

Russia calls for short ceasefire, Putin & Erdogan talk about talks, and the war goes on.



British Defence Intelligence update on Russian attacks & troop locations in Ukraine, January 6.

The contact line between Russian and Ukrainian forces in eastern Ukraine has changed very little since Ukraine took back the city of Kherson and the portion of that region west of the Dniro River in early November. Since then, the battle has continued in and around Bakhmut and other cities in the Donbas, which consists of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions, but with very little change in the territory held by each side. There are, of course, some small changes; indeed, a close observer of today's British Defence Intelligence update on Russian attacks and locations (above) will note that Russian forces have recently taken some of the previously-contested territory between the cities of Bakhmut and Horlivka in the Donetsk region as well as a bit of territory previously held by Ukrainian forces south of the city of Zaporizhzhia. Nevertheless, the fact remains that, overall, the contact line between the forces has changed very little in the two months since Ukraine took back Kherson and the territory of that region west of the Dniro.

That the contact line between Russian and Ukrainian forces in eastern Ukraine has remained largely unchanged for some time has been acknowledged by both sides. Two weeks ago, in an interview with the BBC, Gen. Kyrylo Budanov, the Chief of the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense, said, bluntly, "The situation is just stuck. It doesn't move." Russia, he said, is "now completely at a dead end." But, he said, "We can't defeat them in all directions comprehensively. Neither can they." He added, hopefully, "We're very much looking forward to new weapons supplies, and to the arrival of more advanced weapons."

A few days later, speaking at the annual meeting of the Russian Defense Ministry Board in Moscow, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces Valery Gerasimov likewise said, “The situation on the front line has stabilized” – adding that “the main efforts of our troops are now focused on completing the liberation of the territory of the Donetsk People’s Republic.” As today’s update from British Defence Intelligence indicates, while Russia now controls almost all of the Luhansk region, it controls only about 60 percent of the Donetsk region.

The fact that the contact line is relatively stable doesn’t of course mean that there is no conflict. As noted above, one such focal point is Bakhmut, a small city with a pre-war population of about 30,000 situated at the junction of roads that, if controlled by Russia, would increase its ability to take two larger industrial cities in the north of the Donetsk region – Kramatorsk (pre-war population 160,000) and Slovyansk (pre-war population 110,000).

Nor does the fact that the contact line is relatively stable mean there are not substantial casualties occurring on both sides. On Sunday, just after midnight in the first few minutes of the new year, four rockets fired by a U.S.-supplied HIMARS (High Mobility Artillery Rocket System), a multiple-rocket launcher mounted on a truck and operated by Ukrainian forces, hit Polytechnic School #19 in Makiivka, a city with a pre-war population of about 350,000 immediately adjacent to the city of Donetsk and roughly 20 kilometers from the contact line. The school was being used as a barracks for Russian troops as well as a storage depot for ammunition. On Wednesday, the Russian Ministry of Defense raised its initial estimate that 63 soldiers had been killed in the attack to 89. (Ukraine claims several hundred Russian troops were killed in the attack.) The ministry said, “The main reason for what happened was the switching on and massive use – contrary to the prohibition – by personnel of mobile phones in a reach zone of enemy weapons. This factor allowed the enemy to track and determine the coordinates of the soldier’s location for a missile strike.” Over the past year, especially in the early weeks and months of the conflict before Russia figured out what was happening, Ukraine reportedly hit a number of Russian field headquarters and killed a number of high-ranking officers by identifying the locations from which cell phone calls were being made – to such an extent that the Russian ministry of defense prohibited their use in areas in close proximity to Ukrainian forces. What the ministry evidently failed to appreciate at the time was that HIMARS rockets have a range of 50 miles, well beyond the short range within which cell phone usage was prohibited.

Nevertheless, despite the continuing conflict along the contact line, its relative stability has led many to believe it might be possible to move toward a ceasefire agreement, a truce, and perhaps even to talks that would bring about an end to the conflict. Indeed, even Russian President Vladimir Putin, who initiated the war last February, has recognized the fact that at some point it must end. In his lengthy end-of-the-year press conference in late December, when asked if he saw any signs of the conflict “becoming drawn out,” he said, “our goal is not to whip up the military conflict but to end this war. That is what we will try to do...we will do our best to end this, and the sooner the better.” (That was the first time Putin called what he had previously called a “special military operation” a war.) And in response to a question whether there was a “real chance for a diplomatic solution to the Ukraine situation,” he said, “Every conflict, every armed conflict ends with some kind of negotiations on the diplomatic track, one way or another,

and we have never refused to negotiate. It is the Ukrainian leadership that has forbidden itself to negotiate. This attitude is somewhat unusual, even bizarre, I would say. Nevertheless, sooner or later, any parties that are in a state of conflict sit down and negotiate. The sooner this realization comes to those who oppose us, the better. We have never given up on that.” In a televised interview with Rossiya 1 a few days later, he said, “We are ready to negotiate with everyone involved about acceptable solutions, but that is up to them – we are not the ones refusing to negotiate, they are.”

Perhaps following up on those comments, yesterday afternoon Putin spoke by phone with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. According to the Kremlin readout, the conversation covered several issues, including the creation of a natural gas hub in Turkey, the construction of the Akkuyu nuclear power plant, the export of Ukrainian grain and Russian food and fertilizer, and the situation in Syria. But importantly, the conversation also touched on the situation in and around Ukraine. According to the Turkish readout of the conversation, “President Erdogan said calls for peace and negotiations should be supported by a unilateral ceasefire and a vision for a fair solution.” According to the Russian readout, Putin emphasized the “destructive role of the Western states, which are pumping the Kiev regime full of weapons and military equipment and also providing operational and targeting information.” But, it added, “in view of President Erdogan’s offer for Turkiye to mediate a political settlement of the conflict, Vladimir Putin again reaffirmed that Russia is open to a serious dialogue – under the condition that the Kiev authorities meet the clear demands that have been repeatedly laid out and recognize the new territorial realities.” The “territorial realities” are, of course, the fact that, as of Sept. 30 when they were formally annexed, the Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson regions are, from Russia’s point of view, now part of the Russian Federation. But the fundamental reality for Ukraine, of course, is that those territories, as well as Crimea, annexed in 2014, are part of Ukraine and it can’t possibly accept Russia’s “new territorial realities,” just as Russia can’t possibly agree to returning regions that are now part of the Russian Federation to Ukraine. Russia’s condition – that Ukraine must accept “the new territorial realities” if there is to be a “serious dialogue” – means, in short, there won’t be a “serious dialogue.” At best, there may be a ceasefire, perhaps one that, if it endures, will transform the war into a “frozen conflict.”

Yesterday morning Kirill, the Russian Orthodox Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, called on all parties involved in what he called “the internecine conflict” in Ukraine and the Donbass [which, of course, after the annexation of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, is, in Russia’s view, no longer part of Ukraine] to establish a Christmas ceasefire from 12 p.m. Moscow time today until midnight tomorrow “so that Orthodox people could attend church services on Christmas Eve and on Christmas Day.” Upon consideration of the Patriarch’s call, yesterday afternoon Putin instructed Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu “to introduce a ceasefire along the entire line of contact in Ukraine from 12:00 on January 6, 2023 to 24:00 on January 7, 2023.” Noting that a large number of Orthodox Christians reside in the area of hostilities, he called on Ukraine to do likewise and thereby allow them to attend church services on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

But Ukraine immediately dismissed Putin’s call for a short Christmas ceasefire. Serhiy Haidai, the head of the Luhansk regional military administration, told Ukrainian television: “Regarding

this truce – they just want to get some kind of a pause for a day or two, to pull even more reserves, bring some more ammo. Russia cannot be trusted. Not a single word they say.” And Ukrainian presidential adviser Mykhailo Podolyak tweeted that Russia must leave Ukraine before there could be any “temporary truce,” adding, “Ukraine doesn’t attack foreign territory and doesn’t kill civilians. RF [Russian Federation] does. RF must leave the occupied territories – only then will it have a ‘temporary truce.’ Keep hypocrisy to yourself.”

In his nightly address last night, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy largely reiterated what Haidai and Podolyak said. Speaking in Russian and addressing himself in part to Russian citizens, he said, “Now they want to use Christmas as a cover to at least briefly stop the advance of our guys in Donbas and bring equipment, ammunition and mobilized men closer to our positions. What will this accomplish? Only another increase in the casualty count.... Everyone in the world knows how the Kremlin uses breaks in the war to continue the war with renewed vigor. In order to end the war faster, it needs something else entirely. We need the citizens of Russia to find the courage to free themselves of their shameful fear of one man in the Kremlin for at least 36 hours during Christmas. Your fear of him is destroying your country... The war in Ukraine will end when your soldiers either leave or we kick them out.”

Russia’s unilateral 36-hour ceasefire went into effect at Noon today, Moscow time. Coupled with the snowy weather which obscured targets and made it difficult to use drones, the ceasefire provided some respite from the usual lethal fire along the contact line. Nevertheless, journalists reported occasional artillery fire along the line, the protracted battle for the small city of Bakhmut continued, and several larger cities – most notably, Russian-held Donetsk and Ukrainian-held Kramatorsk – were hit. And so the war goes on – and will no doubt resume at full scale at 12:01 a.m. Sunday morning.

David R. Cameron
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