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Russia's Next Moves in Ukraine

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From the moment the corrupt pro-Russian authoritarian regime of Viktor Yanukovich was overthrown in Kiev at the end of February, Russia, that is Vladimir Putin, has pursued three strategic goals: First, to punish, humiliate, destabilize, if possible, dismember and, ultimately, derail a Europe-bound Ukraine. Second, to prevent the West from imposing meaningful, biting sanctions. And finally, to continue to solidify Putin's domestic political base by means of the rally around the flag effect.

The third objective is the most important one. By all indications, Putin is engineering a presidency-for-life. This is a not an easy task in a Russia with a stagnant economy and possible slide into recession, rising food prices, enormous corruption and continuing decline in the quality of education and health care. As recently as the end of 2013, according to public opinion polls, the Russian people's trust in his promises, his popularity, and the desire to see him as president again in 2018 all were at record lows of Putin's effectively 14 years in power.

All however was forgiven and forgotten in the deafening din of the monopolistic propaganda that followed the annexation of Crimea and the by-proxy invasion of east-south Ukraine. The patriotic euphoria at the sight of these victories for the "just cause" of "saving the ethnic brethren" from depredations by the "Nazi junta" in Kiev combined with an equally unbridled paranoia of NATO plots, from which only President Putin is capable of shielding the Motherland have proved irresistible.

Yet newly elected Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko has quickly proved surprisingly successful not only in mobilizing political support for confronting the Russian proxies, but also in rebuilding the completely demoralized and beggared Ukrainian armed forces. By early July he managed to engineer what looks like a successful Ukrainian ground offensive to recover sovereignty over the country's industrial heartland, starting with the rebel stronghold of Slavyansk on July 7.

The unexpected Ukrainian advance has created a big political problem for Putin. As I have mentioned, the effort of the Russian domestic monopolistic propaganda machine has been very effective. But if one lives by propagandistic hysteria, one may also die, or at least be bled by it. The propaganda-induced mood cannot be tamped down quickly to justify giving up on the "forces of civil self-defense," as the Kremlin calls an assorted rabble, armed and supplied by Moscow, and led and trained by professional Russian special troops, intelligence officers as well as Chechen and Cossack mercenaries. Putin knows only too well the history of the former Serbian strongman, Slobodan Milosevic, who had ridden similarly high in his fight against what he called Bosnia "jihadists" and Croatian "Catholic Nazi Ustashas" until he retreated.

Thus, retreat from, not to mention defeat in, Ukraine is not an option for Putin. So in the face of the Ukrainian advance since the beginning of July, Russia, in effect, has imposed a no-fly zone over east-south Ukraine.

This is the political and military context in which followed the downing of a Ukrainian military cargo plane and fighter jet earlier in the same week that Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17 was shot down by a Buk M-1 (the SA-11 Gadfly in the NATO designation) surface-to-air-missile, fired from the Ukrainian side of the border. Last Wednesday, two Ukrainian SU-25 fighter jets were downed as well. Simultaneously, Russia has escalated the movement of men and heavy equipment across its border with Ukraine, including Grad multiple launch rocket systems, T-64 tanks, infantry combat vehicles with automatic cannons and armored personnel carriers. At the same time Russian artillery began to pound Ukrainian army positions.

If these efforts notwithstanding Russia fails to stop the Ukrainian advance, Putin will be facing two options. First, he may declare that Ukraine “in the throes of a fratricidal civil war” necessitates Russia’s direct military intervention to protect “innocent civilian lives.” In doing so, Putin is likely to invoke the “Libya precedent,” which Moscow repeatedly hinted at as a justification for such an action: after all, Russia will only be following what the West did in Libya in 2011.

This option, however, is not without risks. First, the Ukrainian army is likely to put up a fight and, if Russian casualties begin to multiply, Putin’s domestic support may begin to erode quickly seeing that the almost half of Russians have repeatedly told pollsters that they do not want Russia to invade Ukraine.

Thus Putin’s preferred choice is likely to be a call for an immediate “cessation of hostilities” and, as it has done repeatedly in the past, “direct negotiations” between Kiev and its proxies. The West is also likely to put strong pressure on Ukraine to comply in the hopes of preventing the first open invasion of a major European country since the end of World War II 69 years ago

Needless to say, by enabling the pro-Russian “separatists” to stay in control of the territories they hold today, the Russia-proposed “truce” would allow Russia to have its cake and eat it too: stopping the Ukrainian offensive and saving its proxies from defeat without resorting to an open invasion by regular troops.

The longer the truce, not to mention negotiations, the weaker the support for the activist Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko will be and the lesser the chance for an economic recovery in Ukraine. Given Ukraine’s post-Soviet political history, such a “frozen conflict” could lead to yet another cycle of domestic political instability and perhaps eventually to the realization of the Russian strategic goal of derailing a Europe-bound Ukrainian regime. In the meantime, the truce can be quickly broken by the “rebels” on orders from Moscow, just as the most recent unilateral Ukrainian ceasefire was at the beginning of July.

Whatever the actual tactics, Russia’s strategy will continue to be shaped by the fact that a successful low-intensity war on Ukraine is a key domestic political imperative of the Putin regime.

This, in turn, makes a protracted and bloody stalemate the likeliest outcome in both the short and perhaps medium term of the Ukrainian crisis.