

# Evaluating a US Potential Intervention in Ukraine

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**Abstract:** *Since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, the long-simmering conflict in eastern Ukraine has attracted relatively little attention from Western media. The impeachment inquiry into President Trump has shed new light on the country but coverage of the insurgency in the Donbass region remains obscure. Nevertheless, the conflict continues despite multiple ceasefire agreements and sanctions placed on Russia by the United States and its European allies. Ukraine represents the front line of Russian expansion into Western Europe. The United States therefore has a strategic interest in maintaining the sovereignty of Ukraine. This piece examines the strength of the various actors in the conflict and their motivations for joining the fight. Based on that assessment, the work then evaluates potential strategies of intervention should the United States choose to engage more directly in the conflict. The analysis concludes that a narrow special operations force focusing on counterterrorism operations in support of the Ukrainian government is the most practical intervention strategy available to US policymakers.*

## Introduction

Ukraine has recently been thrust back into the Western news cycle because of its connection to the impeachment investigation involving President Donald Trump. This has drawn attention back into a country where a low-intensity conflict between the Ukrainian regime and Russian-backed separatists has been simmering for five years. Ukraine represents the front line of Russian expansion into Western Europe and, therefore, the conflict has far-reaching implications for strategic security in Europe. The United States and its allies have significant geopolitical interests in the outcome of the conflict. To date, US involvement in Ukraine has been limited and largely ineffective. It is therefore important for policymakers to evaluate potential options to increase US involvement in the conflict, including military intervention. To contribute to that policy discussion, this work identifies three types of intervention options available to the United States: an air campaign, a full-scale ground intervention, and a more limited special operations deployment. While each of these options carries risks and could be implemented to varying degrees of success, this analysis finds that the special operations intervention is the most likely of the three to achieve US objectives.

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To properly evaluate potential US interventions, it is first necessary to put the Ukraine conflict into context. In November 2013, Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich cancelled an agreement that would have brought Ukraine closer to the European Union (EU). Yanukovich instead pivoted toward Russia, which had offered a large economic aid package with comparatively fewer conditions than the EU. This provided the impetus for the Euromaidan protests which began peacefully but became violent as the Ukrainian regime cracked down on

demonstrators.<sup>1</sup> Shortly thereafter, Yanukovich fled to Russia and the rebel movement installed an interim government. Elections were then held, ushering in a new Western-leaning president, Petro Poroshenko.<sup>2</sup>

During the revolution, Russia sent military personnel into Crimea, ostensibly to protect Russians living there.<sup>3</sup> In mid-March 2014, Russia annexed Crimea after holding a secession referendum in the peninsula that was widely viewed as illegitimate and a violation of international law. After witnessing the events in Crimea, pro-Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine's Donbass region began to take up arms. Many were angered by the ouster of Yanukovich and the election of Poroshenko; they opposed Ukraine's trajectory toward the West. Russia supported these separatists by providing them with arms, mercenaries, and troops. It should be noted that Russia denies formally deploying its military to the region, preferring to label its personnel as "volunteers," colloquially known as "little green men". In this way, the conflict in Ukraine is multifaceted. In one sense, it is a civil conflict between the government of Ukraine and a secessionist rebel movement. In another sense, it is a low-intensity interstate war between Kiev and Moscow.<sup>4</sup>

It should be noted that this work acknowledges the strong support that Russia provides to the rebels and the enormous control that Moscow holds over individual rebel groups. Nevertheless, this analysis centers on the civil conflict aspect of the situation. Moreover, while the Russian intervention in Crimea and its subsequent annexation of the peninsula are significant and have relevance for this conflict, the primary focus of this analysis will be the ongoing separatist insurgency in the Donbass region.

### **Problem Identification**

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukraine has been a country torn between East and West. The western part of the country would prefer that Ukraine reorient itself toward Western Europe and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). They also view EU membership as an opportunity to expand markets. Many in eastern Ukraine, however, are ethnically Russian and therefore feel a close affinity for their neighbors to the east. The Donbass region also trades heavily with Russia, further cementing the bond between them. The basis for this fault line lies deep in Ukrainian history. In contrast to modern western Ukraine, which belonged to the state of Kievan Rus', in medieval times, modern eastern Ukraine was ruled by nomadic tribes.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, during the Russo-Polish war of the mid-1600s, eastern Ukraine fell under Russian imperial control far earlier than western Ukraine.<sup>6</sup> This history, while ancient, indicates that eastern Ukrainian affinity for Russia runs deeper than Soviet and post-Soviet ties.

Ukraine's modern history continues to highlight this East-West divide. The Orange Revolution pitted pro-Western Viktor Yushchenko against pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovich in

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<sup>1</sup> Terrence P. Hopmann, "Introduction," in *Understanding the 'Hybrid' Conflicts in Ukraine*, ed. Terrence P. Hopmann (Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies: 2017), 2.

<sup>2</sup> N.A., "Ukraine crisis: Timeline," *BBC News*, November 13, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26248275>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Hopmann, "Introduction," 2.

<sup>5</sup> Serhy Yekelchuk, *The Conflict in Ukraine: What Everyone Needs to Know*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 141.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Kubicek, *The History of Ukraine*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008), 41.

the 2004 presidential elections. Pro-Western demonstrators took to the streets after Yanukovych declared victory in an election marred by allegations of fraud and corruption. The Supreme Court ordered a new runoff election in December 2004 in which Yushchenko was legitimately elected.<sup>7</sup> Over the next five years, support for Yushchenko deteriorated and in 2010, Yanukovych won the presidency by a narrow margin, setting the stage for the Euromaidan revolution that would spark the current conflict.

Beyond the history of the conflict, it is important to identify the key actors. There are two primary actors, the Ukrainian government and the pro-Russia separatists, and several secondary actors, including Russia, the United States, and the EU. As a whole, the Ukrainian government is relatively weak. Analysts agree that Ukraine on its own lacks the capacity to defeat the Russian-backed separatists and maintain sovereignty over the Donbass region.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, following the Euromaidan revolution, the Ukrainian armed forces were poorly trained, led, and equipped. As a result, Ukraine relied heavily on an amalgamation of pro-Western militias which had armed themselves during the revolution.<sup>9</sup> Ukraine has been relatively successful at integrating these militias into the Ukrainian National Guard, but still faces challenges of corruption and tax evasion that hinder its ability to collect revenue to fund the war effort.<sup>10</sup> In addition, Ukraine's new president, Volodymyr Zelensky, is a comedian and political novice. This presents significant challenges as Vladimir Putin may test the newcomer by ramping up aggression in eastern Ukraine. Some fear that Zelensky will capitulate to Russia. Indeed, five months after he assumed office, he signed the Steinmeier Formula, a plan brokered by Germany and France that creates a roadmap to end the war by granting significant autonomy to the Donbass region.<sup>11</sup> However, upon signing the agreement, Zelensky faced an immediate rebuke from thousands of Ukrainian citizens who took to the streets to protest. Furthermore, Zelensky's party does not hold the supermajority in parliament necessary to enact the constitutional reforms to carry out the agreement.<sup>12</sup> Other scholars also note that both sides have red lines that they will not negotiate on, so the new administration is unlikely to result in an end to the war.<sup>13</sup> These facts indicate that while Zelensky himself may be more amenable to compromise, hardliners in Ukraine will present obstacles to any diplomatic settlement unless the status quo on the battlefield changes. Moreover, the Ukrainian parliament's recent vote to constitutionally mandate that Ukraine take steps toward EU and NATO integration further complicates the process and ties Zelensky's hands.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Stepan Andriyovich Kryzhanivsky and Andrij Makuch, "Ukraine," (Encyclopedia Britannica, April 10, 2019), <https://www.britannica.com/place/Ukraine/The-Orange-Revolution-and-the-Yushchenko-presidency>.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Brass, "Military Options and Outcomes," in *Understanding the 'Hybrid' Conflicts in Ukraine*, ed. Terrence P. Hopmann, (Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies: 2017), 13.

<sup>9</sup> Dan Peleschuk, "Your American Tax Dollars Just Sent 300 US Paratroopers to Train Ukrainian Soldiers," *Global Post*. April 20, 2015,. <https://www.pri.org/stories/your-american-tax-dollars-just-sent-300-us-paratroopers-train-ukrainian-soldiers>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Justin Lynch, "Zelensky Flounders in Bid to End Ukraine's War," *Foreign Policy*, . October 11, 2019,. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/11/zelensky-pushes-peace-deal-ukraine-war-russia-donbass-steinmeier-formula/>.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Setan Karlo Rajic, "Ukraine's New President and Russian Relations,," *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*,. May 2, 2019,. <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/ukraines-new-president-and-russian-relations/>.

<sup>14</sup> N.A., "Ukraine's Parliament Votes to Support NATO, EU Aspirations," *US News*, February 7, 2019,. <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2019-02-07/ukraines-parliament-votes-to-support-nato-eu-aspirations>.

The pro-Russian separatists are the other primary actor in the conflict. Within the broader separatist movement, there are two main groups, the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR). These groups cooperate with one another and are unified in their desire to secede from Ukraine. The rebel groups by themselves are relatively weak actors; they rely primarily on support from Russia for arms, funds, personnel, and direction.<sup>15</sup> If Russia stopped supporting the rebels, the Ukrainian government may have the capacity to overtake them with little to no outside assistance, evidenced by the gains that the government made in the summer of 2014.<sup>16</sup> Internally, the DPR and LPR are fragmented. The LPR has experienced various coup attempts throughout the group's existence, most notably in November of 2017 when Igor Plotnisky, the head of the LPR, was removed by a Moscow-backed coup.<sup>17</sup> The DPR has not fared much better as the leader of that group was assassinated on August 31, 2018. While it remains unclear who exactly carried out the assassination, a leading theory is that it was carried out by a deputy within the DPR.<sup>18</sup> In November 2018, the two groups held elections sponsored by Russia to return an air of unity and legitimacy to the groups.<sup>19</sup> However, the internal rivalries within these groups suggest that they will remain fragmented.

Russia is the most involved and arguably most important of the secondary actors. Vladimir Putin has several interests in the conflict. Geopolitically, Russia seeks to expand its power and reassert its relevance in its near abroad. In addition, Russia does have a legitimate interest in securing ethnic Russians that it perceives to be in danger from Ukrainian nationalists. Furthermore, Putin has a political incentive to drum up Russian nationalism by expanding Russian power and opposing Western – particularly NATO – encroachment.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, while its economy has slowed in recent years, Russia still retains significant military prowess. As such, Russia has the ability to continue supplying arms and personnel to the rebel groups almost indefinitely. Russia also maintains the capacity to escalate the conflict by sending additional troops and weapons into Donbass. Because of its proximity to the conflict, Russia could carry out any escalation rapidly.

The EU and the United States have similar interests in the region. Both want to see an end to the conflict, preferably one where Russia retreats and Ukraine's territorial sovereignty is restored. Both parties are opposed in principle to Russia's violations of international law and norms. In addition, the EU has an economic interest in bringing Ukraine into its fold and also maintaining access to Russian natural gas. These interests have led prominent EU members, such as France and Germany, to push for a negotiated settlement to the conflict. Both countries were integral in the signing of the Minsk agreements. These two agreements are ceasefires signed by the Ukrainian government, the rebels, and Russia. The agreements stipulate the withdrawal of heavy weaponry from the front lines. They are meant to separate actors from the conflict zones

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<sup>15</sup> Vladimir Socor, "Change at the Top Exposes the Politics of Donetsk-Luhansk 'People's Republics,'" *The Ukrainian Weekly*, September 21, 2018, <http://www.ukrweekly.com/uwwp/change-at-the-top-exposes-the-politics-of-donetsk-luhansk-peoples-republics/>.

<sup>16</sup> Brass, "Military Options2017," 13.

<sup>17</sup> Oliver Carroll, "Ukraine: Luhansk Coup Attempt Continues as Rival Militias Square Off Against Each Other.," *The Independent*, November 22, 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/luhansk-coup-ukraine-russia-igor-kornet-igor-plotnitsky-military-operations-training-exercise-a8068656.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Socor, 2018 "Change at the Top."

<sup>19</sup> Katarina Kertysova, "November Elections in Eastern Ukraine Unlikely to Bring Major Change.," *Global Security Review*, November 10, 2018, <https://globalsecurityreview.com/november-elections-donetsk-luhansk-ukraine-unlikely-change-russia/>.

<sup>20</sup> Brass, "Military Options2017," 10.

to reduce civilian casualties.<sup>21</sup> These agreements have been widely violated and now serve mainly as a tool for each side to accuse the other of violations.<sup>22</sup>

For its part, the United States seeks to avoid a broader conflict with Russia which could, in a worst-case scenario, lead to nuclear war. For these reasons, the United States has been reluctant to provide anything but diplomatic, economic, and defensive support to Ukraine. Though the United States has powerful military capabilities with which to support the Ukrainian government, Russia's presence has thus far largely deterred it from providing significant military aid to Ukraine.

### Critical Factors

Having outlined the historical context and key actors in the conflict, it is worth examining the critical factors that help explain why war broke out and why individuals and other actors joined the fight. The United States, should it choose to intervene in Ukraine, must be aware of these factors and incorporate methods to counter them into its strategy. At the end of the Cold War, despite the deep connection and ethnic ties between eastern Ukraine and Russia, analysts did not predict that Russia would invade Ukraine on ethnic grounds. In 1993, Barry Posen argued that, from an ethnic security dilemma perspective, three factors diminished the likelihood of conflict between the two states. First, Ukraine's nuclear weapons provided a deterrent effect; second, each side perceived the other's identity as benign; and third, Ukraine's ethnic Russians were largely homogenized close to the border rather than spread out in pockets throughout the country.<sup>23</sup>

By 1994, the first and arguably most important factor, Ukraine's nuclear arsenal, was removed. A balance of nuclear power was thereby replaced by the Budapest Memorandum, a piece of paper which guaranteed the sovereignty of Ukraine's 1994 borders. The memorandum, despite having the weight of international law, had a significantly less powerful deterrent effect for Russia. More recently, as Euromaidan revolutionaries clamored for a pivot toward the west, ethnic Russians living in eastern Ukraine – and Russians living across the border – likely began to perceive Ukrainian nationalists less as a benign force and more as a threat to their safety and prosperity. Finally, Posen argues that the relative geographic homogeneity of ethnic Russians and their proximity to the border would deter Ukraine from committing violence against the ethnic Russians within its borders. Posen's analysis is correct from Ukraine's perspective, but these factors may have increased the likelihood that ethnic Russians would rebel because they calculated that Russia would intervene on their behalf. Indeed, when Russia annexed Crimea partly under the guise of protecting ethnic Russians living there, it showed the rebels and their supporters in Donbass that Russia was willing to intervene. In this way, Russia created a moral hazard that lowered the threshold of rebellion for pro-Russian separatists in Donbass.<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, while ethnicity clearly played a role in Russia's decision to intervene in Donbass, it is less clear that ethnicity played a pivotal role in each individual's decision of

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<sup>21</sup> Hopmann, "Introduction 2017," 3.

<sup>22</sup> John E. Herbst, "Russia, Not Ukraine Is Serial Violator of Ceasefire Agreement," *The Atlantic Council*, June 21, 2017, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russia-not-ukraine-is-serial-violator-of-ceasefire-agreement>.

<sup>23</sup> Barry Posen, "The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict," *Survival*, 35, no. 1 (1993): 12.

<sup>24</sup> Alan J. Kuperman, "The Moral Hazard of Humanitarian Intervention: Lessons from the Balkans," *International Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (March 2008).

whether or not to join the fight. In an analysis of survey data from Luhansk before the war, Michael Gentile notes that “Ukraine’s fault line does not run on ethnic or religious lines per se... instead it largely separates two plates that host partially irreconcilable geopolitical narratives.”<sup>25</sup> Indeed, large portions of both ethnic Ukrainians and ethnic Russians living in Luhansk opposed integration with the EU and NATO. Ethnic Ukrainians were slightly more accepting of a reorientation toward the West, though the percentage was marginal.<sup>26</sup> It appears that, like the Baathists in Iraq, the decision to rebel in eastern Ukraine was influenced by a sudden loss of economic and political power. When the Euromaidan revolution removed Russian-backed Yanukovich, pro-Russian individuals in eastern Ukraine who supported Yanukovich felt threatened socially and economically. This increased their willingness to join the separatist movement. Gentile’s survey data indicates that the economically disadvantaged in Luhansk were already more supportive of Russia in 2013 before the Euromaidan revolution.<sup>27</sup> The revolution likely galvanized these opinions and influenced the rebels to take up arms. If the United States were to intervene, it would be important to understand that some rebels joined the movement because of economic and political motivations. This has significant implications if the United States were to conduct counterinsurgency in the region as it could attempt to “buy off” economically motivated rebels.

Russia’s support for rebels in Donbass highlights another critical factor that influenced individuals in the region to fight. Roger Petersen has devised a framework to analyze the factors that create movement among individuals along the spectrum of rebellion.<sup>28</sup> Petersen’s spectrum ranges from -3, joining the regime’s military force to +3, joining an active insurgent or rebel group; a zero on the spectrum represents neutrality.<sup>29</sup> Petersen notes that a major factor that motivates an individual to move along the positive side of the spectrum is the individual’s risk threshold. The concept of “safety in numbers” holds that an individual’s risk threshold decreases as more and more people join the movement.<sup>30</sup> When Russia’s little green men began appearing in Donbass, they lowered the risk threshold of those who may have not otherwise joined the rebellion.

Petersen also theorizes that different groups will have higher or lower thresholds to rebel. For example, youth groups or social-patriotic groups likely have a lower threshold to rebel than economic groups.<sup>31</sup> It is difficult to know the exact makeup of different communities within the Donbass region because such data are difficult to obtain through English-language open source materials. Nevertheless, Gentile’s 2013 survey of geopolitical attitudes in Luhansk does indicate that only 20.9 percent of residents favored orientation toward the West, either through EU or NATO membership. The remaining 79.1 percent either favored no movement toward the EU or NATO (43.3 percent) or did not know the best course for Ukraine to take (35.8 percent).<sup>32</sup> This indicates that many civilians in the area were either leaning toward Russia or neutral when the

<sup>25</sup> Michael Gentile, “West Oriented in the East-oriented Donbas: a Political nStratigraphy of Geopolitical Identity in Luhansk, Ukraine,,” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 31,1 no.3 (2015):. 205.

<sup>26</sup> Gentile, “West Oriented2015,” 211.

<sup>27</sup> Gentile, “West Oriented,” Ibid. 213.

<sup>28</sup> Roger Petersen, *Resistance and Rebellion: Lessons from Eastern Europe* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>29</sup> Peterson, *Resistance*, Ibid. 8-9.

<sup>30</sup> Peterson, *Resistance*, Ibid. 23.

<sup>31</sup> Peterson, *Resistance*, Ibid. 48-49.

<sup>32</sup> Gentile, “West Oriented2015,” 211. 1

conflict began. This helps to explain why many people shifted into rebellion once it became clear that Russia would support the separatist movement. With that said, the Ukrainian government's weak capacity to quell the uprising also likely lowered the risk threshold for individuals who chose to join the rebellion.

Furthermore, Russian propaganda likely played an important role in an individual's decision to rebel. Petersen notes that strong communities help incite and sustain rebellion by "producing accessible information, reducing communication costs, and facilitating recruitment."<sup>33</sup> While the communities in Donbass seemed to have relatively strong connections before the rebellion broke out, Russian misinformation no doubt helped unite and rally these communities to action.<sup>34</sup> The Russian propaganda apparatus thereby bolstered and complimented the existing community connections among those willing to rebel in Donbass. If the United States chooses to intervene, it must be aware of Russia's significant ability to produce propaganda and should take steps to counter or mitigate Moscow's misinformation apparatus.

Another critical factor in the conflict is the potential for spoilers within the DPR and LPR if new negotiations are opened between the parties. Both the Ukrainian government and the separatists have violated the Minsk ceasefire arrangements, though the rebels have violated the ceasefire with much higher frequency and intensity than the Ukrainian government.<sup>35</sup> There is reason to believe that the rebels would also have incentives to spoil any future ceasefire. As discussed above, both the DPR and LPR are fragmented. The elections held in November 2018 sought to give legitimacy to Moscow's appointed leadership and show unity among the ranks.<sup>36</sup> Even so, divisions remain. Moreover, Wendy Pearlman notes that the leaders of groups who negotiate traditionally have the most to gain from those negotiations, whether it be to consolidate power or to gain concessions from other parties.<sup>37</sup> However, secondary leaders of the DPR and LPR might have more to gain by continuing to fight. This internal fragmentation, displayed by the coup attempts and assassinations, might prove difficult to manage if the conflict ends in a negotiated settlement. For this reason, it will be difficult for these groups to make credible promises in negotiations.<sup>38</sup> Even if a new settlement is agreed to by the leaders of both people's republics, it is unclear if all of their cadres would fall in line to uphold the agreement. Russia does exert a considerable amount of control over the groups, but one could easily imagine a situation where Russia would allow spoilers to continue to engage in conflict in order to prolong the fight or to obtain more concessions from Ukraine or the international community.

Relatedly, the fractionalization of the DPR and LPR highlights a potential area of weakness in their ability to successfully leverage Russian support in the long term. Paul Staniland argues that rebel groups are much more likely to make effective use of a sponsor's resources if they are built upon strong pre-existing social networks.<sup>39</sup> While the rebel groups are

<sup>33</sup> Petersen, *Resistance* 2001, 15-16.

<sup>34</sup> Jill Dougherty, "Everyone Lies: The Ukraine Conflict and Russia's Mmedia Transformation," *Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy*, Discussion Paper series #D-88, July 2014, <https://shorensteincenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/d88-dougherty.pdf>.

<sup>35</sup> Herbst, "Russia, Not Ukraine." 2017

<sup>36</sup> Kertysova, "November Elections." 2018

<sup>37</sup> Wendy Pearlman, "Spoiling Inside and Out: Internal Political Contestation and the Middle East Peace Process," *International Security* 33, no. 3 (2009): 85

<sup>38</sup> Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, "Actor Fragmentation and Conflict Processes," *Project on Middle East Political Science*, August 2013, <https://pomeps.org/2014/02/12/actor-fragmentation-and-conflict-processes/>.

<sup>39</sup> Paul Staniland, "Organizing Insurgency: Networks, Resources and Rebellion in South Asia," *International Security*. 37, no. 1, (July 2012): 142.

united by their Russian ethnicity and their separatist ideology, it does not appear that they are making use of such strong, pre-existing social networks. They have formed quasi government structures, but evidence suggests that some lower-level separatist leaders are motivated primarily by personal economic and political gain rather than fealty to an overarching structure.<sup>40</sup> The separatists in Donbass had strong enough community connections to instigate rebellion with Russian help, but it is unclear that these connections are strong enough to endure. While the DPR and LPR have made good use of Russian resources to date, this is largely because of the direct involvement and strong supervision of Russian personnel, even if these troops are not formally deployed. For instance, after the assassination of Alexander Zakharchenko, the head of the DPR, Zakharchenko's deputy immediately assumed power. However, Russia hastily intervened and ordered the DPR's parliament to install a new leader, Denis Pushilin, who then fired five ministers.<sup>41</sup> This was widely seen as Moscow cleaning house in the DPR. For now, Russia is exerting clear control over the leadership of the people's republics. If this direct influence wanes, however, it is unlikely that the DPR or the LPR are built upon a strong enough social foundation to maintain effective use of Russia's resources. This is one area that the United States could exploit if it is able to strike a deal with Russia that would limit its overt influence over the rebel groups.

### **Conceptualizing and Measuring Success**

The primary goal for any US intervention is to avoid an escalation with Russia, its premier nuclear-armed rival. The United States has several interests in Ukraine. These include strategic alignment against Russia, reinforcing NATO relevance, stemming refugee flows into the rest of Europe, and upholding international law and norms. None of these interests, however, is worth risking a larger war against Russia. Of course, any US intervention in Ukraine would sour US-Russian relations. But there is, at least in theory, a middle ground that the United States can strike that will increase the costs of the war for Russia to the point where it no longer sees value in continuing to support the rebel cause.

A second goal of a US intervention is a return of Ukrainian territory to the status quo antebellum. This would advance the US interest of maintaining the sovereignty of Ukraine and upholding international law. The success of this goal could be achieved either through a negotiated settlement or through a total victory of the Ukrainian government. The former is more realistic and less costly than the latter.<sup>42</sup> The success of a negotiated settlement would be measured by the terms of the agreement. The most important factor is the restoration of the full Donbass region to Ukrainian control. The success of the agreement would also be measured by the number of ceasefire violations. The Minsk agreements are viewed primarily as failures because violations are rampant and are met with impunity. A new negotiated settlement would likely need a third-party guarantor to enforce it and raise the costs of violation for either side.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Mansur Mirovalev, "Russia-Backed Separatists in Ukraine in Disarray Amid Fighting and Violence," *Los Angeles Times*, October 1, 2018, <https://www.latimes.com/world/europe/la-fg-ukraine-separatists-20181001-story.html>.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Brass, "Military Options Brass, 2017," 13.

<sup>43</sup> Barbara F. Walter, "The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement," *International Organization* 51, no. 3 (July 1997).

The third primary goal of a US intervention would be to dissuade Putin from future attempts to expand Russia's territory and influence into Europe. This was part of the rationale given by the Obama administration when it first placed sanctions on Russia after the annexation of Crimea.<sup>44</sup> Putin's actions in Ukraine are a clear violation of international law and, because of nearby NATO countries, the United States has a significant interest in containing Russian aggression in the region. Success of this goal would be measured by Russia withdrawing its troops from Donbass and refraining from further territorial advances either in Ukraine or other countries, such as Moldova or Georgia. International commitments from Russia to refrain from further action in the region would be welcome, but as Putin has made clear, Russia has few qualms with disregarding international law. Therefore, Russia's actions, or more specifically the lack thereof, would be the primary indicator of success for this goal.

It is important to note that the United States need not enter into the theater with the goal of defeating the insurgency. Rather, the primary strategy should be to raise the costs for the rebels and for Russia in order to bring about a negotiated settlement that maintains the territorial sovereignty of Ukraine. The presence of US troops in Donbass should raise the risk for Russia. Like the United States, Russia clearly does not want a broader hot conflict with its Cold War rival. Therefore, Russia is unlikely to order an unprovoked attack on US personnel. The presence of US troops raises the stakes for Vladimir Putin and, if successful, would drive him to the negotiating table, this time with a real commitment to de-escalation. An intermediate indicator of success in this area would be if Russia was pressured into formally deploying uniformed troops rather than "volunteers." This would make it easier for US and Ukrainian personnel to distinguish between Russian soldiers and separatists.

Furthermore, while some US policymakers may be tempted to pursue a strategy that results in the partition of Ukraine, this would be an ineffective strategy and would only achieve the first of the three US goals. One flaw of this strategy is that the Donbass region is not homogenous. The Luhansk survey data outlined above highlight that there are a fairly significant number of Ukrainians living in the region that support Ukraine's reorientation toward the West.<sup>45</sup> These people would likely be treated as second-class citizens or worse under a partitioned Donbass. Indeed, according to Sambanis, ethnic partition does not significantly decrease the potential for lower-level residual ethnic violence.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, ethnic Russians and pro-Russian Ukrainians still maintain a significant presence throughout the rest of the country other than within the far-West.<sup>47</sup> Partition would therefore not solve the broader problem of the east-west division within Ukraine. Moreover, partition would be viewed as a success by Russia. This would do little to dissuade Putin from taking further action on behalf of ethnic Russians living in Ukraine or other former Soviet territories, such as Georgia or Moldova.

All three US goals, avoiding a broader conflict with Russia, restoring Ukraine's territory, and preventing further Russian encroachment, will prove difficult, if not unrealistic. If the United States wishes to pursue these goals through a military intervention, it will have to tread carefully.

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<sup>44</sup> Rachel Gosnell, "The Obama Administration and the Crimea Crisis," *University of Maryland Public Policy Review*, 2, no. 1 (May 2018): 61.

<sup>45</sup> Gentile, "West Oriented," 2015, 211.

<sup>46</sup> Nicholas Sambanis, "Partition as a Solution to Ethnic War: An Empirical Critique of the Theoretical Literature," *World Politics*, 52, no. 4 (2000): 474.

<sup>47</sup> David R. Marples, "Ethnic and Social Composition of Ukraine's Regions and Voting Patterns," *E-International Relations*, March 10, 2015, . <https://www.e-ir.info/2015/03/10/ethnic-and-social-composition-of-ukraines-regions-and-voting-patterns/>.

Though Russia also wants to avoid a broader war, it may view any US troop presence near its border as a threat worthy of escalation. Furthermore, returning the Donbass region to Ukraine leaves it with much of the same problem it had before the conflict: a country deeply divided. Kiev would need to invest heavily in the reintegration of former separatists and their supporters into Ukrainian society. Finally, Russia's interests in maintaining influence in its near abroad are widespread, and it is unclear just how much US intervention in Ukraine would change Putin's future calculus when deciding whether or not to spark and support pro-Russian rebellions in the region.

### **Assessing Current and Potential US Strategy**

This section will evaluate the strategy and the success of what the United States has done thus far in Ukraine. It will also assess potential intervention strategies for achieving the goals outlined above. This analysis concludes that if the United States were to intervene, it should do so with a relatively limited number of special operations troops supported by a small quick reaction force. The total number of troops should not exceed 10,000. However, given the potential risks and consequences of an intervention, the United States should approach any intervention with caution.

#### *Former and Current US Strategy*

Immediately following the Russian annexation of Crimea and intervention in Donbass, the United States, along with its European allies, imposed sanctions on Russia. These sanctions were targeted at high-level Putin associates and had two express objectives: first, punishing Putin's administration for its violation of Ukrainian sovereignty and second, dissuading Putin from attempting to take more territory in Ukraine.<sup>48</sup> This aligns directly with the third goal and indirectly with the second goal described above. The sanctions have been somewhat successful in their goal of weakening the Russian economy, though it is difficult to separate out the effect of sanctions from the broader stagnation of the Russian economy due to the reduction of global oil prices.<sup>49</sup> There is still debate among scholars and policymakers over whether sanctions have achieved their goals. Some contend that the sanctions have dissuaded Russia from taking even further action in Ukraine and have reduced the Russian public's support for Putin's actions.<sup>50</sup> Others cite Russia's continued presence in Ukraine, its use of a nerve agent in an attempted assassination in the United Kingdom, and its disruption in the 2016 US elections as evidence that Russia is undeterred by the threat of sanctions.<sup>51</sup> At best, the sanctions receive a passing grade on dissuading Putin from further Ukrainian aggression, but they have failed to persuade Putin to cease intervention in Ukraine and therefore they have not achieved the US objective of restoring Ukraine's territory.

The United States also initially provided Ukraine with non-lethal aid and then sent a small training contingent to western Ukraine.<sup>52</sup> In an additional show of force and support for Ukraine, the United States took part in a multinational military exercise in Ukraine days before a

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<sup>48</sup> Gosnell, "Obama Administration," 2018, 62-63.

<sup>49</sup> Gosnell, "Obama Administration," Ibid. 68.

<sup>50</sup> Nigel Gould-Davies, "Sanctions on Russia Are Working," *Foreign Affairs*, August 22, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2018-08-22/sanctions-russia-are-working>.

<sup>51</sup> Andrew Chatzky, "Have Sanctions on Russia Changed Putin's Calculus?" *Council on Foreign Relations*, May 2, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/article/have-sanctions-russia-changed-putins-calculus>.

<sup>52</sup> Peleschuk, "American Tax Dollars," 2015.

similar Russian military exercise in the region.<sup>53</sup> While the aid and training were no doubt helpful to Ukraine, it is not clear that this was designed to achieve any broader US objective other than avoiding the collapse of Kiev if the rebels were to advance. Without US arms or personnel, a total victory for Ukraine would be highly unlikely. With that said, the United States was able to provide this aid without causing Russia to escalate the conflict. While Putin expressed disapproval of US trainers and non-military aid, it did not cause him to significantly increase aggression in Donbass. This suggests that Russia, while wary of American action in the region, will allow some limited intervention without resorting to military escalation.

Under President Trump, the United States has stepped up military aid to Ukraine, including anti-tank weapons.<sup>54</sup> The United States is also considering supplying naval weapons to Ukraine to help it respond to incidents such as Russia's incursion on Ukrainian naval vessels in the Kerch Strait in November of 2018.<sup>55</sup> This approach aligns slightly more with US goals as it gives Ukraine the ability to make advances in Donbass if what is left of the Minsk ceasefire breaks down.<sup>56</sup> This would give Ukraine a better opportunity to secure its own territory without a US intervention. It is therefore in support of the United States' second goal of restoring Ukrainian territory. Nonetheless, Ukraine's ability to win the war on its own remains doubtful because Russia has a near endless capacity to supply more personnel and weapons to the theater to counter any Ukrainian advances. Unless the United States joins the conflict more directly to provide a counterbalance to Russia, the power asymmetry between Russia and Ukraine will remain.

#### Potential US Strategies

There are several intervention options available to US policymakers that better serve US objectives compared to current policy. These options include an air campaign, a full-scale intervention, and a limited special operations intervention. As will be discussed, the full-scale intervention could take the form of either a peace enforcement operation or a counterinsurgency operation. It should also be noted that any of these strategies could be carried out multilaterally, or unilaterally by the United States. Because of Russia's assured veto on the UN Security Council, if the United States leads multilaterally, it will almost certainly do so as a NATO operation or as a "coalition of the willing." In either case, however, the United States would likely bear the brunt of the military operation.

Potentially the most politically attractive option is to initiate a bombing campaign similar to the one used in Kosovo. An aerial intervention would be considerably less dangerous for US personnel than a ground invasion. Moreover, the US could use Ukrainian or nearby NATO airbases to launch operations, reducing the need to place aircraft carriers in an area dominated by the Russian Navy. If the United States could establish air dominance, it could easily provide cover for Ukrainian forces on the ground to advance into Donbass and beat back the rebels to either secure victory or drive them to the negotiating table. This would clearly service the United States' second goal of restoring Ukrainian territory. Underneath these rosy hypotheticals, however, lies the unfortunate truth that a US air campaign would be ineffective and would likely

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<sup>53</sup> Ryan Browne, "US Troops Take Part in Ukrainian Military Exercise Before Russian War Game," *CNN*, September 11, 2017, . <https://www.cnn.com/2017/09/11/politics/us-troops-ukraine-nato/index.html>.

<sup>54</sup> Ted Galen Carpenter, "Washington Quietly Increases Lethal Weapons to Ukraine." *Cato Institute*, September 10, 2018, . <https://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/washington-quietly-increases-lethal-weapons-ukraine>.

<sup>55</sup> Rebecca Kheel, "US Considering Providing More Weapons for Ukraine, General Says," *The Hill*, March 5, 2019, . <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/432659-general-us-considering-more-weapons-for-ukraine>.

<sup>56</sup> Brass, "Military Options," 2017, 13.

incite Russian escalation with little payoff. Russia has supplied the rebels with significant air defenses that have shot down several Ukrainian Air Force jets since the start of the conflict. In addition, either the Russian military or pro-Russian rebels infamously used Russian equipment to shoot down Malaysian Airlines flight 17 in July 2014. This is significant because the airliner was flying at high altitude, indicating that the rebels or their Russian sponsors would be able to defend against a high-altitude bombing campaign like the one carried out by NATO in Kosovo. Moreover, in Kosovo, NATO also targeted critical nodes in Belgrade to increase the cost of the war for Serbia.<sup>57</sup> It would be impossible for the United States to carry out such bombings in Russia, even against supply lines into Donbass, without seriously escalating the conflict with Russia. As such, a purely aerial intervention is not likely to achieve success and carries an unacceptable risk of violating the primary goal of avoiding a broader conflict with Russia.

Another strategy the United States could adopt would be to send in a full-scale intervention of ground troops. These troops could either be used as a peace enforcement contingent to enforce the Minsk agreements or to conduct counterinsurgency operations. With regard to peace enforcement, monitors have been deployed to the conflict zone since fighting broke out. In 2014, the Operation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) deployed an unarmed Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) to observe and deescalate the conflict.<sup>58</sup> By not arming the monitors, the OSCE sought to increase legitimacy and impartiality as the monitors would not engage on behalf of either side. The decision was also prerequisite condition put forth by Russia before it approved the mission. By not arming the SMM, however, the OSCE limited any power that the monitors would have had to deescalate the violence. This has also made the mission vulnerable to attacks and harassment.

The United States should avoid this impartial approach. Given the United States' past support of the Ukrainian government and its denunciation of Russian aggression, any force the United States sends to Ukraine cannot be seen as impartial, even if it is truly there to enforce peace. Richard Betts argues that impartial interventions prolong wars and erode the long-term legitimacy of peacekeeping operations.<sup>59</sup> In this vein, the United States could enforce the Minsk agreements by providing overwhelming support to the Ukrainian government such that any attempt by the rebels to violate the agreement would be met with significant force. The presence of US forces would increase the costs to both the separatists and their Russian backers. When the costs to these actors outweigh the benefits of continuing the conflict, additional negotiations could take place that would help the United States achieve its goal of restoring Ukraine's territory. The United States could then remain in the region as a committed third-party guarantor to oversee and enforce the terms of the agreement.<sup>60</sup> The strong US show of force would likely deter Russia from future aggression in the region, thereby achieving the United States' third objective.

Alternatively, the United States could use a full-scale ground intervention to conduct counterinsurgency operations. Survey data indicate that prior to the war, there were pockets of individuals who maintained pro-Western sentiments. The survey notes that these people were largely younger, more educated, more socio-economically advantaged, and lived closer to city centers. Surely some of these individuals have fled or been killed in the years of fighting that

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<sup>57</sup> Barry Posen, "The War for Kosovo: Serbia's Political-Military Strategy," *International Security* 24, no. 4 (2000).

<sup>58</sup> Hopmann, "Introduction2017," 3.

<sup>59</sup> Richard Betts, "The Delusion of Impartial Intervention," *Foreign Affairs*, 1994, .  
<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/libya/2011-03-19/delusion-impartial-intervention>.

<sup>60</sup> Walter, "Critical Barrier."1997.

have passed, but some likely remain. If US forces can find and protect these individuals who hold pro-regime values, they may be able to win back some of the “hearts and minds” in Donbass. US troops could thereby leverage civilians living in the region who are at a zero on Petersen’s continuum of rebellion and pull them into -1 or -2 in support of the regime as US counterinsurgency forces did in Iraq during the surge.<sup>61</sup>

It should also be noted that many of the United States’ most recent interventions involved either regime change or support of anti-regime rebels. This includes Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, and Kosovo to name a few. If the United States were to intervene in Ukraine it would be on behalf of the government against a hybrid insurgency. This presents unique challenges but also opportunities in that the United States will not be responsible for rebuilding government and democracy from scratch. The government in Kiev is far from perfect but Ukraine does have a semi-functioning democracy and moderately strong civic and social institutions. This means that the United States will not have to build the government from the ground up as was the case in Iraq and Afghanistan. Therefore, counterinsurgency operations might have a better chance of success.

With that said, if the United States were to engage in an intervention with ground forces, it is important to understand the personnel resources that would be required to achieve its objectives. To effectively conduct stability operations in eastern Ukraine where there is an active insurgency, the United States would need at least 10 troops per 1,000 residents.<sup>62</sup> Exact population numbers for the Donbass regions are not currently known. The last official Ukrainian government census was carried out in 2001 and indicates that close to 7.4 million people lived in Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts. A New York Times estimate put the combined population of the region just prior to the war at roughly 4.5 million.<sup>63</sup> It is unknown how many people have fled the region and how many Russian “volunteers” have come across the border to take their place, but a conservative estimate is that roughly two-thirds of the population still resides in the separatist-controlled region. That would mean that close to 3 million people still live in the area, some of whom are in active rebellion. If the United States adheres to Quinlivan’s recommended force estimate of 10 troops per 1,000 residents, it would require close to 30,000 troops. Given current US troop commitments, a deployment of that size is not outside the realm of possibility, but it is highly unlikely that the president could achieve, let alone sustain, domestic support for such a large deployment.

Moreover, deploying 30,000 US troops to the Russian border, even for an ostensible peace enforcement operation, would almost certainly cause Russia to escalate the conflict. This would again violate the first and most critical US objective. A key aspect of potential Russian escalation in this scenario is that Russia can deploy forces much faster than the United States can, even with access to NATO bases throughout Europe. Russia’s capacity for rapid escalation must give US policymakers cause for concern before deploying a large contingent of US forces. If Russia sends more troops into Ukraine to counter US forces, the United States will have to either withdraw or deploy more troops to the theater. This will invoke a classic security dilemma between Russia and the United States that, given the proximity between the two forces in Eastern Ukraine, is likely to erupt into a more widespread conflict.

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<sup>61</sup> Roger Petersen and Jonathan Lindsay, “Varieties of Counterinsurgency: A Case Study of Iraq, 2003-2009,” in CIWAG Symposium, Naval War College (Center for Irregular Warfare/Armed Groups 2011).

<sup>62</sup> J.T. Quinlivan, “Force Requirements in Stability Operations,” *Parameters* 25 (1995): 63.

<sup>63</sup> Andrew Kramer, “Ukraine to Freeze Payments in Separatist Areas,” *New York Times*, November 5, 2014, [https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/06/world/europe/ukraine-to-freeze-payments-in-separatist-areas.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/06/world/europe/ukraine-to-freeze-payments-in-separatist-areas.html?_r=0)

A third option available to US policymakers is to send a limited special operations force that would act in support of the Ukrainian government and go after high-value separatist targets. Scholars have argued that the United States should take a similar approach to Afghanistan. They contend that the United States has the ability to conduct counterterrorism operations from Kabul at a significantly lower cost and troop level than what it takes to occupy the country. The authors argue for a smaller contingency of special operations of troops supported by a relatively small quick reaction force.<sup>64</sup> This model could be applied to Ukraine. The total number of troops required to carry out this intervention would be roughly 8,000-10,000— a third of the forces required to carry out a broader counterinsurgency campaign. US special forces could be based in Kiev and even potentially have forward operating positions in cities like Mariupol that are close to the front line but still under government control. This limited intervention approach would also likely have broader support among the American public as opposed to a large-scale deployment of US troops.

If US forces committed to only targeting separatist leaders and avoided confrontation with Russian soldiers wherever possible, Russia might allow this intervention without significant escalation beyond words of discontent by Putin and the Russian foreign ministry. This intervention would thereby achieve the first US objective. As discussed above, this type of intervention might have the added benefit of forcing Russia to formally deploy troops with Russian uniforms to distinguish them from rebels. Moreover, US special forces operations against the rebels, combined with additional weapons and training for the Ukrainian government, has at least a moderate chance of defeating the insurgency over time and restoring Donbass to Ukraine. This may fail if Russia decides to escalate the conflict, as a small contingent of special operations troops will not be equipped to partake in an interstate war between Ukraine and Russia. Nevertheless, it is doubtful that Russia has a strong enough interest in Donbass to wage a more intense war over it. Furthermore, deploying US troops, even a small contingent, will likely still be enough to show Russia that the United States is resolved to oppose Russian violations of sovereignty and international law. This may dissuade Russia from carrying out continued aggression in Ukraine and the broader region, thereby achieving the third US objective.

The above analysis indicates that, of the three options outlined, the special operations intervention is the most likely to achieve the goals of the United States. With that said, US policymakers should still carefully weigh the potential risks of intervention against the benefits and the strategic interests of the United States. Even in the special operations scenario, the success of the intervention is uncertain, and the risk of Russian escalation prevails. This analysis is not an endorsement of intervention, but rather an assessment of the options available to policymakers.

## Conclusion

The actions that the United States has taken since Ukrainian conflict began in 2014 have only partially been in line with their broader strategic objectives. This is reasonable, given the overriding concern of avoiding escalation with Russia. Nevertheless, it is important for US policymakers to consider potential interventions and evaluate them based on their political and military feasibility as well as their likelihood to achieve success. This is true of all potential interventions. In particular, the United States should consider the limitations of airpower. A rebel

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<sup>64</sup> Joshua Rovner and Austin Long, “““Dominos on the Durand Line?”” Overcoming Strategic Myths in Afghanistan and Pakistan,” *CATO Policy Analysis*, No. 92 (2011): 8.

group or a state that has access to moderate air-defense capabilities will severely hinder US airpower. Furthermore, this analysis highlights the potential pitfalls of a full-scale ground intervention, both in terms of winning domestic support and also in terms of escalating the conflict. The United States should only conduct full-scale interventions when it has clearly defined interests, achievable goals, and sustainable domestic support.

The conflict in Ukraine also has broader implications for NATO. If a US intervention successfully restores Ukraine's territory, it is likely that Ukraine would take steps to become a member of NATO. This might create tension within the organization as new members must be invited on the basis of consensus among all existing members. Some countries might be unwilling to allow Ukraine into the alliance for fear of provoking Russia. If, on the other hand, Ukraine does eventually gain NATO membership, this will certainly draw ire from Russia. Such an arrangement positions an implicitly rival security organization on Russia's doorstep. Russia would likely perceive this both as a security threat and as an insult to its national pride. This might lead Russia to attempt to more covertly incite insurrection in eastern Ukraine to further test the will of the alliance.

The conflict in Ukraine also has several implications for other conflicts around the world. For example, in 2014, both the United States and Russia stepped up their interventions in Syria. Some believed that the United States needed to take a firmer stance in Ukraine to dissuade Russia from fully throwing its weight behind the Assad regime. The Obama administration seemed to follow the logic that it was better not to rile Putin to maintain stable relations with Russia to coordinate actions against the Islamic State. It remains uncertain how integrated these two conflicts are. Both Russia and the United States have discrete interests and motivations for the actions they are taking in Syria and Ukraine. It is therefore not clear that escalation in one country would immediately cause escalation in the other. With that said, however, any US intervention in Ukraine, regardless of whether it leads to military escalation with Russia, will undoubtedly further strain US-Russian relations. There are a host of other global issues that affect the interests of both countries, including climate change, potentially negotiating a new arms control treaty with China, and possibly reconfiguring the Iran nuclear deal. If the United States intervenes in Ukraine, any progress that the United States and Russia might make on these issues will be severely hindered. US policymakers should also consider these implications before deciding to intervene in the conflict.

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