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Putin Needs Another Victory in Ukraine

By Andrei Malgin

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Ukrainian media raise the alarm every few days that the Russian army is about to attack and seize this or that town.

But nothing happens. And this has been going on for a long time now. True, skirmishes do erupt and the number of war casualties continues to mount, but no large-scale offensive has yet materialized.

Is President Vladimir Putin prepared to unleash a major military campaign in the Donbass?

Yes and no.

Russian military expert Pavel Felgenhauer, whose opinion I have long respected, said only a few days ago that "Russia is poised for a new attack." A huge contingent of Russian forces is stationed at the border with Ukraine, fresh troops have rotated in, Russia has built up the infrastructure to provide logistical supply to their forces, some of which are already in Ukraine, the military warehouses in the breakaway republics are bulging with tons of ready ammunition and a motley mix of local "irregulars" has almost completed their training.

There are two fairly straightforward possible explanations for Russia's high battle readiness. The first is that the Russian army is poised in readiness so as to guarantee that Ukrainian forces do not advance, and will not budge unless Kiev makes a move. This is because the Russian army's General Staff doubtless recalls how the Ukrainian army displayed unexpected prowess and almost managed last summer to defeat the pro-Russian separatists and regain control of the breakaway regions of Donetsk and Luhansk. Ukraine was just hours away from victory when Putin openly sent in Russian troops to drive them back. After that, the separatists managed to not only recover lost territory, but to improve their position, allowing Russia to withdraw a large part of its forces to again stand in readiness just beyond the border.

According to this argument, the Ukrainian General Staff also recalls the events of last summer, and that makes a second attempt to regain control over the breakaway territories — that is, to intensify what Kiev calls its "anti-terrorist operations" — highly unlikely as long as the status of the separatist-held territories remains unchanged and Russia maintains full control over the border.

The second scenario, and the one I think most likely, is that Putin will attack. Russian generals recently conducted reconnaissance in Marinka and discovered that the Ukrainian army is now much stronger than it was one year ago, making it impossible to conduct a swift and bloodless march on Kiev. For political reasons, Putin would like to avoid the degree of bloodshed such a campaign would cause. And yet he needs military victories to sustain his popularity at home. The Russian economy is in terrible shape and a wide cross section of the population is now experiencing hardship. People are impoverished. They have lost their jobs, lack enough money for food and housing and are getting crushed by debt. The masses might soon grow discontented with their leaders. What could raise their spirits and cause them to once again rally around their National Leader? Of course, Putin cannot give the order to seize Crimea a second time, but he stands in dire need of a small and easy military victory.

No, Putin does not want sanctions and fears that the West might expand them, but events are carrying him forward and he could not stop them even if he wanted to. In fact, he shows no sign of wanting to stop them. Now he needs to hand Ukraine a humiliating defeat and to simultaneously cripple the country in military, economic and humanitarian terms. Only then will the Russian people once again hail him as the "father of the nation," a superman who personifies Russia itself, as his cronies like to claim. I am not a specialist on military affairs like Felgenhauer, but I am something of an expert on propaganda. And I know that propaganda very closely reflects the mood of the rulers. And what is Russian propaganda declaring now? That war is coming.

Andrei Malgin is a journalist, literary critic and blogger.

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