

## As the war in Ukraine grinds on, both sides thinking about how and when it will end



UK Ministry of Defence update of Russian-controlled and contested areas as of May 25

On Feb. 24, after formally recognizing and signing treaties of friendship, cooperation and mutual assistance with the “People’s Republics” created by pro-Russian separatists in portions of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of eastern Ukraine after Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, President Vladimir Putin announced a “special military operation” in eastern Ukraine to protect the people who “have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kiev regime.” The “special military operation” was in fact a full-fledged, multi-pronged invasion of Ukraine from Belarus in the north, Crimea in the south and Russian territory adjacent to eastern and northeastern Ukraine, accompanied by intensive attacks by artillery and missiles on many cities throughout the country. Initially focused not only on eastern Ukraine but also on the Kyiv region, the territory between Kyiv and Kharkiv, and southern Ukraine adjacent to Crimea, in late March, after the attack in the Kyiv region had stalled in the face of strong resistance, Russia shifted the focus of its “special military operation” to eastern Ukraine and proclaimed as its main objective the “liberation” of the Donbas.

Three months after the “special military operation” began and two months after its focus shifted to eastern Ukraine, the war continues in a grinding battle for Severodonetsk, Lysychansk, Slovyansk, Kramatorsk and other cities in the pocket of territory between Izium and Donetsk, and for large stretches of territory between Donetsk and Zaporizhzhia and between Kherson, Mykolaiv and the area north of Nova Kakhovka. As the map issued today by the UK Ministry of Defence of the territories controlled and contested by the two sides indicates, with the completion of its takeover of Mariupol last week, Russia now controls a substantial portion of

the Luhansk and Donetsk regions as well as a wide “land bridge” from the Donbas to Crimea. Last Friday, speaking to his ministry’s board, Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu said the “liberation” of the Luhansk People’s Republic is nearing completion: “Groups of Russian Armed Forces, together with People’s Militias of Lugansk and Donetsk People’s Republic continue expanding their control over Donbass territories. Liberation of Lugansk People’s Republic is nearing its end.” In yesterday’s intelligence update, the UK Ministry of Defence noted that “Russia has increased the intensity of its operations in the Donbas as it seeks to encircle Severodonetsk, Lysychansk, and Rubizhne.... Russia’s capture of the Severodonetsk pocket would see the whole of Luhansk Oblast placed under Russian occupation.”

The war obviously is not over and Russia continues to face strong resistance to its effort to take the cities and territory in the pocket between Izium and Donetsk as well as the other areas that are currently contested. But it’s highly unlikely that Ukraine will claw back significant portions of the territory in eastern and southern Ukraine that Russia now controls and, recognizing that reality, both sides have begun to think and speak, albeit very generally and not yet with each other, about how and when the war will end. Putin has made it clear that the effort to “liberate” the Donbas applies to the entire Donbas, meaning all of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions, rather than just the 35-40 percent of those two regions that was controlled, prior to Feb. 24, by the two “People’s Republics.” It’s quite likely that, if and when Russia takes control of all of the territory of those two regions, it will add the newly-acquired territory to the two existing statelets. It may even, with or without the prelude of a prior affirming referendum, annex both of the enlarged statelets. Whether it will create similar statelets from the other territory it now controls in eastern and southern Ukraine, and perhaps even annex one or more of them, is uncertain. But it seems quite likely that it will pursue one of those options in order to secure a substantial land bridge to Crimea. There is some reason to think it will, as well, pursue one of those options in regard to some of the territory west of Crimea. On May 11, Kirill Stremousov, a Ukrainian the Russian forces installed as the deputy head of the Kherson regional government, said that, rather than holding a referendum as occurred in Crimea, the region will simply ask Putin to arrange for its annexation: “The referendum, which was absolutely legally held in Crimea, was not recognized by the world community, which did everything not to recognize Russia as a full-blown member of the global community. Therefore, this will be one single decree based on the appeal of the leadership of the Kherson region to Russian President Vladimir Putin. There will be a request to make the Kherson region a full-fledged constituent of the Russian Federation.”

That may, of course, just be the fantasy of a local politician. Nevertheless, last week Russian Deputy Prime Minister for Construction and Regional Development Marat Khusnullin visited Kherson and the area near it in southern Ukraine that is controlled by Russia and suggested the region might be incorporated into the Russian Federation: “I believe the region’s future is to work in our friendly Russian family. I came here to provide maximum opportunities for integration.” While Russia hasn’t officially said what it intends to do with the territories outside the Donbas it now controls, it has reportedly already introduced in Kherson the Russian currency, altered the school curriculum, installed new officials, rerouted internet servers through Russia, and blocked Ukrainian broadcasts. And the Russian ambition may extend not only west of the land bridge to Crimea but north of it as well; in a press conference in Melitopol, Khusnullin, alluding to the nuclear power plant in Zaporizhzhia now controlled by Russia, said

Ukraine would have to pay for any electricity it gets from the plant: “If not, it would be working for Russia.”

Russian and Ukrainian representatives met in Belarus on several occasions in late February and early March to discuss the creation of humanitarian corridors out of the cities that were being attacked by Russian missiles and artillery. After a meeting in Turkey between Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in mid-March, the Ukrainian and Russian negotiating teams discussed by video conference and in a meeting in Istanbul in late March the broad contours of a possible peace agreement that would address the issues that had prompted the war in the first place – Russia’s insistence that Ukraine not join NATO, not provide forward bases for NATO forces and offensive weapons, and accept Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk “republics” in eastern Ukraine. Ukraine had already acknowledged, in a number of statements by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, that it was prepared to abandon its aspiration, embedded in its constitution, to become a member of NATO and would accept, instead, an international status as a non-aligned neutral state. It had also indicated it would be willing to prohibit other states from having bases and deploying troops and offensive weapons in the country, would accept a reduction in the size of its military, and would be willing to accept Russian as an official language in the predominantly Russian-speaking areas of the Donbas. But it insisted that, as a neutral and militarily non-aligned state, its security be guaranteed by other states in an arrangement broadly analogous to Article 5 of the NATO charter. It also refused to recognize the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics as independent states as Russia had done on Feb. 21. And it refused to accept Crimea as part of the Russian Federation and proposed, instead, that its status be addressed by political and diplomatic negotiation and decided within 15 years. Russia, needless to say, strongly objected to those positions.

The talks continued into early April but made little further progress in resolving the key differences in regard to security guarantees for Ukraine and the future status of the Donbas entities and Crimea. After Ukraine put forward a new draft agreement based on the talks in Istanbul in late March and by video conference thereafter, Lavrov objected to Ukraine’s proposal that, if and when an agreement were reached on the security guarantees, it would conduct a referendum on its commitment to neutrality and the security guarantees – but only *after* there was a ceasefire and the Russian troops had withdrawn. He said, “There is a big probability that when this referendum gives a negative answer, the negotiating process will have to be started anew. We don’t want to play such cat-and-mouse games.” And he raised a number of other objections as well. He said the new draft represented a “clear departure from the most important provisions that were recorded at the Istanbul meeting on March 29,” including the fact that, although Ukraine had agreed at that meeting that its security guarantees wouldn’t apply to Crimea, there were no such statements in the draft agreement. He also objected to Ukraine’s proposal that the issues regarding Crimea and the Donbas entities would be discussed by the presidents rather than addressed in the agreement. And he raised again his objection to Ukraine’s proposed sequence of ceasefire, Russian troop withdrawal, then Ukrainian referendum on the peace agreement: “Surely Ukraine will next request a withdrawal of Russian troops and will keep piling up preconditions. The plan is clear and unacceptable.” Since then, the negotiations have been paused.

Last Thursday, Russian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Andrey Rudenko said Russia would give a positive response if and when Ukraine indicates it would be willing to resume the negotiations: “The negotiation process was not interrupted by us. It was put on pause by our Ukrainian partners. As soon as they express their willingness to return to the negotiating table, we will respond positively. The main thing is to have something to discuss.” The next day a member of the Duma who is a member of the Russian negotiating team said, “I am not ruling out the resumption of the negotiating process. Now it depends on Ukrainian negotiators.” On Monday, Rudenko reiterated that Russia is ready to return to the negotiating table once Kyiv displays a “constructive stance” and responds to its proposals: “It was not our initiative to freeze the talks, to put them on pause. We are ready to return to the negotiations as soon as Ukraine displays a constructive stance, at least provides a reaction to the proposals submitted by us.”

But Ukraine is not yet ready to return to the negotiations, since doing so could be construed as an acknowledgement of defeat and an implicit acceptance of its loss of the territories in eastern and southern Ukraine now controlled by Russia. In a televised interview Saturday, Zelenskyy recalled what he said three years ago, after his election – that although Ukraine didn’t start the war, it had to end it: “I really thought that the war could end with dialogue...that it would be possible to find answers to many questions and many decisions with the Russian side. I really thought so.” Now, he said, “I understand that the ending will be diplomatic...That is why the war is so difficult. And the victory will be very difficult. It will be bloody, it will be in battle, but the end will definitely be in diplomacy....There are things that we will not be able to complete otherwise than at the negotiating table. We want everything back. And the Russian Federation doesn’t want to return anything. That’s why the ending will be at the negotiating table...A lot depends on us, but a lot depends on Russia, too. Without talking to them, we must then state the result we have. We want the territories back and this war to be over. But how and when it will happen depends on the time when the conversation with Putin will take place. I think that the conversation between Ukraine and Russia will definitely take place. But we don’t know in what format: with or without intermediaries, in a wide circle or in the format of bilateral conversation.”

Speaking today via video link to those gathered at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Zelenskyy said he doesn’t see any evidence that Russia wants to end the war: “I don’t see any interest. I don’t see things. The only positive thing is that the parties started talking about the unblocking of Azovstal [the huge steel plant in Mariupol] and the evacuation of civilians. I don’t see any more steps.” Speaking of Putin, he said, “He lives in his own informational world, not realizing that Ukraine will not make concessions. This war for Ukraine is not against anyone, but for itself, for its land. He must get out of his informational unreality.” And so the war continues.

David R. Cameron  
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