

**A Military Assessment of the Russian War in Ukraine**

Stephen Blank

Senior Fellow American Foreign Policy Council

February 2015

Testimony Presented to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Subcommittee on  
Europe and Regional Security Cooperation, March 4, 2015

Ukraine needs military help from abroad in terms of weapons, training, and finances to help sustain its government and economy in the face of Russian aggression. At a conference of the Potomac Institute, US analysts and Ukrainian military leaders reported that the Ukrainian military continues to be severely disadvantaged by not being equipped with a list of the items that are becoming well known to those watching the current situation in eastern Ukraine: secure communications systems; anti-tank guided weapons with tandem warheads; counter-battery radars; UAVs for both reconnaissance and strike missions; and the ability to stream multiple intelligence sources into centralized command centers to get inside the 'decision loop' of the Russian-backed forces.<sup>i</sup>

Therefore, Ukraine needs and has requested these capabilities, secure communications equipment, counter-mortar or counter battery weapons, anti-air, and anti-tank weapons and missiles. Ukraine also clearly needs UAVs or weapons to use against Russian drones. It also needs weapons to counter Russian artillery fire by the use of intelligence capabilities to determine the source and point of origin of those fires and then take them out. Ukraine also needs to devise an effective, democratic command and control structure that allows competent officers to rise to positions of responsible command, to train proficient officers whom men will follow and who understand modern warfare, and create a basis for integrating volunteers into a regular army commanded and led by proficient officers committed to democracy. In American terms it needs both an Edwin Stanton and a George Marshall. It also needs to sustain patriotic morale to counter manifestations of draft dodging and to demonstrate to the world that it is reforming. Right now it needs weapons as outlined above urgently as well as financial assistance and

a long-term plan of both energy and financial assistance and steady support for (as well as pressure from outside) to reform its government and economy.

At the same time, there is little doubt that the White House and the NSC are holding up sending weapons to Ukraine at this point. But whatever their reasons are, there is little doubt that the Ukrainian army will fight and with assistance can prevail over the rebels as long as Russia cannot operate freely there. Indeed, the fighting to date shows that only with substantial Russian help and the takeover of the operation by the Russian army can the so-called rebels prevail in battle. If anything, this key fact justifies the provision of weapons and training to Ukraine as part of a broader strategy to wrest the strategic initiative away from Russia and give it to Ukraine and NATO.

The signs of this dependence on the Russian Army are evident everywhere. According to the IHS consultancy firm, Ukrainian authorities and the Potomac Institute, there are currently 14,400 Russian troops on Ukrainian territory backing up the 29,300 illegally armed formations of separatists in eastern Ukraine. These units are well equipped with the latest main battle tanks, armored personnel carriers and infantry fighting vehicles, plus hundreds of pieces of tube and rocket artillery. There are also 29,400 Russian troops in Crimea and 55,800 massed along the border with eastern Ukraine.<sup>ii</sup>

- Russian units have made heavy use of electronic warfare (EW) and what appear to be high-power microwave (HPM) systems to jam not only the communications and reconnaissance assets of the Ukrainian armed forces but to also disable the surveillance unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) operated by ceasefire monitoring teams from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Russian EW teams have

targeted the Schiebel Camcopter UAVs operated by the monitors and "melted the onboard electronics so that drones just fly around uncontrolled in circles before they crash to the ground", said one of the briefers at the conference. Russian EW, communications and other units central to their military operations are typically placed adjacent to kindergartens, hospitals or apartment buildings so that Ukrainian units are unable to launch any strikes against them without causing unacceptable and horrific collateral casualties.

- The war against Ukraine is not a "new" strategy for Moscow; the Russian general staff has been preparing for Ukraine-type combat operations since 1999. Indeed, the Ukrainian operation has been planned by Moscow at least since 2005 and it is incomprehensible why the Administration could not or would not formulate an assessment of what was happening in February 2014.<sup>iii</sup> This speaks to our willingness and capability to assess Russian moves correctly and it is not encouraging.

- The Russian military's Zapad 2013 exercise (the word 'Zapad' meaning 'West' in Russian to denote that it was an operation designed to practice operations against NATO) was a dress-rehearsal for parts of the Ukraine campaign and future potential operations against the Baltic states. The exercise involved 76,300 total troops, 60% of which were drawn from the same Russian Interior Ministry (MVD) units that were used in the Chechen conflicts of the 1990s.

- Russia's information warfare campaign includes budgeting for the state-run Russia Today network (more than USD300 million per annum) and support for pro-Russian NGOs (USD100 million per annum).<sup>iv</sup>

Russian casualties are much higher than imagined and reports of the true number of dead, wounded, POW and/or MIAs would undermine Putin at home. Second, Russian tactics are rather crude, essentially being massive artillery and air shelling of enemy positions. Such tactics mandate a traditional enormous output of ammunition and artillery. The numbers of shells being expended periodically forces Russia to accept truces in order to replenish its forces in Ukraine who are in full command of this operation. There are an estimated 17-20,000 Russian forces in Ukraine brought together or even cannibalized from many different Russian military units in order to bring ground, air, anti-air, and support functions into the theatre. In addition, there is a substantial reinforcement of the naval, air, and missile forces in the Crimea, including nuclear-capable or so called dual use weapons being brought to Crimea.

We can learn the following lessons from this analysis. First, Putin cannot escalate the scale of conflict beyond present limits without antagonizing NATO further into a full-scale protracted war and he cannot afford that. He is also reputedly very afraid of media reports of the true extent of what evidently are sizable numbers of Russian casualties. For example, according to Ukrainian sources, at Debaltseve, 1300 Ukrainians and 4500 Russians were killed.<sup>v</sup> Why we are not publicizing Russian casualties escapes me. Third, there is every reason to believe that if NATO mobilized its resolve and capabilities to give Ukraine weapons and training as part of a comprehensive strategy that Ukraine's morale and capabilities would improve to the point of imposing much greater costs on Russia which is reaching the limit of its capabilities. Putin is already bringing troops

form Central Asia and Siberia to Ukraine, indicating a manpower shortage and a lack of desire inside Russia to fight Ukraine. There are also many reports of disaffection within the Russian military. In other words, whereas NATO has hardly engaged, Russia is already feeling the pressure.

Russian tactics and strategy have aimed to keep the fighting at a level under NATO's "radar" to avoid a too protracted war. It appears Putin aims to create his "Novorossia" and present the EU with a fait accompli by mid-year to persuade a divided Europe to remove sanctions and thus escape the risk of a protracted war. We have it within our power, if we can find the will to do so, not just to impose costs on Putin but to regain the overall strategic initiative and take it away for him by helping Ukraine to defend itself. What is needed here and in Europe and Kyiv is a comprehensive strategy that embraces not only military but also strong economic and informational means to thwart this effort to sustain Putin at home, destroy an independent Ukrainian state, overturn the post Cold War status quo in Europe, undermine European integration, and hasten the rupture of the Transatlantic alliance. Our continuing passivity allows this shameful conquest and the spread of state terrorism and criminality orchestrated by Moscow and its subalterns in Crimea and Ukraine to spread with impunity. We must realize that this is the most naked aggression since Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990 and respond accordingly to what is the greatest threat not just to European security but to international order. For if we do not do so, others will be even more emboldened by our inaction and confusion as we have seen with ISIL in the Levant and we can see with China in the South China Sea, and with Iran in regard to state-sponsored terrorism and nuclear proliferation. Continued passivity invites more escalation, and not only by

Putin, whereas soundly conceived and implemented resistance upholds not only our values but even more importantly, our interests, both in Europe and across the globe.

---

<sup>i</sup> Reuben F. Johnson, “Hybrid War Is Working,” *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, February 26, 2015

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>iii</sup> Adam Entous, Julian E. Barnes, and Siobhan Gorman, “U.S. Scurries to Shore Up Spying on Russia,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 24, 2014, [www.wsjonline.com](http://www.wsjonline.com)

<sup>iv</sup> Johnson

<sup>v</sup> Conversations with Ukrainian officers and officials, Washington, DC, February 26, 2015