



No good military solution for Ukraine

Jan Ludvík

A war has been brewing in Eastern Europe for a few months now. A war which, perhaps, no one wants but also which no one fears enough. Russia, Ukraine, and the West might prefer peace, but no side seems ready to give significant political concessions. The West because it doesn't have to, Ukraine because it can't, and Russia because it can take what it demands from Ukraine by force.

At first glance, Ukraine now commands relatively well-armed forces of some two hundred thousand soldiers. Furthermore, military aid pours into Ukraine from Western countries. The West, however, should be under no illusions. Russia remains superior, and it is too late to change the military reality between Moscow and Kyiv.

After the revolution in 2014, Ukraine had to rebuild its army while fighting the war in Donbas. Most resources had to be used for immediate needs of the ongoing war. In Donbas, however, Ukraine is fighting "pro-Russian rebels." These rebel forces use a mix of light weapons, with some artillery and armor that Moscow sent and disguised as if it was captured from the Ukrainian army. Russian soldiers support the rebels, but except for a few moments when Moscow had to rescue the rebels from a defeat, the Russian military did not fight in Donbas as an organized force.

The Ukrainian military suffers from several weaknesses due to its "made-for-Donbas" army. The Ukrainian

air force and air defense are no match for Russian airpower. Moreover, Russia has an enormous advantage in long-range fires. The West can help with some deficiencies, but it is too late to fill the significant gaps. A modern military is a complex system. It is simply impossible to add something, wave a magic wand, and hope the system will work.

The modern military

Russia has already amassed more than 100,000 troops in the vicinity of Ukraine. This might seem an insufficient number to fight the quarter-million-strong Ukrainian military. In September 1939, the Wehrmacht needed two million troops to invade Poland, a smaller country but with roughly the same population as Ukraine.

Russia has, however, amassed combat troops near Ukraine. These are organized into battalion tactical groups (BTGs). Each BTG is an independent maneuver unit with a tank or mechanized battalion, augmented by combat

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support such as artillery, engineers, and air defenses. Their seemingly small number is deceptive.

Modern armies need fewer combat troops but a large support system to assist the combat element. To illustrate, combat troops and combat support make up only a quarter of the U.S. military. By contrast, the Russian troops in the vicinity of Ukraine primarily come from the ninety battalion tactical groups. A quarter-million-strong Ukrainian army includes everything from front-line soldiers to border guard paramilitary units to the janitor at the headquarters in Kyiv.

Russia used much smaller forces during previous battles in Donbas. Michael Kofman estimates that 4-6 BTGs were deployed to Donbas in the summer of 2014. In the winter of 2015, a larger operation required 8-10 BTGs and culminated with a major defeat of Ukrainian forces in the battles for Donetsk International Airport and at Debaltseve. The current concentration of Russian troops is almost an order of magnitude bigger. For comparison, the U.S. forces in Kuwait, which defeated Iraq in 2003, numbered a bit more than one hundred and fifteen thousand troops; no more than 50-60 thousand were combat troops.

Military limits of political decisions

Russia might not defeat Ukraine as easily as the U.S. defeated Saddam's army. How the armies employ their forces matters. An effective military must work together as a well-coordinated machine. This has been true since World War I, which brought the destructive power of the Industrial Revolution to the battlefield.

Through the painful process of millions of deaths, World War I taught the belligerents that a successful attack on a modern battlefield requires a combination of coordinated small units with effective fire support. The defense then requires depth, reserves, and a coordinated counterattack. Stephen Biddle calls this “the modern system of warfare”, and such a modern system of warfare

puts heavy demands on the tactical skills of the belligerents.

Assessing the tactical skills is considerably more difficult than monitoring the numbers. Both Russia's and Ukraine's militaries have extensive combat experience. Ukraine has fought the war in Donbas for eight years. Russia has successfully intervened in Georgia, Donbas, and Syria. However, those operations have been limited in scope and intensity.

It is difficult to draw a clear conclusion about the tactical skills of the two adversaries, but Kyiv has little reason for optimism. The Ukrainian military would have to master the modern system to stop the Russian Bear, while Russia would have to fail to master it. Deterrence would be even more difficult. Moscow would have to be convinced of the tactical superiority of the Ukrainian army.

The West can reverse the eventual outcome of a military clash in Ukraine only if it sends substantial military forces into the country, risking war with Russia. Such a war could quickly escalate to the nuclear level. With this in mind, President Biden has already made it clear the U.S. will not go to war over Ukraine's right to join NATO.

The military reality around Ukraine is certainly uncomfortable. However, denying the reality and pretending that a happy end is possible would do even more harm. The West should recognize that a military situation limits its political options. Without western military intervention, a political solution, even one that includes significant concessions, remains the best outcome for Ukraine. In Ukraine, however, these concessions almost equal political suicide. Taking the blame for the necessary concessions might be the best the West can do to avert Russian tanks from rolling in the streets of Kyiv.

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