The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russian View: Ukraine Is Safe From a Moscow Invasion

By Alexey Eremenko

August 12, 2014



Police standing guard at a protest in Kiev on Tuesday, as a humanitarian convoy made its way from Russia, prompting fears of an imminent invasion.

Concerns voiced by Kiev and the West that Moscow's humanitarian convoy to Ukraine's battle-scarred east is nothing more than a Trojan Horse are — most likely — unfounded, Russian military analysts said.

Pundits told The Moscow Times on Tuesday that the limited scope of a "peacekeeping" operation would be inadequate to bring about a victory for pro-Russian separatists.

While a massive Russian blitzkrieg remains possible, it would have exorbitant geopolitical costs.

And Russian forces may simply be ill-prepared to deal with the newly revitalized Ukrainian army, which would likely receive help from NATO given the need.

That said, the conflict in Ukraine is far from over, as the embattled pro-Russian insurgency is likely to ditch the pretenses of regular warfare and take up guerilla tactics, analysts agreed.

Beware of Russians Bearing Gifts

A three-kilometer-long motorcade of 280 trucks without license plates, loaded with humanitarian aid, departed on Tuesday from the Moscow region to Ukraine, according to RIA Novosti.

The motorcade, loaded with more than 500 tons of food, 54 tons of medical supplies, 12,000 sleeping bags and 69 power generators, is due to reach the Ukrainian border on Wednesday morning, ITAR-Tass reported.

European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso and French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius joined U.S. diplomats in expressing concern that the convoy may in fact be a pretext for an armed invasion.

Official Kiev said Tuesday it would accept the incoming humanitarian aid on the border, but would not allow Russian trucks into the country.

Citing domestic diplomatic sources, Russian media outlets reported in July that the Kremlin was preparing to deploy a "peacekeeping force" to the insurgency's heartland in the Donbass region.

This has fanned worries in Ukraine, given that peacekeeping contingents Russia keeps in the post-Soviet breakaway regions of Transdnestr, Abkhazia and South Ossetia serve to guarantee the de-facto independence of these pro-Russian separatist enclaves.

Since its outbreak last spring, the insurgency has scored numerous victories against what started as an ill-equipped and poorly trained Ukrainian army, but Kiev's forces eventually capitalized on their vast superiority in manpower and equipment, ultimately isolating the rebels to the cities of Luhansk and Donetsk. Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko reportedly promised to crush the resistance by Aug. 24, Ukraine's Independence Day.

Sacrificial Peacekeepers

A limited peacekeeping mission of the sort found in the self-proclaimed republic of Transdnestr or South Ossetia would be both illegitimate and ineffective from a military standpoint, experts said.

Peacekeepers can only be deployed if authorized by the United Nations, which Moscow — at odds with the U.S. and EU — stands no chance of obtaining, said retired army colonel Viktor Litovkin, a prominent military analyst.

Moreover, the miniscule size typical of peacekeeping forces would render one useless against the Ukrainian army, said Mikhail Barabanov, editor-in-chief of the Moscow Defense Brief.

The Ukrainian anti-insurgency force is estimated to be about 50,000-strong.

"Peacekeepers would only offer a brief respite to the rebels," said Alexander Golts, a military

expert with the opposition-leaning publication Yezhednevny Zhurnal.

The Donbass Blitzkrieg

An all-out invasion would offer the rebels their only chance of survival in the field, Barabanov said.

The Ukrainian forces are already straining under the pressure of sustained combat, and a Russian strike could send them scrambling from eastern Ukraine, he said in emailed comments.

Russia has amassed between 20,000 and 40,000 troops on the Ukrainian border, nominally for military exercise, but could boost that sum to 80,000, said Konstantin Makienko, deputy director of the for-profit Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies.

Experts were split on whether it would suffice to break the back of the Ukrainian army. Barabanov and Makienko said it was possible, while Golts said at least 100,000 combat-ready troops may be needed — more than Russia can muster, he said.

Ukrainian forces can also regain morale and put up a good fight in the case of outright foreign aggression, Makienko said.

And NATO, which backs official Kiev, would definitely help the Ukrainians, at least by supplying them with arms, though not by directly taking on the Russians, something that never happened even at the height of the Cold War, Golts said.

"I hope nobody is going to find out," Makienko quipped.

In any case, an all-out invasion would leave Russia — which has already been hit by Western sanctions — totally isolated from the international community, experts agreed.

Can't Stop the Guerillas

The insurgency lacks the strength to hold on to its remaining strongholds, most pundits agreed.

"By and large, they are irregular forces comprised of local guerillas," said analyst Litovkin.

But this is precisely what could spell trouble for Ukraine after the tentative fall of Donetsk and Luhansk, experts said.

Once the rebels give up on pitched battles in favor of guerilla warfare, they will be almost impossible to uproot, especially given the influx of angry, new recruits from among the war-torn local communities, Litovkin said.

The conflict can simmer long into the winter, and possibly for years afterwards, agreed Golts.

"Even better-prepared armies, down to the Americans in Iraq, have failed to defeat guerillas," Golts said.

Contact the author at a.eremenko@imedia.ru

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/08/12/russian-view-ukraine-is-safe-from-a-moscow-invasion-a38275