Running hot and cold: The potential for a frozen conflict in eastern Ukraine

More than three years after the outbreak of the Ukraine-Russia conflict in 2014, the stalemate in Ukraine's eastern Donbass region might be about to freeze over as both sides acknowledge that a military solution is out of reach and perpetual conflict is unsustainable.

Jim Dorschner investigates

The Ukrainian armed forces are still struggling to cope with Russian aggression in the east, which resulted in major losses of national territory in 2014. The long front line in the Donbass has remained more or less stable since the Minsk II agreement of February 2015. However, near daily exchanges of heavy weapon fire and a steady drip of military and civilian casualties highlight the inherent risks of spontaneous escalation when heavily armed opposing forces with weak command-and-control structures are in close proximity for years. As the economic, political, and social challenges of sustaining and effectively controlling those forces continue to strain both sides in the conflict, the probability of achieving some kind of limited pullback that establishes another ‘frozen conflict’ may be growing.

New volunteer recruits of the Ukrainian Army's 'Donbass' battalion take part in a military oath ceremony of the National Guard alongside a BTR-3DA infantry fighting vehicle near Novi Petrivtsi village, not far from Kiev, on 23 June 2014. (Sergei Supinsky/AFP/Getty Images)

Although there have been improvements in Ukrainian training and readiness that include a robust NATO training programme and improved serviceability of core equipment, the Ukrainian armed
forces are still only just capable of resisting further advances by Russian forces in the east of the country. Ukraine is also currently incapable of major offensive operations to regain territory now controlled by ethnic Russian entities in the eastern Donbass region that are heavily supported by the Russian state. At the same time Russia appears reluctant to risk the broader consequences of the major military effort that would be required to decisively defeat Ukrainian forces in the field, seize more territory, and potentially cause the Kiev government to fall.

As a result, the 500 km military line of contact (LOC) in the east is becoming a hardened de facto border between the rest of Ukraine to the west and the two ethnic Russian rump states in the Donbass region known as the Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) and the Luhansk People’s Republic (LPR). This follows the pattern of other frozen conflicts involving Russian aggression around the periphery of the former Soviet Union, such as those in Georgia and Moldova. Meanwhile, Moscow has successfully absorbed Crimea into the Russian Federation and is steadily progressing with an extensive military build-up there, which probably precludes any prospect of it returning to Ukrainian control.

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Russian strategic objectives involve keeping Ukraine unbalanced, unable to threaten Russian interests, and unable to draw closer to the EU and NATO. Ultimately, Russian President Vladimir Putin would like a regime change in Kiev and the installation of a new government that would be more favourable to Russia. At the same time it was hoped that the Ukraine conflict would serve to distract NATO and draw scarce resources away from other areas of military tension such as the frontier with the Baltic states and Poland, the Baltic Sea, and Russia’s ‘fortress’ in the Kaliningrad enclave.

During 2014–16 it is likely that Russia believed a proxy war in Ukraine would prove advantageous by further fracturing and weakening NATO and the EU, maybe even fatally in the case of NATO. This would have allowed Moscow to overcome crippling sanctions and cleared the way for the restoration of lucrative economic and political ties with a divided Europe while further diminishing US influence. Ironically, though, since 2016 NATO forces have steadily grown more powerful and capable, backed by relatively strong popular and political support. As a result, while NATO forces are not yet fully capable of facing full-on Russian aggression, increasingly resolute and united NATO and allied forces are now in place from the Arctic to the Baltic states and Poland, all the way south to the Black Sea region in Romania and Bulgaria – and will only grow stronger.

At the same time Russia faces increasing economic and political pressure to consolidate expensive and demanding military operations and to shift limited resources to broader, long-term military modernisation to match NATO. Combat deployments to Syria are also likely to continue indefinitely. Improving the posture of forces in the northern segments of the NATO frontier from Poland to the Arctic, as well as emerging requirements in the Pacific Far East, will require careful management of limited manpower and material resources.

As Jane’s reported in March, Russia’s 2017 defence budget was cut by 25.5%, falling from RUB3.8 trillion (USD65.4 billion) to RUB2.8 trillion: the largest cut to Russian military expenditure since the early 1990s. While Russian officials claim that armed forces modernisation will continue apace, some consolidation and rationalisation is required in the face of budget reductions that have been driven by a sagging economy, international sanctions, and widespread corruption among other factors.
Therefore, Moscow may be willing to accept a frozen conflict scenario in eastern Ukraine that would facilitate reductions in the level and types of Russian forces deployed there and in the military assistance provided to the two proxy states. Essentially the cost of continuing the proxy war in Ukraine is not worth the now-more-limited potential benefits.

Turning west, in October former NATO secretary general Anders Fogh Rasmussen, former Swedish prime minister Carl Bildt, and other experienced Western officials urged the transatlantic community to consider President Putin’s September draft proposal for a UN peacekeeping mission in the Donbass region. However, they proposed major modifications to guarantee Ukrainian security and territorial integrity, including the exclusion of Russian participation.

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**Both sides now**

Since 2014 the Ukrainian armed forces have benefited from continuous NATO training missions in Ukraine along with donations of equipment, although the alliance has so far resisted deeper involvement, including the provision of weapons such as the anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs) requested by Kiev.

A Canadian soldier sends the signal to begin the simulated attack on a defensive position during a live-fire exercise during Operation ‘Unifier’ in Starychi, Ukraine, on 30 June 2016. Ukraine has benefited from a number of training missions involving NATO nations since 2014. (Joint Task Force Ukraine)
effort as part of the Multinational Joint Commission, which Canada joined in January 2015. It also co-chairs the associated subcommittee on military policing.

A Ukrainian soldier surveys the arcs of fire from his BMP-2 IFV in preparation for live-fire defensive training during Operation 'Unifier' in Starychi, Ukraine, on 30 June 2016. (Joint Task Force Ukraine)

The JTF-U has trained about 5,000 Ukrainian soldiers during 112 course iterations. With about 200 personnel assigned, the JTF mandate runs until March 2019. JTF-U tactical training includes: individual weapon training and marksmanship; movement in conflict areas; explosive threat recognition; command, control, and communications; survival in combat; explosive ordnance disposal (EOD); military police training; casualty evacuation and combat first aid; and logistics. Training is mainly conducted at the International Peacekeeping and Security Centre (IPSC) in Starychi, near Lviv in western Ukraine.

Since January 2014 the Canadian government has announced more than CAD700 million (USD551 million) in assistance for Ukraine, which includes non-lethal military equipment such as communications systems, a mobile field hospital, EOD equipment, medical kits, and night vision goggles.

The US training effort is directed by the Joint Multinational Training Group-Ukraine (JMTG-U), which will continue training and advising Ukrainian security forces until 2020. JMTG-U oversees defensive and security training for up to five battalions per year, including national guard units. Training is focused on partnering at the battalion level and below to build professional and capable Ukrainian forces able to effectively defend the country’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. The headquarters also works with Ukrainian partners on the development of the IPSC. Other elements are working with the Ukrainian Army on an ongoing review and modernisation of doctrine.
The California Army National Guard's 45th Infantry Division assumed the JMTG-U mission in January. Initially led by the 1st Battalion, 179th Infantry Regiment, in July responsibility passed to the 1st Battalion, 279th Infantry Regiment.

In August 2015 Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko declared the number of Ukrainian troops in the LOC area to be 64,000, which has probably not altered significantly since then. Factors that continue to dog development of the armed forces include widespread corruption at all levels of the state, ineffective leadership, and Russian penetration of the armed forces and government.

The Ukrainian Army has an official strength of 150,000, with 15 combat brigades, although actual numbers are thought to be far lower, with only about half the brigades considered adequately manned, equipped, and trained. The Ukrainian Air Force is also seriously undermanned and no match for the Russian Aerospace Forces after it lost numerous aircraft in the Russian takeover of Crimea in 2014 and during combat operations in eastern Ukraine thereafter. The Ukrainian Navy also lost personnel, ships, and most of its infrastructure in Crimea. Given sparse budgets, Ukraine is unable to procure many new weapon systems or equipment, relying instead on overhauling existing equipment, including recovering many platforms that have been in storage since the late 1990s.

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Background
From the break-up of the Soviet Union until 2014 the Ukrainian defence establishment consistently failed to identify threats, roles, and missions for its armed forces while sustaining bloated, relatively static, and largely ineffective services. These forces were focused on deploying purpose-built contingents for international missions such as the NATO Kosovo Force (KFOR), US-led coalition operations in Iraq, and multiple UN missions.

A BTR-3DA armoured personnel carrier from the Ukrainian Army’s 1st Battalion, 95th Separate Airmobile Brigade, crosses a lake during training at the Yavoriv Combat Training Centre in western Ukraine on 26 August. (US Army/Sergeant Anthony Jones)

As relations with Russia fractured during the 2005–10 presidency of Viktor Yushchenko, particularly after the 2008 invasion of Georgia, elements of the government sought closer relations with the West, particularly NATO and the EU. Simultaneously the government also tried to improve Ukraine’s military capabilities in the face of severe financial constraints. Yushchenko’s successor, Viktor Yanukovych, then pivoted back to Russia and tried to roll back Western influence. Closer political and military co-operation with Moscow energised Ukrainian nationalism and pro-Western sentiment, particularly in western Ukraine, which further exacerbated national divisions as Russian influence increased in the Russian-speaking east and in certain sectors of the government, such as the security services.

Increasingly strident political disagreements finally erupted into months of protests and violence in late 2013, which eventually brought down the pro-Russian Yanukovych government in February 2014. At this point Ukrainian forces were completely unprepared to face the complex Russian aggression that followed in Crimea and the Donbass. By mid-March 2014 Russian military forces and state security operatives, working with local ethnic Russian political figures, had successfully seized control of Crimea by effectively disarming Ukrainian forces in the peninsula. As a result direct combat between Russian and Ukrainian forces was forestalled, with shattered and humiliated Ukrainian elements compelled to abandon the province.

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The other side

Various sources place the strength of Russian separatist forces in the Donbass at somewhere between 35,000 and 45,000 troops, serving in nominally independent ‘local’ ethnic Russian units, including significant numbers of paid ‘volunteers’ recruited in Russia from among former military personnel. According to official Ukrainian sources, Russian DPR and LPR units possess 650 tanks, 1,310 other AFVs, almost 500 pieces of tube artillery, about 260 multiple rocket launchers (MRLs), and up to 100 surface-to-air missile systems, although actual numbers are probably much lower. Almost all of them are late-model Russian systems transported into Ukraine.

In direct support are various Russian Federation units, including special forces (SF) and security service paramilitary formations. Some are ad hoc units manned by contract professional soldiers to execute specific tasks such as fire support co-ordination and air defence, along with train-and-assist teams and logistics formations. According to NATO, Russian manoeuvre units deployed in eastern Ukraine include two infantry battalion tactical groups (BTGs): all-professional units formed in each of the army’s high-readiness brigades, most often from the four airborne brigades.

The BTGs back up ‘local’ formations, all of which are operationally subordinated to Russian command, although effective control can be problematic. Russian SF teams conduct reconnaissance and strike missions. Additional high-readiness Russian heavy armoured forces equivalent to a reinforced division, with fixed- and rotary-wing air support, are available directly across the border at Russian bases, which also serve as logistics and training hubs that support operations in the Donbass. These include repair depots, training camps, and medical facilities. Additional Russian forces earmarked for Ukraine operations are readily available in Crimea and western Russia if required.

Considerations

With Ukrainian forces firmly on the defensive, the steady military build-up in Crimea provides Russia with additional offensive options in case general hostilities resume. These include a thrust westward along the Black Sea coast, possibly supported by amphibious operations, to gain control of Odessa, the second-largest city in Ukraine, in conjunction with offensives along the Donbass front. However, as 2018 looms Russia finds itself in an unforeseen race against time with an energised NATO while struggling to finance current operations in Syria and forces-wide military modernisation. The political and military leadership is also mindful of the need to maintain public support for actions in Crimea and the Donbass region and the necessity to limit Russian battlefield losses, especially casualties, which can negatively affect public opinion at home.

Meanwhile, Poroshenko declared on 16 March 2016 that Ukraine’s military and national security policy officially regards Russia as the country’s primary national security threat, citing the Russian invasion and occupation of Ukrainian territory and activities of the Russian intelligence services. That said, Ukraine is in no position to recover any lost territory and can only hope to make the conflict as expensive as possible for Russia. Ukrainian forces are only just able to defend the front lines in eastern Ukraine against Russian-backed separatists and Russian forces; retaking Crimea is completely beyond Ukrainian capabilities.

Although Russia’s predominately conscripted military is constrained by many of the same factors that inhibit Ukrainian effectiveness, Russian weapon systems are generally more advanced and better integrated with capable intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) systems, all...
backed by a responsive battlefield logistics tail reaching into Russia. Moreover, superior Russian air forces could be brought to bear in a Ukraine-Russia conflict that would quickly overwhelm the opposition, although not without losses. Resulting Russian air superiority would further reduce Ukrainian effectiveness on the battlefield.

The Ukrainian government has increased defence spending to fill gaps in capabilities and there are plans for a significantly larger defence budget in 2018, which will further enhance military procurement, professionalism, and quality of life. On 10 October Defence Minister Stepan Poltorak suggested a budget increase from USD2.6 billion this year to as much as USD3.1 billion in 2018, noting as procurement priorities air defence systems, ATGMs, EW equipment, and UAVs. This includes additional Stuhna and Korsar ATGWs and more BTR-4E and BTR-3DA wheeled infantry fighting vehicles. President Poroshenko said that “UAH1.6 billion [USD61.5 million] will be spent on purchasing the latest weapons and military equipment”.

A US Army soldier from the 45th Infantry Brigade Combat Team acts as an observer controller trainer while soldiers from the Ukrainian Army’s 1st Battalion, 95th Separate Airmobile Brigade, secure a drop zone before a US airdrop during Exercise ‘Rapid Trident 2017’ in western Ukraine on 10 September. (US DoD/Captain Kayla Christopher)
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