

What transitioning to a defensive strategy might mean for the Russians in Ukraine

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Abstract (English)

While the Russian Army's offensive in the east continues, it is likely in the short term that they will reach the limit of their offensive capability. As such, Author explores what transitioning to a defensive strategy might mean for the Russians in Ukraine.

Keywords: Putin, Russia, Ukraine

While the Russian Army's offensive in the east continues, it is likely in the short term that they will reach the limit of their offensive capability. As such, today I explore what transitioning to a defensive strategy might mean for the Russians in Ukraine.

The Russian Army has been attempting to re-boot its efforts in Ukraine. It fired senior commanders accused of failure, reorganised combat units, begun digging in defensive positions north of Kharkiv & conducted additional strategic missile strikes across Ukraine.

The focus of Russian forces at present is eastern Ukraine, and in particular, securing the Donbas region. Compared to the grand aspirations of Putin in the war's early days, this is a relatively modest target. And despite scaling back its goals, the Russian military is still struggling to make significant progress in the face of the dogged defence of the Ukrainians, and the massive inflow of western military aid. Thousands of Russians soldiers have been killed or wounded, and hundreds of armoured vehicles

destroyed in the east of the country. For all this effort, the Russians have gained little additional territory in the past month.

It is possible, to support their offensive in the east, the Russians may launch attacks in the Zaporizhia and Kherson regions. But, given the scale of the Ukrainian military mobilisation, the amount of western aid, and the demonstrated inability of the Russians to competently undertake large scale operations, this too is unlikely to result in significant breakthroughs. For this reason, it is likely the Russian capacity to continue its offensive operations in Ukraine is close to reaching its high-water mark.

The Ukrainians have corroded the physical, moral and intellectual capacity of the Russian military in Ukraine. The Russian President and military high command will continue to demand advances, but at some point in the next month or two, any capacity of the Russians to do so will be at an end. Too many of the Russian combat units are being frittered away, and too many of their soldiers and junior leaders lack

the will to give their ‘last full measure’ for an institution that can’t even feed them properly.

We should not be under any misconception that this means the Russians are defeated, or that they will soon depart from Ukraine. The Russians will simply shift to a defensive strategy in Ukraine. And while this may at first glance appear to simplify the Russian’s problems in Ukraine, the reality is that it raises a new set of challenges.

The four challenges: losing initiative, governance, insurgency, morale

The first challenge is that they will no longer have the initiative. The Russian Army, in a defensive strategy, will be in a responsive mode. The Ukrainian Army will be able to decide where and when it engages the Russians. In effect, the strategic, operational, and tactical initiative will rest with the Ukrainians. This gives the Ukrainian military high command flexibility about the time, place, strength & sequencing of the inevitable counteroffensives it will conduct to recapture territory.

A second challenge for the Russians is that many of its units will shift from military operations to ‘occupation support’ activities. In effect, soldiers will need to become governors in the areas of Ukraine they still hold and which they seek to convert to Russian colonies. Not only does this bleed off military forces to defend against the Ukrainians, it requires a range of skill sets not normally resident in military institutions, such as civil administration. And, as the Russians found in Syria and Chechnya, it is extraordinarily expensive.

A third challenge for the Russian occupiers, to compound their already massive problems, is that they will probably have to deal with a

nascent resistance movement. As the Ukrainians have shown throughout this war, they are a proud, determined, and courageous people. There are already reports of Ukrainian insurgents operating in southern Ukraine. This will only grow with time in areas controlled by the Russians. And the Russians know that these insurgents will be well supported by the West.

Finally, the Russian Army has a problem with morale. In her [essay in Foreign Affairs](#), [Dara Massicot](#) (@MassDara) describes a “culture of indifference to its personnel fundamentally compromises the Russian military’s efficacy.” Overlaid with this cultural issue has been multiple reports by intelligence agencies & media about Russian Army desertions, the inability to retrieve its dead and lack of support to military families.

These challenges will only be intensified by a long-term occupation where soldiers are poorly led, and expected to be administrators, chase insurgents and win the hearts and minds of patriotic Ukrainians. And large numbers of Russians will be required for an Army of a occupation – many more than they have currently deployed in Ukraine.

The recent Ukrainian decision to cease its defence of the Mariupol steelworks provided a small yet pyrrhic victory for the Russians. But it is unlikely that there will be more of such minor successes for the Russian Army. As their eastern offensive loses momentum, the Russians will inevitably have to transition to a defensive strategy in Ukraine. And in doing so, the Russian Army will confront a new range of difficult challenges ahead.