

Don of a New Era



Ukrainian troops camouflage their multiple rocket launcher at a checkpoint in Kryva Luka, in eastern Ukraine.

More than two years since Moscow stunned the world with its annexation of the Crimea, the conflict in eastern Ukraine has descended into an uneasy stalemate between the Kiev government and breakaway pro-Russian forces mainly composed of ethnic Russians. It seems likely that Moscow's intent was not to occupy Ukraine and send tank divisions to Kiev, but to covertly

support breakaway pro-ethnic Russian forces in the east of the country to create a buffer.

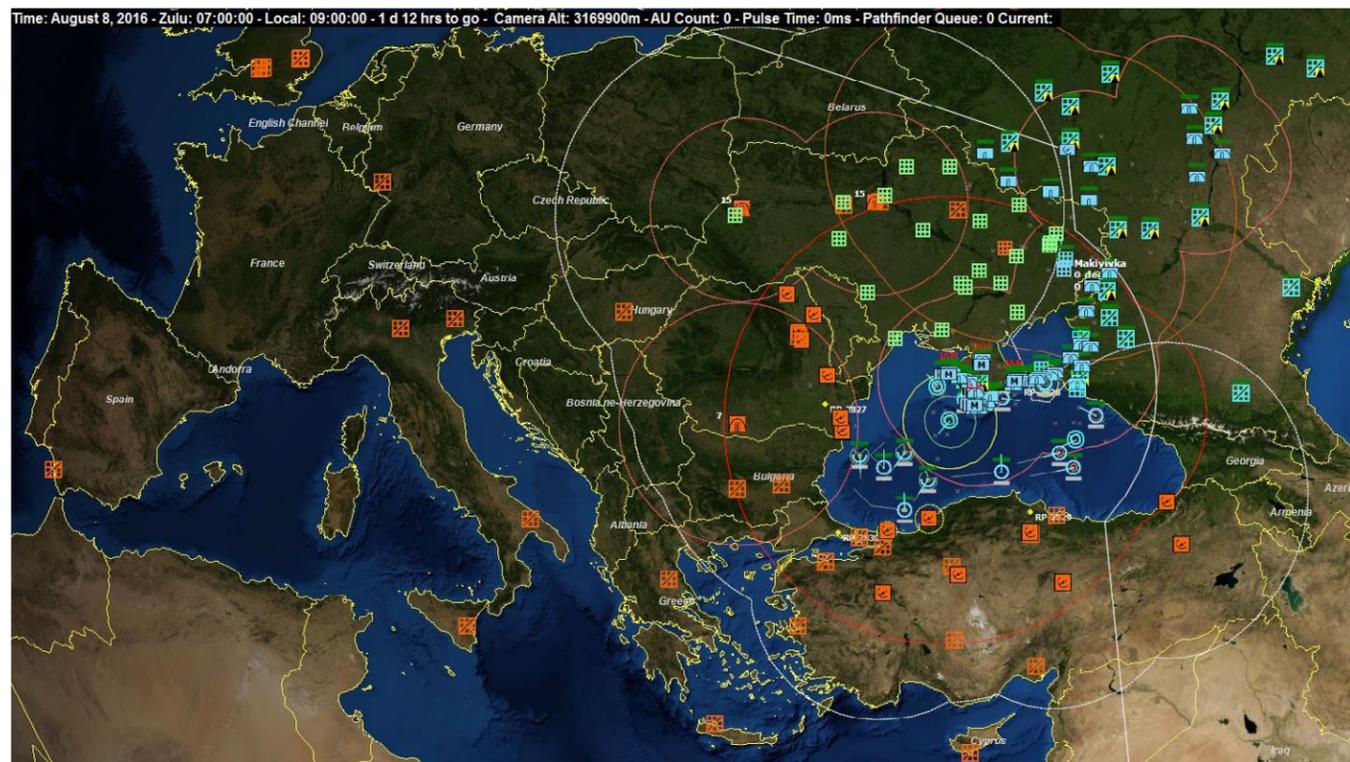
Unfortunately, these pro-Russian rebels proved far weaker than expected and a wider revolution and civil war did not take place, leading to Russia's secret conflict in Eastern Ukraine where small specialist forces and equipment were committed in specific places to help turn the tide of the

battle against Ukraine. Cross-border artillery attacks, UAVs and highly effective EW were Russia's contribution to help rebels in the Donbass. The high point of this intervention was August 2014. However, while Russia has not been shy about using cross-border artillery strikes against regular Ukrainian forces – interestingly it did not commit its air power to this fight.

Possibly this is because while artillery can be 'deniable' as to who exactly fired it, a Su-25 or Mi-24 with Red Star markings shot down over Ukraine would have provided incontrovertible evidence of Moscow's involvement.

Aiding pro-Russian fighters with specialist weapons and equipment is what led to the

Continued on page 2 →



Russian Position in the Region.

infamous MH17 shutdown in July 2014 where an advanced SAM system was brought in from Russia in order to help rebels who had been suffering from air attacks by Ukrainian AF Su-25s. Though Moscow has argued a number of alternative theories as to what downed the 777 with the loss of 298 lives, the lack of air threat from pro-Russian rebels, the 777s track heading east towards rebel-held territory and forensic evidence (bow-tie shaped missile fragments) as well as intelligence and cell phone intercepts point the finger directly back at the Kremlin. Having been found guilty in this

way, it may be that Russia believes that in any future intervention, that there will be no-need to pretend that its forces are not involved in eastern Ukraine.

While a ceasefire in Eastern Ukraine is in place, sporadic small-scale fighting still breaks out from time to time and the peace remains fragile.

A land bridge to Crimea

As well as the desire to bring ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine back into the fold, Moscow has three other reasons why the current situation is not ideal.

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The first is that with the situation as is, Crimea is cut off as if it were an island from the rest of Russia – despite the straits being only 19km wide from Krasnodar to the east. A land bridge is under construction linking Kerch peninsula with the mainland, but will only be complete in December 2018. Relying on ferries for links with Crimea (and to reinforce and resupply Russia’s key strategic naval base in the Black Sea), makes it particularly vulnerable. It is no wonder, then that during the height of Russia’s involvement in eastern Ukraine, many thought that a land invasion with regular forces to sweep south and link up with Crimea was the most likely move. Large-scale military exercises and mobilisation in Russia’s south, have

also raised fears that on one of these future occasions, these will be sent west.

Industrial dependency

There is a second factor acting as a pull for Russia to secure eastern Ukraine, once and for all. That is its continued dependency on Ukrainian aerospace and military industry. As a result of the Soviet Union’s industrial policy, Ukraine became the single supplier for the USSR’s helicopter engines, military transport aircraft (Antonov) as well as missiles and some rocket technology – and a full third of the USSR’s defence industry.

The spilt between Kiev and Moscow, then, has cut Russia off

from some key defence equipment suppliers – although it is making efforts to grow its own capabilities itself. For example, the Motor Sich factory, which makes the engines for almost all Russian-built helicopters is sited 230km west of Donetsk. R-27 air-to-air missiles, too, are produced in Ukraine. Crucially the bulk of the defence industry is based in the east and south, making for an additional appealing goal should Moscow decide to invade.

On to Moldova

Beyond south east Ukraine there is another tempting goal – that of Moldova – caught between Ukraine and Romania and the location of another ‘frozen conflict’ from the 1990s, the Transnistria war – where again –pro-Russian separatists attempted to carve out their own region. Should this conflict flare up again, then it would be hard for Moscow not to answer the call for help and come to the aid of oppressed ethnic Russians in Moldova and Transnistria. Going through southern Ukraine to get to Transnistria would thus solve two problems at once for Moscow.

A tougher challenge

However, if Russia does seek to break the deadlock, seize a land bridge to Crimea and reclaim

a ‘New Russia’, it now faces a tougher challenge than two years previously. Then surprise, confusion and deception caught both Ukraine and the international community off guard, and allowed President Putin to dominate the direction. Western military analysts knew who the ‘Little Green Men’ were that appeared in Crimea overnight, but the international response to this bold 20th century-style national land grab was slow and uncertain.

Today, however, Ukraine has rebuilt and strengthened its forces – and national pride has seen volunteers sign up to defend against Russian aggression. Though the US has carefully avoided handing over too sophisticated weaponry (such as Javelin ATGMs) Ukraine’s military is now a far more formidable opponent than before. It has also overhauled its air force, bringing aircraft back into service.

NATO too is now ready this time round. While the Baltics as NATO members have focussed attention as a likely flashpoint, deployments and joint exercises of US and NATO forces in Poland, Bulgaria and elsewhere have sent a message that the West will defend friends and allies in Eastern Europe. While the threat of outright invasion may be small, NATO Eastern Europe



nations now feel that they are on the front-line of a new Cold War. Indeed, should Moscow’s ambitions extend to helping separatists in Moldova, it is difficult to see how NATO can turn a blind eye, given the proximity to Romania – now as key location for the US ABM anti – ballistic missile system, which was declared operational in May 2016.

First clash of stealth?

It is not only resolve in the West that has stiffened too. Two years on, new equipment is about to or has entered service, in particular the Lockheed Martin F-35 Lighting II. Already in service with the USMC, it is also entering

service in the ‘A’ model with the USAF with over 180 aircraft now flying. At the Royal International Air Tattoo in July 2016, General ‘Hawk’ Carlisle, Chief of USAF’s Air Combat Command said he would deploy the F-35A ‘in a heartbeat’ if needed and referenced the air policing mission in the Baltics as one future deployment. In particular, the F-35 will be used to negate the Russian advantage in triple-digit SAM systems such as the S-300/S-400 – clearing the way for legacy fighters from the US and allies.

Unlike its a covert war in Ukraine were Russia’s air involvement was limited to artillery-spotting UAVs, any full scale push to secure territory in Eastern Ukraine and Moldova would most likely involve the full strength of Russia’s air, sea and space power, as well as its usual land forces. In particular, the air force’s intervention in Syria has honed their skills and demonstrated new weaponry and equipment, such as long-range cruise missiles, and the latest air-to-air missiles and attack helicopters. Meanwhile Russia’s T-50/PAK-FA stealth fighter has also been edging towards operational capability. Six prototypes have already been built and the first delivery of a production version is slated for this year.

For a peer-matched opponent like Russia, it is thus highly probable that the US will want to call on its F-35As for the most dangerous missions in contested airspace. Likewise, if Moscow was facing advanced NATO air power as well as Ukraine, it too might consider an operational



Ukrainian AF SU-25s.



Lockheed Martin F-35 Lighting II.



Russian Sukhoi T-50 PAK-FA Stealth Fighter.

test deployment of the PAK-FAs to help give it the battle-winning edge. Though risky, it is not without precedent. Russian for example tested Ka-50s attack helicopters in Chechnya in the 1990s while the US deployed JSTARS and Global Hawk to operations before they were officially ready.

If this did occur, it would be the first time stealth aircraft would have the chance to meet in battle – and would thus be of huge significance for air combat strategists, military planners and tacticians. Will the F-35 prove as effective in real combat as Lockheed Martin and the USAF predict? Or will the PAK-FAs

cheaper, '80% stealth' solution that does not sacrifice the number of weapons carried and manoeuvrability, prove to be the correct one? All things being equal, or course, there would be other factors here, such as AEW and ISR support, readiness levels and pilot skill, but this 'stealth vs stealth' clash could be as historic

as the first jet vs jet engagement. Committing the F-35A into a high-threat area with triple-digit SAMS would also finally answer the question – was the vast expense worth it?

Summary

In short then, finishing off this 'frozen conflict' for once may be appealing to Moscow for a number of reasons. With the West distracted by Syria and the probes in the Baltics, a short campaign, backed this time by Russian air power and the Black Sea Fleet could bring ethnic Russians back into greater Russia, secure part of its lost defence industry and complete a land bridge to Crimea. An open military defeat of Ukraine would also have the effect of the government in Kiev falling, potentially to be replaced by a more Moscow-friendly regime. While an outright invasion makes the risk of a direct NATO involvement also higher, the potential rewards, that of undermining and splitting the alliance permanently also are larger.



Standard SM3 missile being launched from *US Fitzgerald*.