

Another change in command of Russia's forces, another wave of missile strikes, war on the ground continues in the Donbas, and Germany hesitates on Leopards for Ukraine.



President Vladimir Putin and Chief of the General Staff & Deputy Defense Minister Valery Gerasimov, the new commander of Russian forces in the “special military operation” in Ukraine.

Last February, three days after recognizing the independence of the “People’s Republics” created by pro-Russian separatists in portions of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of eastern Ukraine in 2014 and signing treaties of friendship and mutual assistance with both, Russian 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. In the first weeks of the “special military operation,” Russia attempted to take Kyiv with ground forces and attacked Kyiv as well as Kharkiv, Kherson, Dnipro, Mariupol, Odesa and other cities with artillery and missiles. But the Russian forces were unable to take Kyiv and in late March the Russian military announced a fundamental shift in the focus of the “special military operation” to the “liberation of Donbass.”

As Russia shifted the focus of the “special military operation,” in early April it also appointed for the first time an overall military commander of its forces in Ukraine – Gen. Aleksandr Dvornikov, the commander of the southern military district headquartered in Rostov-on-Don, adjacent to the Donetsk region. Prior to his appointment, the Russian forces in Ukraine were under the commanders of the adjacent regional military districts, which may have contributed to a lack of overall coordination in the offensive in Ukraine. Dvornikov, widely known (at least outside Russia) as “the butcher of Syria” for what the forces under his command did to Aleppo

and other cities in 2015-16, lived up to that characterization in directing the sustained assault on and destruction of Mariupol, a city of more than 400,000, the second largest in the Donetsk region and tenth-largest in the country. But while the Russian forces quickly took most of Luhansk region, they encountered tough resistance in the Donetsk region, and by early June there were reports that Dvornikov had been replaced as overall commander of the “special operation” by Gen. Gennady Zhidko, the head of the main military-political directorate of the Russian Armed Forces and deputy minister of defense and, prior to that, commander of the eastern military district. Some reports suggested Dvornikov was still in charge of the “special operation” but had been told to take the city of Severodonetsk in the Donbas within a week or be replaced, and after failing to do so had been replaced by Zhidko in late June as overall commander of the Russian forces in Ukraine.

In early October, the Russian Ministry of Defense announced the appointment of Gen. Sergey Surovikin as the overall commander of the Russian forces in Ukraine. Like Dvornikov, he had served in Syria, where he was responsible for the Russian air forces that destroyed Aleppo and other cities, earning for himself the title of “General Armageddon.” He had taken over from Dvornikov as head of the southern military district when Dvornikov had been appointed overall commander in Ukraine in April, and in June he had become head of the southern group of forces in Ukraine. But like Dvornikov, he too had a short term as commander of the Russian forces in Ukraine; last Thursday, he was replaced by Gen. Valery Gerasimov, the Chief of the General Staff and First Deputy Minister of Defense. Surovikin did, however, stay on as one of Gerasimov’s deputies.

One important consequence of Gerasimov’s appointment is that, for the first time, the commander of the Russian forces in Ukraine also has direct control over Russia’s air and naval forces and can deploy them against Ukraine without going through a complicated inter-service process to obtain authorization. As if to underscore that point, two days after Gerasimov’s appointment, Russia hit Kyiv, Kharkiv, Dnipro, Lviv, Odessa, Mykolaiv, Zaporizhzhia, and other cities with a wave of cruise missiles last Saturday and Sunday, some of them launched from strategic bombers based in Russia and others from naval vessels and facilities in Crimea. One of them, which British Intelligence subsequently identified as a Kh-22, a long-range, high speed cruise missile designed to destroy ships and fired from a Tu-22 M2 strategic bomber while over Russia, leveled a nine-floor apartment building in Dnipro Saturday, killing 45 residents, including six children, and injured 80, with another 20 missing.

Meanwhile, the war on the ground continues along the contact line in the Donbas – a line that has changed very little over the last several weeks - with Russian and Ukrainian forces battling for control of two small cities – Soledar, pre-war population 11,000, adjacent to Bakhmut, pre-war population 75,000 – that are consequential because they are at the junctions of roads that go to the larger cities in the region that each side wants to take – for Russia, pushing westward, the two largest cities in Donetsk region still held by Ukraine, Kramatorsk (pre-war population 160,000) and Slovyansk (pre-war population 110,000); for Ukraine, pushing eastward, Horlivka (pre-war population 290,000) and, beyond Horlivka, Donetsk (pre-war population 920,000), the capital of the region. Russia has claimed that it has taken Soledar but Ukraine disputes that and says it still controls it and Bakhmut.

But while the contact line has changed very little in the last several weeks as winter has settled in throughout eastern Ukraine, both sides apparently believe the war can be won once winter gives way, after the mud, to spring, and toward that end are preparing for a resumption of the ground war in the Donbas. Russia is embarking on a second round of conscription – larger than the first, in late September and October, that drafted 300,000 – that aims to bring another 500,000 into the military. Ukrainian intelligence is predicting a massive Russian offensive, perhaps beginning in February and March while the ground is still frozen and tanks and other large vehicles can move quickly, that may involve not only a resumption of conflict along the contact line in the Donbas but, as occurred at the outset of last February’s “special military operation,” an attack on Kyiv via Belarus, Russia’s partner in their so-called Union State.

Ukraine is preparing for what is likely to come in the next month or two, primarily by pressing its supporters for more equipment including, in particular, armored vehicles, personnel carriers, and, above all, tanks – many tanks. Ukraine estimates it will need several hundred tanks to withstand the attack that will come in the weeks and months ahead. Some of Ukraine’s supporters in the West have already offered some assistance in that regard; the UK has agreed to send 14 Challenger 2 tanks, the U.S. yesterday announced a package that includes 59 Bradley armored vehicles and 90 Stryker personnel carriers, and Poland and Finland have agreed to provide some of their German-made Leopard 2 tanks, which were specifically designed to fight Russia’s T-90 main battle tank. But in accordance with German law, their provision requires Germany’s approval. And thus far, Germany has hesitated, leading some to believe that, since their delivery to Ukraine would be viewed by Russia as occurring only because Germany approved the delivery, Germany has insisted it will only deliver the Leopards if and when the U.S. provides Ukraine with its M1 Abrams main battle tank, something the U.S. doesn’t want to do.

Today, the top defense officials of the U.S. and other countries in the Ukraine Defense Contact Group met in Ramstein, Germany to discuss what Ukraine needs for the battle that is coming in the weeks and months ahead. And needless to say, in a meeting that began with an online address from President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the number one topic on everyone’s mind, not only in the meeting but in Ukraine and, for that matter, in Moscow as well, was tanks: How many Leopards will Ukraine get and when? And will Germany continue to refuse to permit other countries to give Leopards to Ukraine unless the U.S. provides Ukraine with the M1 Abrams, its main battle tank? Boris Pistorius, the new German Defense Minister as of yesterday, said after the meeting, “Today, we still cannot say when a decision will be taken and what the decision will be when it comes to the Leopard tank.” It is perhaps understandable why a minister who has been in office for only 24 hours would want to talk with his officials before taking such a decision. Nevertheless, Zelenskyy and many others were immensely disappointed. But there were two individuals who no doubt had big smiles on the faces when Pistorius said what he said – the men in the photo at the top.

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