Flight MH17, Ukraine and the Civil War

Flight MH17, Ukraine and the New Cold War. Except from Chapter 4, 'The civil war and the MH17 disaster'

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Global Research, September 22, 2018

Region: [Europe](#), [Russia and FSU](#)
Theme: [History](#), [Media Disinformation](#)

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The July Offensive and NATO Monitoring

On the margins of D-Day celebrations in Normandy in June 2014, Poroshenko agreed with Putin to start talks on a ceasefire, for which a Russian emissary arrived in Kiev on the 8th. On 24 June the Russian Federation Council revoked the authority granted to Putin in March to deploy Russian troops in Ukraine. Moscow had already indicated it did not want the Donbass insurgency to lead to secession when it refused to honour a referendum on the issue. It did recognise the results of the Ukrainian presidential election, leading to angry accusations by Strelkov and other commanders of the insurgency. Russia, however, was responding to an apparent EU willingness to give it a breathing space. After Kiev signed the economic Association Agreement with the EU on 27 June, implementation of the DCFTA [Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement] was postponed to 31 December 2015.

However, when Poroshenko indicated he intended to prolong the ceasefire in the last days of June in spite of his post-election promise to 'liquidate [the insurgents] in days', a threatening demonstration in Kiev by the Donbass and Aidar battalions and Kolomoiskiy's Dnipro 1 demanded the immediate resumption of the civil war. Interior minister Avakov's Kiev-based paramilitary group 17+ *Sotny* was also involved in the demonstrations. Their belligerence was echoed by the war party in the US and NATO. The American ambassador to the United Nations, Samantha Power, lavished praise on the Kiev regime and warned Europe against caving in to 'Russian aggression'; the EU fell in line on the 27th when it 'called on Putin to take steps to de-escalate the violence in Ukraine'. The Polish president, Bronislaw Komorowski, even proposed suspending Russia's UN veto power. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the West did not want the forces of compromise to prevail and gambled instead on a new offensive.

On the 30th of June, following a four-hour NSDC [National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine] meeting with Parubiy, Avakov, and others whose followers were demonstrating outside, Poroshenko declared that the ceasefire would be lifted and a new offensive launched. Valeriy Heletey, the new secretary of defence (his predecessor, Koval, was made deputy secretary of the NSDC) promised an imminent victory parade in Sebastopol. Alarmed by the prospect of a full-scale civil war, the German and French foreign ministers, Steinmeier and Fabius, convened a last-minute meeting with their Russian and Kiev colleagues, Lavrov and P. Klimkin, in Berlin on 2 July, one day into the renewed hostilities. They reached a deal on a ceasefire, further negotiations, and OSCE control of the Ukrainian border—a provision especially threatening to the insurgency because it would cut off their

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supply lines. However, the US was again not represented and indignantly condemned the agreement as a 'craven surrender to Russian aggression'. The State Department claimed that 'Russia continues to provide [the insurgents] with heavy weapons, other military equipment and financing and continues to allow militants to enter Ukraine freely'.

On 4 July, the 'Breeze 2014' NATO naval manoeuvres in the Black Sea, announced in May, commenced under the official auspices of Bulgaria. Besides the US, naval units from Britain, Romania and Turkey, Greece and Italy took part. Electronic warfare was a key component of the manoeuvres. Significantly, the French and Germans did not participate, although there were two French ships in the area, the frigate *Surcouf* and the signals intelligence ship, *Dupuy de Lôme*. In response to the NATO show of force, twenty ships of Russia's Black Sea Fleet also began manoeuvres, including missile launches at practice targets. The alarm about an impending Russian invasion was sounded throughout, echoed by NATO command. Obviously the aim was to call for a major Western response should an event come about that signalled Russian and/or insurgent escalation, or might be construed as such.

The new offensive went well for Kiev. Slavyansk, the gas hub where the revolt had started, was taken by its forces on 5 July. On the 7th, Artemivsk and Druzhkivka fell. On the 10th, Siversk, a village just east of Slavyansk and 100 kilometres northeast of Donetsk, was taken, suggesting a possible encirclement of the city. The next day, Poroshenko warned that the insurgents in Donetsk were in for 'a nasty surprise'. Was this bluff or a provocation? With the NATO summit in Wales coming up in September, the trope of a 'Russian invasion' had become vital to the survival of the alliance after the Afghanistan debacle. Hence, the war party's strategy, according to Mike Whitney, was to 'lure Putin across the border and into the conflict, or the neocon plan [would fall] apart, which it will if they can't demonise Putin as a "dangerous aggressor" who can't be trusted as a business partner'.

Above I already referred to the privatisation of US intelligence. Satellite surveillance is largely privatised to the *DigitalGlobe* corporation which had become the monopoly supplier after acquiring its one competitor, *GeoEye*, in 2013. It serves a range of customers including the Pentagon's National Geospatial Intelligence Agency (NGA). Its high resolution surveillance over eastern Ukraine suggested a push through the Debaltsevo corridor in order to cut off Donetsk from Lugansk, and a southward flanking operation to allow an attack on the city of Donetsk from the rear. The maps of the areas covered were later made public by a Russian geography website, *Neogeography.ru*, as part of an analysis of the downing of Flight MH17. On 11 July, DigitalGlobe monitored sectors west of Donetsk and north of Druzhkivka, above the Druzhkivka-Artemivsk line captured by Kiev three days earlier. On the 12th, a wider area was surveyed, partly extending into Lugansk oblast. Apparently, a sector offering strategic depth and secure flanks was being mapped for a push towards Debaltsevo, which had already been the target of heavy fighting in May. Yet Moscow seemed unwilling to commit to the struggle directly, in spite of serious reverses for the insurgency. To cite Mike Whitney again (writing on 9 July): the United States 'has a very small window to draw Putin into the fray, which is why we should expect another false flag incident... *Washington is going to have to do something really big and make it look like it was Moscow's doing*.'

This was published eight days before the MH17 disaster. Yet Breeze 2014, the ten-day NATO naval exercise begun on the 4th, ended without major incident. On the 14th, the US Navy's AEGIS-class guided missile cruiser USS *Vella Gulf*, a type of ship equipped with AN/SPY 1 radar that can track long-distance targets, left the Black Sea in compliance with the

Montreux Convention, which limits to 21 days the naval presence of countries not bordering it. After the departure of *Vella Gulf*, other NATO ships remained in the Black Sea and were there on the day of the downing of MH17; notably, the Italian flagship frigate ITS *Aviere* and a number of electronic surveillance ships and minesweepers of other NATO states (but apparently none belonging to the US Navy).

The Breeze 2014 exercise in addition included 'the use of electronic warfare and electronic intelligence aircraft such as the Boeing EA-18G Growler and the Boeing E3 Sentry Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS)' and these elements were also part of exercises throughout the previous month. On the 5th of June, a dangerous loss of transponder signals (by which a civilian plane returns a radar signal to identify itself) from more than fifty passenger planes over south Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic, and Poland, turned out to have been caused by an undeclared NATO exercise in Hungary, *Newfip*. When the same phenomenon occurred again later that month, causing delays and flight cancellations, the German government had to inquire with NATO Air Command in Ramstein whether electronic warfare exercises from 9 to 20 June in Italy had been responsible.

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Title: Flight MH17, Ukraine and the New Cold War (Prism of disaster)

Author: Kees van der Pijl

ISBN: 978-1-5261-3109-6

Publisher: Manchester University Press

Pages: 208

Price: £18.99

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