

C U R B I N G
**RUSSIAN
AGGRESSION**

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A VIEW FROM KIEV OF THE MOSCOW-BACKED INCURSIONS INTO UKRAINE

In the first 10 days of August 2014, Russian President Vladimir Putin brought his military standoff with Ukraine to the boiling point. First, deposed Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich bolted, then special forces agents in eastern Ukraine and the pro-Kremlin Donbass “elite” failed to live up to expectations. Before the pro-Russian bloc in the Verkhovna Rada, the Ukrainian parliament, visibly weakened, Ukrainian security forces had shown they still had muscles to flex and, finally, the parliament started preparing for a total reset. This started the chain of events that pulled Ukraine out from under Russia’s thumb. Putin is realizing he has bitten off more than he can chew, and he is delirious with frustration.

As if in revenge, the Kremlin has supersized its provocations. Occasional Grad artillery barrages were followed by a murderous aerial bombing of Luhansk Oblast and, within a week, Russian military planes were openly attacking Ukrainian air forces. The unprecedented annihilation of a civilian jet (Malaysian Airlines Flight 17) by Russian-backed separatists, killing nearly 300 passengers, proved to the world that Putin’s team will not stop threatening international order. Moreover, a future large-scale war will not bear the warning of an official declaration from Moscow — if such a mass invasion takes place, it will take the form of a gradual expansion of the current, undeclared war until it becomes so blatant as to be undeniable. Even then, the Kremlin can hide behind any cover it chooses and will lose nothing by retroactively claiming the insertion of “peacekeepers.”

Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, front left, walks with Russia’s President Vladimir Putin, center, to watch military exercises upon his arrival at the Kirillovsky firing ground in the Leningrad region in March 2014. REUTERS

TOTAL READINESS

Ukraine has never been as close as it is now to full-scale war with Russia, not even when Putin’s “little green men” swarmed the Crimean Peninsula.

According to a number of analysts, the level of tension (with the intensification of Russian provocations, military-style sabotage and subversion, and mass crimes against the civilian population) is mirrored by the complete readiness of Russian troops for a large-scale attack. Nevertheless, an offensive could be avoided if Putin’s objectives of derailing parliamentary elections and further destabilizing Ukraine can be achieved by less risky means, such as a covert, subversive war. Alternately, the Western world might demonstrate unity in this struggle against the latest threat to world peace and more actively support Ukraine, including with military and technical aid.

Throughout August 2014, ever more Russian reconnaissance and sabotage teams crossed the border into Ukraine, along with military hardware, artillery shelling and precision aerial bombing. The war continued to expand as the Russian military sent heavy weapons and military aircraft into Ukraine, and there is a danger that Russia could use its missile capabilities, including the latest short-range attack missiles. The composition of the separatist combat groups also changed in August — 40 to 50 percent of fighters are now professional soldiers from the Russian Armed Forces. The Kremlin is trying to spur an increase in the number of civilian victims, spreading panic and mistrust of the authorities and, if possible, turn the flow of refugees into a humanitarian catastrophe. Then, Putin can be heralded as a savior, rescuing the war-struck regions from total collapse. Meanwhile, Putin is tireless in his attempts to drag the Ukrainian defense forces into a large, officially declared war or, failing that, into negotiations with the separatists/terrorists (for whom the Kremlin will happily nominate “leaders” like Viktor Medvedchuk or Oleg Tsarev), as he tries to turn the Donbass into



Dutch investigators examine wreckage of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, shot down by separatist forces near the village of Rassipne, Ukraine, in July 2014.

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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another Transnistria-like “frozen conflict.” Putin seems happy to use any trick to set fire to Ukraine from within.

Russia’s military argument is hard to ignore. By August 10, numerous Russian reservists had been mobilized along the Ukrainian border. During a short-lived rollback of troops from the border in June 2014, the Kremlin regrouped, replacing “light units” (mainly special units with light armored vehicles) with “heavy” mechanized units that have well-organized, comprehensive support, from preparation of air strikes to logistics. Bold surges by special forces units in lightly armored vehicles, which was the tactic in Crimea, are being replaced by a new battle plan that features military aviation and heavy artillery.

Some believe that the Russian general staff is now studying operational tactics from World War II — in case there is a full-scale war, the generals want to factor in the ideal strike structure and sequence, as well as local geography. Analysts do not rule out the possibility of initial strikes in the south of Ukraine (including from Transnistria and Crimea) and in the north (including fire from Belarus). Large-scale bombing of Ukrainian air bases would be inevitable. To this end, Russia has concentrated significant bomber forces near the border, including long-range planes, such as Tu-22M3 bombers armed with X-22 cruise missiles, which can operate at a great distance and have a launch range of 500 kilometers with accuracy to a few meters.

Other aircraft seen on the move and concentrated along Ukraine’s borders include the new Ka-52 helicopters and Su-35 aircraft, and even Tu-160 and Tu-95MS strategic bombers — both of which can carry nuclear weapons. Ukraine’s defenses have already been dealt a heavy blow by the loss of Crimea, where 25 percent of air defense troops and resources were concentrated, along with 17 percent of the nation’s air force.

On the other hand, many security specialists suggest that Moscow’s bark is worse than its bite. The political scene offers plenty of farcical material, reminiscent of then-Russian Defense Minister Pavel Grachev’s threat in December 1994 to take Grozny, Chechnya, “in two hours” during the first Chechen War. In the summer of 2014, rumors were thick on the ground that the Pskov Airborne Division was preparing for a Ukraine mission. Vladimir Shamanov, commander of Russia’s airborne paratroopers, wants to make history for organizing the first successful combat jump, his own troops have said.

But many actions suggest muscle-flexing for psychological effect — a mechanized bodybuilding show, choreographed for shock and awe. Without a doubt, one psychological factor is present and dangerous — Putin’s own personality. Mulling over events in his own head, he is beginning to look like a rat caught in a tight corner. If he perceives he is too tightly cornered, he could launch a desperate, full-scale attack. Sadly, many Russians are blinded by state propaganda and may support such a reckless gamble.

Experts note Ukraine’s need to rapidly organize defenses along the entire border, from Belarus to Transnistria. Although Russia currently has the military and political advantage, it could still lose this edge if sufficient assistance is forthcoming from the international community, including rapid coordination of far-reaching, worldwide sanctions, complete political isolation of Kremlin leaders, starting with Putin, and above all, military and technical aid.

Unfortunately, even very tangible victories of Ukrainian forces against Kremlin-sponsored terrorist groups are creating no leeway for talks with Moscow. The very idea of talks in this format is unacceptable to Putin, who would have to admit Ukraine’s existence as an independent state (which would imply a denial of his previous convictions). This explains why Putin is marshalling an army of

diplomats to convince Berlin and Paris that relations between Moscow and Kiev are no more than a spat between neighbors. Unfortunately, French President Francois Hollande and German Chancellor Angela Merkel have continued to allow ambiguous dealings with the aggressor. These dual standards in the main European capitals have given Putin a second wind as the tussle goes into extra time. Putin's hesitation can mainly be attributed to the third round of sanctions, both well-oiled and far-reaching. The Kremlin's chief occupant may now hear his survival instinct hinting to him that a simple miscalculation could now bring him the fate of the miscreant officer in Kafka's *In the Penal Colony*. However, even if Putin's saber-rattling is an elaborate bluff, the rest of the world is being offered Pascal's Wager: If Russia's subversive terrorist war against the Ukrainian people does not evolve into an all-out war, it will be one more bloody daub on the demonic masterpiece by the artist in the Kremlin.



Ukrainian servicemen ride on a military vehicle toward Novoazovsk in the Donetsk region in August 2014. Ukrainian forces engaged separatist forces supplied and abetted by Russia. AFP/GETTY IMAGES

IN A LETHAL BROTHERLY EMBRACE

As soon as Russia began its undeclared war against Ukraine, the Center for Army, Conversion and Disarmament Studies identified the three factors necessary to stand up to the Kremlin: resilient Ukrainian defense forces, the West's solidarity and readiness to eliminate this new threat to world order, and the ability of the Russian people to ascertain the true intentions of their leader and start resisting Russia's slide into the abyss. Sadly, by the late summer of 2014, the Ukrainian state rested on just one of these three pillars.

The resistance put up by Ukrainian defense forces, and the nationwide, popular resistance to Putin's aggression, has become the main guarantee of victory. Although the widely respected Business Insider moved Ukraine's Armed Forces up on its list of the world's most powerful armies, it would be virtually impossible to defeat the Kremlin-backed terrorists and Russian mercenaries if it were not for the efforts of volunteers within the war zone.

Still, we are far from the tipping point. The military situation can change only after complete closure of the border and all channels used to deliver weapons and Russian fighters into Ukraine. But this requires significant troops and equipment, the creation of special mobile teams in the most dangerous areas, and the rapid adoption of modern target acquisition, tracking and strike systems. Military

aircraft with attack capabilities will also be needed. So far, there is a catastrophic deficit of almost every tool needed to do the job.

Naturally, Kiev has great hopes that the United States and Europe will implement sanctions with solidarity and consistency. In a perfect scenario, sanctions could be a highly effective, asymmetric weapon. The downed Malaysian Airlines jet may become the watershed moment in the series of bloody incidents initiated from the Kremlin. Ukrainian experts see a connection between a clear shift in Western attitudes toward Moscow's activities, and the understanding that Putin's preferred zone of influence may reach as far

as the Atlantic. In such a situation, the West's readiness to initiate finely tuned resistance to further aggression from Moscow is critically important, as are synchronized sanctions executed by the European Union, the U.S. and adjacent allies.

The Chinese perspective carries particular weight with Putin, and if Japan's disapproval is echoed by China, the situation could change fundamentally. Decisive steps by the international community may yet save the shaken world order, and the potential for economic losses could be a genuine guard against world war. Robust sanctions and complete isolation — these are the strongest weapons against Putin. Tragically, many have yet to comprehend that any delay in deploying these weapons could cause the explosive use of genuine weapons of war.

Kiev seeks technical military aid as a matter of active diplomacy. First, all restrictions need to be lifted to allow Ukraine to buy the latest small-arms and data transfer systems — if only for the special

forces (Alpha, SVR Special Operations and certain special units of the Interior Ministry). Currently the situation is tragicomic: Europe refuses Ukraine sniper equipment, while the aggressor, Russia, is furnished with Mistral warships.

Only the U.S. has proven consistent in military and technical aid and cooperation. Although there have been media reports that Canada intends to deliver 20 CF-18A combat aircraft, a final agreement is still to come. The Pentagon has prepared a shipment of equipment, including thermal imaging devices and night-vision equipment. To ensure the success of Kiev's wartime diplomacy, U.S. think tanks urge the compilation of two lists, the first showing the equipment and lethal weapons required. Some think U.S. President Barack Obama is unlikely, in the near future, to agree to send weapons to Ukraine. Objectively speaking, however, such a position is, for Western leaders in the current situation, more risky than offering direct assistance. If the Kremlin makes a military breakthrough, new targets could quickly include the Baltic countries or Kazakhstan. Then NATO would face a true existential choice.

Ukraine needs a military lend-lease arrangement. For example, together with nonlethal equipment from the U.S., Central and Eastern European states could send Ukraine deliveries of post-Soviet arms in exchange for American arms shipments to these states.

American analysts insist a great deal depends on a jointly articulated, open list of Ukraine-U.S. agreements that must include a range of options for Ukraine to compensate the efforts of Western states. In Kiev, revolutionary ideas are being developed. Ukraine is ready to accept broad military and political cooperation with the West. For example, Ukraine could produce target missiles for the U.S.-led missile defense program, or offer territory to place the interceptor missiles (which would, incidentally, allow Ukraine to be protected by Patriot missiles). Military-economic projects could prove of interest — such as the use of the Yavorov test site for large-scale Western military exercises or development of the An-124 Ruslan, a modern heavy transport plane with Pratt & Whitney engines. These are only undeveloped ideas, but it is clear that strategically important agreements could be forged today. Ukraine could become a strong nonmember ally of NATO.

A GLIMPSE INTO THE FUTURE

Experts offer a stern warning that, although Moscow may not now achieve its goals of turning Donbass into a Ukrainian Transnistria, the Kremlin may repeat attempts to incite a civil conflict in

Ukraine if the economic and energy crisis becomes acute. The Institute for Evolutionary Economics (IEE) has identified a protracted 5 percent nationwide drop in industrial production (a 5 percent overall drop). IEE experts predict a 5 to 10 percent drop in gross domestic product (GDP) with a subsequent fall in industrial production of 5 to 12 percent. According to some assessments, decreased industrial production in the East (in the war zone) will be as high as 60 percent, or almost 20 percent of GDP. Thus, the complex economic situation is indeed a threat to President Petro Poroshenko's team. The domestic crisis may be further deteriorated by a reappearance of oppositional political forces, such as those surrounding Yulia Tymoshenko.

At the same time, many politicians, public figures and analysts agree that the latest events have created a unique opportunity to form a strong new army in Ukraine capable of standing up to external aggressors, including those as strong as Russia. It should not be forgotten that Ukraine could end up as Europe's border region, a bulwark protecting European stability after Putin injected the plague of terrorism.

In this context, proactive steps to protect national information space are significant. For example, experts welcome Ukrainian plans to introduce licenses for Russian-language books and quotas for foreign book publishing. Eighty percent of books in Ukraine come from Russia, which presupposes an intellectual and cultural influence on the Ukrainian people by the state next door. Specialists in this field are convinced it would be useful for the Ukrainian Security Service to compile a record of foreigners who have publically voiced anti-Ukrainian convictions.

A trend worthy of attention is the genesis of anti-Putin movements within Russia. Ideas such as the "Siberian March" for federalization, even if firmly thwarted by Russia's uniformed services as an attempt at Russian separatism, should be supported and developed by the international community. In fact, this is not so much a separatist movement as an expression of purely anti-Putin sentiments aimed at reducing authoritarianism and expressing a refusal to support the Kremlin's dubious (and worse) projects. The people of Russia, who "made" Putin, according to Elena Bonner, widow of Andrei Sakharov, may turn out to be the best ally in the struggle against his latter-day demonism. Such movements are still extremely weak in Russia, and are easily quashed by the state police system, but, to blow out the flame of Kremlin aggression from within, the West could do far worse than to support these sporadic strivings for democracy. □