

Fighting Flares in Eastern Ukraine Amid Continued US-NATO Buildup Against Russia

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Renewed fighting in eastern Ukraine has killed and wounded dozens on both sides as the Ukrainian armed forces and allied militias have clashed with pro-Russian separatist forces in Donetsk province.

The fighting, while not as bloody as the battles that raged in 2014 and the winter of 2015, has seen heavy artillery and multiple Grad rocket launchers unleashed against civilian areas. The shelling has left Avdiivka, an industrial town of 20,000 which straddles the demarcation line between government and separatist-controlled territory, without water, electricity or heat in sub-freezing conditions.

“Not only are the lives of thousands of children in Avdiivka, and on all sides of the conflict, at risk, but to make matters worse the lack of water and electricity means that homes are becoming dangerously cold and health conditions deteriorating as we speak,” Giovanna Barberis, Unicef’s representative in Ukraine, said Tuesday.

The European Union, NATO, the US State Department and the United Nations have all issued calls for a renewal of the cease-fire imposed under the terms of the Minsk accords negotiated in February 2015. Washington and its European allies have repeatedly invoked alleged violations of the accords by the pro-Russian separatists as the pretext for maintaining sanctions against Moscow. Violations by Ukrainian government forces entail no such repercussions.

Nearly 10,000 people have been killed in the fighting since rebels in the Donbass region sought independence from the Ukrainian government following the 2014 US and German-backed coup that brought to power an extreme right-wing and virulently anti-Russian regime in Kiev. Washington and its allies accused Russia of instigating and militarily supporting the uprising in the east.

The situation in eastern Ukraine combined with Russia’s reincorporation of Crimea in the wake of the coup were invoked as the justification for sanctions by both the US and the EU.

Kiev and the separatists in Donetsk have each blamed the other for the latest outburst of violence.

“The current escalation in Donbass is a clear indication of Russia’s continued blatant disregard of its commitments under the Minsk agreements with a view to preventing stabilization of the situation,” the Ukrainian foreign ministry said in a statement.

For its part, Moscow pointed to an earlier statement issued by the Ukrainian defense ministry boasting that “the Ukrainian armed forces are advancing forward meter by meter” in the area around Avdiivka as proof that Kiev had launched the offensive.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the fighting was the result of a deliberate “provocation” by the government of President Petro Poroshenko designed to distract public attention from Ukraine’s protracted economic and political crisis.

The German daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung* suggested that the real motive for this provocation lay in Kiev’s determination to disrupt any rapprochement between Washington and Moscow under the new US administration of Republican president Donald Trump and to prevent any easing of sanctions against Russia.

“The Ukrainian military is currently trying to shift the situation at the front line to their favor. Apparently, they accept the fact that tensions are increasing ... Behind this position, according to some members of the German administration, could be an attempt to worsen the situation to the extent that US President Donald Trump’s plans to ease the sanctions are suspended,” the newspaper reported. “According to Berlin’s interpretation, Poroshenko is ready to do anything to prevent the withdrawal of the sanctions.”

Stratfor, the private US intelligence company which maintains close ties to the Pentagon and CIA, also suggested such a motive in its analysis of the renewed fighting: “Though Ukrainian officials accused Russia of orchestrating the flare-up to strengthen its negotiating position with the West, Kiev could have incited the violence to draw attention to the conflict and rally international support for continued sanctions on Moscow.”

As part of his government’s attempt to shore up support for sanctions and to offset any possibility of a move by the Trump administration toward a less confrontational posture toward Russia, Poroshenko traveled to Berlin on January 30 for a meeting with Germany’s Chancellor Angela Merkel. During his visit, Merkel reiterated her government’s support for keeping sanctions in place. Poroshenko staged a hasty exit from Berlin, claiming that he had to return to deal with the crisis in the Donbass.

The State Department’s response to the fighting in eastern Ukraine was notable for merely declaring that Washington was “deeply concerned” and “calling for a cease-fire” without placing the blame on Russia.

Rossiiskaya Gazeta, a Russian government daily, called attention to the statement as an indication of a shift in US policy: “Washington is not blaming the unrecognized republics for breaking the ceasefire, is not stating any support for Kiev, is not saying a single word about the role of Russia ... Different variations of these elements were, as a rule, a key part of all statements of Ukraine under Barack Obama’s administration.”

On the other hand, US officials on the scene showed no such change in line, reflecting the increasingly open split between the Trump administration and the career employees of the State Department. “Russia and the separatists initiated the violence in Avdiivka,” US chargé d’affaires to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Kate Byrnes charged at an emergency OSCE meeting in Vienna Tuesday. “We call on Russia to stop the violence, honor the ceasefire, withdraw heavy weapons and end attempts to seize new territory beyond the line of contact.”

The day before his first post-inaugural telephone call with Russian President Vladimir Putin last week, Trump declared, "As far as the sanctions, very early to be talking about that." During the conversation itself, sanctions reportedly went unmentioned and there was no substantive discussion about Ukraine.

Meanwhile, both the US and the German military continue to build up forces near Russia's western borders.

On Monday, US troops and tanks assembled for exercises in Poland that their commander acknowledged were meant to threaten Russia.

The deployment had been made necessary by "the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the unlawful annexation of Crimea," Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges, the commander of US ground forces in Europe, told the *Washington Post*. "The last American tank left Europe three years ago because we all hoped Russia was going to be our partner. And so we had to bring all this back."

Meanwhile German tanks and troops began arriving in Lithuania on Tuesday, the first entry of the German military into the former Baltic Soviet republic since its occupation by the Nazis during the Second World War. The German deployment is to include 450 troops and some 200 vehicles, including 30 tanks.

In all, the NATO alliance has committed to moving four battalions, roughly 3,000 to 4,000 troops, to within striking distance of Russia in northeastern Europe as part of a permanent "rotating" deployment.

Whatever the statements of the Trump administration about improving relations with Moscow, the fighting in Ukraine combined with NATO's aggressive military deployment on Russia's borders are sharply elevating the threat of an armed confrontation between the world's two largest nuclear powers.

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