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Can Ukraine's Military Beat the Pro-Moscow Rebels? Not Right Now.

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Key Points

A conference attended by influential Ukrainian and US officials has concluded that Russia's hybrid warfare campaign in eastern Ukraine is working

Ukrainian forces continue to be outmatched, not only by the hardware they face but also the sophistication of the offensive they face

A significant forum focusing on the current situation in eastern Ukraine and the future of the country in terms of its relationship with the EU and NATO has revealed that Russia's 'hybrid warfare' campaign in its former Soviet vassal state appears to be achieving Moscow's desired results.

At a 14 February conference in the southern city of Dnepropetrovsk, Lieutenant General Ruslan Homchak, the head of the Ukrainian military's Operational Command South, and others involved in the combat in the eastern regions of Lugansk and Donetsk, along with a team from the Potomac Foundation, a Washington, DC-based private defence and foreign affairs think-tank, briefed the US Ambassador to Ukraine, Geoffrey Pyatt, and two defence attaches from the US Embassy in Kiev.

The Potomac team was led by its director, Dr Phil Karber, a former senior official within the Office of the Secretary of Defense, and General Wesley Clark (rtd), who served as NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) from 1997-2000.

The main points made by the briefers were as follows:

- There are currently 14,400 Russian troops on Ukrainian territory backing up the 29,300 illegally armed formations of separatists in eastern Ukraine. These units are well equipped with the latest main battle tanks, armoured personnel carriers and infantry fighting vehicles, plus hundreds of pieces of tube and rocket artillery. There are also 29,400 Russian troops in Crimea and 55,800 massed along the border with eastern Ukraine.

- Russian units have made heavy use of electronic warfare (EW) and what appear to be high-power microwave (HPM) systems to jam not only the communications and reconnaissance assets of the Ukrainian armed forces but to also disable the surveillance unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) operated by ceasefire monitoring teams from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Russian EW teams have targeted the Schiebel Camcopter UAVs operated by the monitors and “melted the onboard electronics so that drones just fly around uncontrolled in circles before they crash to the ground”, said one of the briefers at the conference.

- Russian EW, communications and other units central to their military operations are typically placed adjacent to kindergartens, hospitals or apartment buildings so that Ukrainian units are unable to launch any strikes against them without causing unacceptable and horrific collateral casualties.

- The war against Ukraine is not a “new” strategy for Moscow; the Russian general staff has been preparing for Ukraine-type combat operations since 1999.

- The Russian military’s Zapad 2013 exercise (the word ‘Zapad’ meaning ‘West’ in Russian to denote that it was an operation designed to practice operations against NATO) was a dress-rehearsal for parts of the Ukraine campaign and future potential operations against the Baltic states. The exercise involved 76,300 total troops, 60% of which were drawn from the same Russian Interior Ministry (MVD) units that were used in the Chechen conflicts of the 1990s.

- Russia’s information warfare campaign includes budgeting for the state-run Russia Today network (more than USD300 million per annum) and support for pro-Russian NGOs (USD100 million per annum).

Overall, the Ukrainian military continues to be severely disadvantaged by not being equipped with a list of the items that are becoming well known to those watching the current situation in eastern Ukraine: secure communications systems; anti-tank guided weapons with tandem warheads; counter-battery radars; UAVs for both reconnaissance and strike missions; and the ability to stream multiple intelligence sources into centralised command centres to get inside the ‘decision loop’ of the Russian-backed forces.

