity of the separatists depends on their relationship with Russia. Instead, the capture of Debaltseve will open up a direct rail and highway

connection between Russia and the front line around Donetsk, allowing Russia to launch future offensive phases more quickly.

MARIUPOL

Mariupol itself faces the prospect of a "cauldron" offensive similar to the maneuver around Debaltseve. As January 2015 attacks by separatists on the contested H20 highway and on Mariupol itself demonstrate, the city is vulnerable from the north and the east to DNR bombardment, penetration, and expansion.[46] The highway, which runs from the former separatist stronghold of Sloviansk south to Donetsk and Mariupol, is a key operational target for the DNR. The shelling of a civilian bus on January 13 near a Ukrainian checkpoint on the highway served as a high-profile demonstration of this goal. DNR leader Aleksandr Zakharchenko's recent statement that the DNR will target Sloviansk, a key source of fresh water for the oblast, before seizing Mariupol underscores the scope of Russian ambitions.[47]

The city has largely escaped hostilities since the September 5 ceasefire, but it has long represented a logical next target for Russia. As many observers have pointed out, the Ukrainian government-held city poses a discrete obstacle to a possible land corridor between southwestern Russia and the annexed Crimean peninsula or even Moldova's pro-Russian breakaway state of Transnistria farther west. Moscow has likely aimed to create a "land bridge" to Crimea since its annexation in March 2014 in order to integrate the peninsula into the Russian security and economic framework. As in Debaltseve, a Russian-backed separatist victory in Mariupol will put Moscow in a stronger position to launch a future offensive along the coastline. Separatist expansion to Mariupol would potentially place Russian forces in a stronger offensive position relative to Ukrainian reinforcements from cities along the Dnieper line, depicted on the graphic above, marking the boundary of Ukrainian core strength.

DECISION POINTS

The ignition of a maneuver phase in the conflict poses new decision points to Russia and Ukraine. By supporting maneuvers on Donetsk, Debaltseve, and Mariupol, Russia has already made its decision to abandon the lines demarcated by the September 2014 ceasefire agreement. As Zakharchenko suggested and the recent DNR offensives confirm, separatist will continue to attack Ukraine-controlled territory "up to the borders of Donetsk Oblast."[48] Accordingly, Russia will face a new decision point if the DNR reaches the provincial boundaries. If it decides in favor of an extended campaign it will likely advance along the Azov Sea coastline toward Crimea, possibly opening a new front from the peninsula. A land corridor between southwestern Russia and Crimea would allow Russia to integrate the annexed

peninsula into its economic and security framework and prepare for a future offensive along the Black Sea littoral or north to the key city of Dnipropetrovsk. Should the LNR capture the remaining territory of Luhansk Oblast, Russia will face a parallel decision point. It could extend the separatist incursion into Kharkiv Oblast, possibly through regular Russian troops from the north, but this scenario is less likely than the extension of Donetsk operations along the Azov coastline. As Ukraine's biggest city after Kyiv, the capture of Kharkiv would represent a shift from an isolated Russia-backed insurgency to a full-scale irredentist campaign to restore the western boundaries of the Russian empire, which would include the birthplace of Russian civilization, Kyiv.

Kyiv faces a more difficult decision point following Russia's abandonment of the Minsk Protocol ceasefire. The separatist maneuvers preceded the launch of Ukraine's mobilization by a matter of days. While it plans to draft 50,000 new soldiers over the next eight months, Kyiv's capacity to convert this mobilization into counter-offensive gains remains in doubt.[49] As National Security chief Oleksandr Turchynov has pointed out, Ukraine lacks the precision weaponry needed to combat the separatists, who often fire from densely populated areas.[50] Facing military limitations, Kyiv must decide whether to seek a new less favorable settlement, perhaps recognizing the authority of the DNR and LNR over their current domains, or to stand by the Minsk agreement and raise international pressure on Russia. It is unlikely, however, that either decision will influence Russia's operational and strategic objectives in Ukraine.

Following its overt rejection of the ceasefire, Russia is likely to facilitate a separatist offensive until the DNR and LNR control the entirety of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts. Russia will likely pause to consolidate, resupply and reconstruct the territories, which inevitably will be ravaged and abandoned in the wake of imminent offensives. Rather than annex the territories formally, as in Crimea, Russia will instead pursue a settlement wherein Kyiv ends its Anti-Terror Operation (ATO), its name for the counterinsurgency campaign, and recognizes the new de-facto borders for the purposes of internal security and political administration. The creation of secure Russian proxy states represents an important interim objective because it will allow Moscow to enter a consolidation phase. Under the Minsk ceasefire demarcation line, populated areas under separatist control depend on infrastructure under Ukrainian control and vice versa. This infrastructure overlap precludes the possibility of an extended consolidation phase because the separatists cannot govern a population that does not have

access to water, heating, and electricity. Instead, Russia must continue to support separatist offensives until they secure these infrastructure points, the cities that contain them, and the roads between them. Consolidation and strengthening of proxy territories does not preclude future Russian expansion objectives; rather, they support it. It also provides Russia with an opportunity to set political terms with Ukraine that favor Russian interests.

A continued offensive beyond the confines of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblast will remain a distinct possibility, with two-pronged incursions into Ukraine's remaining Azov sea coastline and Kharkiv Oblast as the primary candidates. As in the past, the Kremlin will use the threat of a renewed incursion to apply pressure on President Poroshenko's government, which will likely face a political crisis if it suffers such heavy losses.

In the immediate term, Kyiv will seek to galvanize international support for the ATO and sanctions against Russia. To prevent a separatist advance, Kyiv will seek military assistance from its Western partners, both in the form of training and lethal hardware. It will continue to promote an international effort to isolate the Russian economy to weaken the Kremlin's capacity to support the separatists. With the collapse of gas prices, further economic sanctions may threaten the position of Vladimir Putin, whose regime in Moscow owes its success to economic stability. Rather than launching its own offensive, Kyiv will likely continue its strategy of trying to cut Moscow's fiscal and political capital in an effort to bring Putin to the negotiating table. This strategy will likely continue to fail.

The situation in southeastern Ukraine will likely undergo extensive changes over the first week of February. First, separatists are likely to capture the railroad hub of Debaltseve. The Ukrainian government will likely reinforce its positions near Artemivsk to the northwest and concede the portion of the highway that connects it Debaltseve. Ukrainian forces will likely experience heavy casualties when they attempt to evacuate the city, as in Ilovaisk in August 2014. Following the capture of Debaltseve, the focus of the DNR will likely turn to the port city of Mariupol, which may endure another barrage of rocket attacks similar to January 24, 2015. In the wake of the Ukrainian defeat at Debaltseve and possible escalation near Mariupol, the U.S. and its NATO allies will likely make concrete plans to provide Ukraine with lethal military assistance. Although this assistance will increase Ukraine's capacity to respond to separatist offensives in the long term, potentially reducing the Russia's impetus to coordinate successive operations, the announcement of lethal aid packages will likely provoke an immediate Russian and separatist response. The announcement on February 2, 2015 that the DNR and LNR will begin mobilizing 100,000 men under a unified army may shed light on the nature of this response.[51] A separatist, and indeed Russian, mobilization looms.

Hugo Spaulding is a Ukraine Research Analyst at ISW
Twitter: @TheStudyofWar

NOTES

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