FORWARD OBSERVER

NATO-RUSSIA SITREP

WEEKLY SNAPSHOT

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A LOOK INTO A WORSENING NATO-RUSSIA CONFLICT

BACKGROUND

Following the spring military buildup in Russia's Southern and Western Military Districts, a complex but relatively predictable series of events are in motion to destabilize Europe. The Russians continue to utilize a combination of military deception operations, information operations, hybrid warfare (economics/migration), and traditional battle preparations (large-scale training events) to degrade and deter a unified Western response. Undermining NATO solidarity is a continuous effort for Russian-backed influence operations, with tailored approaches for governments and citizenry across Europe.

Over the summer and fall, Russian energy supplies to European countries slowed substantially, driving up energy prices and preventing adequate supplies for local winter storage. Energy disruptions are a primary point of economic leverage for the Russian Federation to minimize European Union or NATO involvement in Ukraine and Belarus. Russia exercises significant influence over the German government, and Russian President Vladimir Putin rejected a final meeting with outgoing German Chancellor Merkel meant to deescalate the migrant and energy crises.

Current winter weather forecasts do not bode well for a unified response to a conflict in Eastern Europe. Weather forecasters note "interior portions of Eastern Europe will be in the bull's-eye for unseasonably cold air this winter." Monitors predict "the area at the most risk for temperatures several degrees below normal this winter includes an area from central Ukraine, northward to Latvia and Estonia and as far west as Slovakia and Poland." Meanwhile, the Russian military remains well-equipped to conduct a winter assault. In contrast, NATO would likely struggle to traverse the continent after winter conditions set in under threat of engagement by Russian long-range precision fires.

During the NATO Foreign Minister Summit in Riga, Latvia this week, officials stopped short of promising direct military support to Ukraine, as Ukraine is not a

member nation. Individual members continue to express diplomatic support for Ukraine, although some countries like the U.K. and Sweden have military assets on standby in the event of a Russian offensive. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg warned that "[a]ny future Russian aggression against Ukraine would come at a high price and have serious political and economic consequences for Russia."

Russian military force relocation via rail systems throughout the Western and Southern Military districts are ongoing, and observers note the reduction in commercial rail allocations. Observers suspect the Russian government of blocking open-source research into train car movements, demonstrating a higher degree of secrecy relative to the spring buildup. The expansion of sophisticated information operations is a crucial indicator the Russians are preparing for a kinetic conflict.

The border conflict between Belarus and Poland continues to use the plight of Middle Eastern and North African migrants to manufacture a humanitarian crisis. The use of a migrant surge as a hybrid warfare tool prompted the deployment of NATO Hybrid Warfare advisers to the Baltics. Poland rejected the deployment in favor of their organic border security forces. The current influx of migrants is similar to past surges in 2015, likely facilitated by the Russian government. Notably, the British and Latvian military deployed advisers to Poland in mid-November to assist in border wall construction and security operations.

POTENTIAL COURSES OF ACTION

The most dangerous course of action (**MDCOA**) remains a simultaneous military action against Poland and Ukraine, immediately involving U.S. and U.K. troops already in the region. Military provocation against Poland would invoke the Common Defense (Article 5) provision of the NATO Charter. Energy supplies to Europe would cease almost immediately, limiting European ability to respond without severe impacts to civilian populations. Global supply chains face catastrophic disruption as flagged commercial vessels will likely become maritime targets. The E.U. expects massive cyber disruptions targeting governmental and private communications and financial systems. This MDCOA is consistent with current assessments from U.S. Special Operations Command Europe, the unit most likely to immediately respond should conflict erupt.

A second scenario would see Russia claiming Ukrainian military movements toward/vicinity of Line of Contact (LOC) as justification/act of war (AOW) for moving conventional troops, weapons, and equipment into separatist regions. In this scenario, Russia would support separatist requests for military assistance and push the contested territory up to the Dnieper River with Belarusian support from the north.

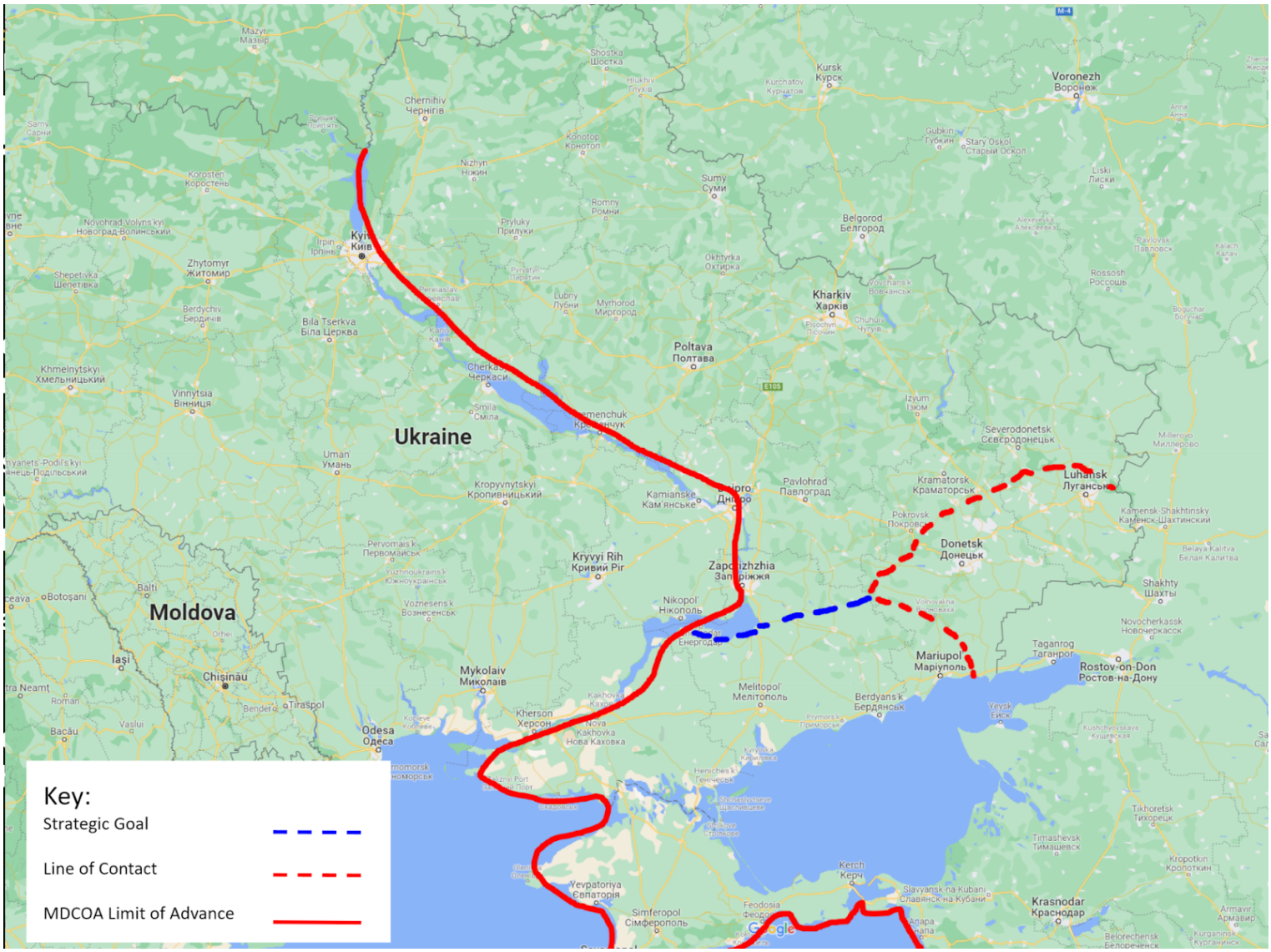
At the same time, this could preclude NATO involvement. Strategic territorial targets include the landmass between Mariupol and the Dnieper River, securing the Sea of Azov for Russia. This action would likely result in formal Russian territorial expansion to include Donetsk, Kherson Luhansk, and Zaporizhia (image below).

A third option includes Russian claims of military assistance from NATO members to Ukraine is an act of war. This action is moderately likely as NATO continues to state that Russia has no grounds to prevent Ukraine's accession. Individual member state action in support of Ukraine could prompt an official NATO military response, but the Russians are betting on disunity within the alliance.

U.S. RESPONSE

A potential U.S. government response includes immediate call for a ceasefire, attempts to engage in diplomatic dialogue, and severe economic sanctions for Russia. The perceived and actual weakness in U.S. leadership could be the limiting factor during a non-NATO conflict.

Potential U.S. military responses on the lesser end of involvement include increasing special operations training of Ukraine's military (low-visibility weapons



delivery) and intelligence sharing. This would not represent a substantial change in current conditions or expansion of Operation Atlantic Resolve. Should NATO countries invoke Article 5 and deploy troops to Ukraine, the U.S. would likely be forced to deploy conventional troops. - D.M.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The political climate is likely to worsen substantially with U.S. involvement, as foreign actors ramp up information operations targeting the U.S. populace with anti-American and anti-NATO propaganda. These efforts will likely be amplified by sympathetic domestic actors. U.S. populations would also be targeted with pro-American and pro-NATO propaganda, attempting to build and sustain support for U.S. military action. The promotion of competing narratives will make objective information and analysis increasingly challenging to come by.

Americans should find reputable sources of information outside of state-controlled media. Forward Observer is developing alternative dissemination channels in the event of a disrupted information and communications environment.

Additionally, a December 2020 report from the U.S. Army warned that peer and near-peer adversaries in a crisis or conflict could use hybrid tactics, which could include protests, cyber attacks, and the use of transnational criminal organizations in the U.S. homeland.

These activities are likely to be concentrated around strategic targets, such as military, energy, and government facilities. Americans who live in the vicinity of these targets should take additional safety precautions.

The U.S. homeland is also likely to experience a sharp increase in energy prices as import and export operations become prime targets for kinetic and cyber disruption.

Readers should consider their material needs, especially those made overseas, and ensure at least a 3-6 month supply, although disruption could last considerably longer.

Given the Russian security cooperation agreement with China, the logistics market could also face substantial disruption if Beijing takes action to deter further U.S. involvement.

It's possible that China uses this opportunity to launch a military campaign to take control of Taiwan, as the United States is likely unable to fight a two-front conventional war.

International trade and markets could collapse under the weight of geopolitical disruption and potential targeting by military assets along Atlantic and Pacific trade routes.

As always, the most extreme scenario is generally the least likely to occur, however, the United States could still experience significant disruption during the most likely scenario. - F.O.