

Trend Analysis and Assessment Report

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Report Topic: Short-Term Assessment of the Russo-Ukraine War

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Russo-Ukraine War may soon see a Russian escalation

Key Takeaway

Recent events in Ukraine have seen large swathes of Eastern Ukraine retaken by the Armed Forces of Ukraine (ZSU) from the Russian Armed Forces. Elements of the ZSU have advanced on Kherson in southeastern Ukraine, while actions in the northeastern Kharkiv Oblast have seen Ukrainian troops advance as far as the Oskil River and even restore portions of the pre-hostilities Russia-Ukraine border. Russian forces have appeared to be in disarray and demoralized. These events have resulted in domestic turmoil in Russia and increasingly aggressive statements from Russian President Vladimir Putin regarding the potential use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine and increased anti-Western rhetoric. As the ZSU counteroffensive continues to make gains, it is likely Russian President Vladimir Putin will attempt to distract from political turmoil at home by escalating the war in Ukraine. The use of tactical nuclear weapons is unlikely, but the option remains.

Trend Pattern

Recent events suggest that Russian forces are on the back foot in Eastern Ukraine and potentially on the verge of collapse.

- From September 6 to September 11, Ukrainian forces launched a counteroffensive near the Ukrainian city of Kharkiv and in the southeast near Kherson. On September 7, Ukrainian forces attacked the town of Balakliia in the Kharkiv region— at the time occupied by Russian forces. This enabled elements of the ZSU to retake the town of Izyum, a key Russian supply hub. These events occurred at the same time that a Ukrainian senior presidential advisor claimed that a Ukrainian counteroffensive was occurring in eastern, north-eastern, and southern Ukraine [01].
- The region of northern Luhansk was previously occupied by Russian forces and was a strategic land port for Russian supplies. The counteroffensive in Kharkiv has seen Russian troops retreating back to Russian occupied territory near their eastern front in Donetsk. According to Western sources, large quantities of Russian troops have been seen crossing over the Russia-Ukraine border [02]. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky noted that approximately 3,088 square miles of territory in the northeast and south were liberated by Ukrainian forces. President Zelensky described these gains as a success and estimated that nearly half of these regions would require stabilization efforts [03]. Russian forces have established a new line on the Oskil River.
- On September 21, Russian President Vladimir Putin threatened the use of “all the means at their disposal” to protect Russia if the territorial integrity of the country was threatened by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) [04]. President Putin cited numerous statements from senior representatives of NATO countries, about the permissibility of using nuclear weapons, as “nuclear blackmail”. President Putin has also stated that in some cases Russian nuclear weapons are “more modern than those of NATO countries” and mentioned that his statement was “not a bluff”. A number of Western leaders quickly condemned the threats made by President Putin, with NATO secretary general Jens Stoltenberg calling them “dangerous and reckless” [05].

As Russian forces give way to Ukrainian advances, events suggest that Russian President Vladimir Putin is willing to escalate the war in Ukraine and utilize Russian energy as a weapon against the West. NATO is unlikely to give way to Russian threats.

- On September 14, the Kremlin said that Ukraine's ambition to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) poses a threat to Russia's security. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that the notion of Ukraine joining NATO is Russia's "main threat" and reiterated the urgency for Russia to safeguard its own security and national interest [06].
- On September 21, Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the first mobilization of troops since World War II, with the end goal being the addition of 300,000 troops to the Russian Armed Forces. The mobilization was only a partial one and would only call up individuals with prior, relevant military experience [07]. President Putin also announced the annexation by Russia of the Ukrainian Oblasts of Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson [08]. The mobilization announcement was followed by limited protests in major Russian cities.
- On September 27, underwater explosions were picked up by Danish and Swedish authorities. Upon investigation, two undersea leaks were discovered in pipelines delivering natural energy from Russia to the European Union (EU), one each in the Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines. Western powers accused Russia of sabotaging the pipelines, claims which Russia denied [09].

Assessment

Ukrainian forces are almost certainly going to continue to put pressure on the faltering Russian positions in Eastern Ukraine. Ukraine desires to fully repel the invading Russians from Ukrainian territory but lack the manpower and equipment to do so. Russian forces are in disarray from their withdrawal from their positions around Kherson to the new defensive line on the Oskil River. The news of the partial mobilization and the arrival of new recruits may bolster the morale of Russian forces in Eastern Ukraine, but this remains to be seen. The Oskil River provides a natural defensive barrier and the delay in fighting will allow both the ZSU and Russian troops to recuperate and reorganize for future fighting. The West is likely to continue to place political and economic pressure on Russia, and Russia is almost certainly going to resist and utilize its energy reserves against Europe as winter approaches.

We assess that the Russo-Ukrainian War is likely to continue as a stalemate, with neither Ukraine nor Russia able to fully achieve breakthrough against each other's line. We also assess that President Putin is highly unlikely to give in to Western and internal pressure to abandon the war and is highly likely to escalate the war via conventional methods and by placing economic pressure on the West, although he is unlikely to do so via nuclear weapons.

Broader Implications

Russian President Vladimir Putin's threat to utilize nuclear weapons is alarming. This is not the first time President Putin has threatened to use Russia's nuclear arsenal. His phrasing, however, has changed. President Putin's declaration that he would use "any means necessary" to defend Russian territorial integrity is different from Russia's national nuclear strategy, which states that nuclear weapons may only be used in a conventional war in which Russia's very survival is at stake.

Ukraine greatly desires to liberate its eastern regions but is unable to do so without Western help. Western weapons and supplies have been crucial in Ukraine's eastern push, but President Putin's declaration, combined with the annexation of portions of Eastern Ukraine, may alarm Western powers enough to slow down their supply of materiel to Ukraine. Additionally, the usage of energy as a weapon by Russia comes as the cold European winter—the time when Europe's energy needs are greatest—approaches.

Indicators

We will be watching for a change in the status of Russian nuclear forces that may indicate an imminent nuclear attack on Ukraine. Any change could be an indicator, or a bluff by Russian President Vladimir Putin, so a close watch must be kept. Additionally, the presence of newly mobilized Russian troops to Eastern Ukraine may indicate a new Russian offensive and a new phase of the war.

Sources

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