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Prospects for a Peace Operation in the Donbas

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Speaking at the Munich Security Conference on Friday, Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko referred to a 'unique window of opportunity... [for the] deployment of [a] United Nations peacekeeping mission in Donbas.' Intended to coincide with Poroshenko's call, the Hudson Institute published a special report commissioned by Rasmussen Global on the potential for such a mission. In the end, though, the signals from the conference were discouraging. A meeting of the Normandy Format on the sidelines of the event did not occur and NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg sounded a doubtful note about agreement on a peace operation after meeting Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov.

Nevertheless, it is the appropriate time to evaluate the prospects for any UN-authorised peace operation. Previously called for by Poroshenko in 2015, Russia's Vladimir Putin surprised many by reviving the idea in September last year and circulating a draft UN Security Council resolution. During his annual end of the year 'big press conference,' he further suggested that Russia had subsequently amended its proposals. Since then the situation has deteriorated in the war-ravaged parts of the Donbas. The OSCE's Special Monitoring Mission reported 11,000 ceasefire violations during the period from 22 January to 4 February; a considerable increase compared to the data for the second half of 2017. Inevitably the heightening of violence has strengthened calls for a peace operation.

The Hudson Institute report, written by Richard Gowan, suggests a force of at least 20,000 personnel would need to be deployed. Although it contains references to authorising the use of 'limited force,' it ostensibly implies a peacekeeping operation – which could be authorised under Chapter VI of the UN Charter – rather than a more ambitious peace enforcement operation under Chapter VII. However, there are clear obstacles to obtaining support for a peace operation, let alone implementing any agreed mandate.

Different visions of peace

Crucial to the success of a peace operation will be a set of clearly specified goals. Agreement between Russia and leading Western states on the goals of a mission appears far off. Russia's proposals imply a minimal operation that might allow citizens to get on with their lives but little more; the September proposals – at least in their initial variant – only foresaw peacekeepers along the line of contact. From the perspective of other interested parties, the OSCE monitoring mission has largely contained the conflict, and a peace operation should be tasked with more ambitious goals that might lead to a settlement of the conflict. In this vein, the Gowan report emphasises the fulfilment of the Minsk II agreement. Above all, this means enabling elections in the self-styled Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics to put representatives in the Ukrainian Rada and restoration of Kyiv's control over the Russia-Ukraine border.

> The most widely discussed obstacle to a potential peace operation is the lack of political will.

A Chapter VI peacekeeping operation would presumably require the consent of those controlling the Donetsk and Luhansk republics. Although fairly seen as Russian marionettes, they do have a modicum of agency and can be expected to exercise it in a last-ditch effort to retain power. This is a minor obstacle that could easily be overcome were Russia on board. Likewise, the fact that Russia is unlikely to agree to anything other than a peace operation authorised by the UN Security Council, where it wields a veto, does not in itself present any great challenge.

Far more problematic is securing Russia's support for the kind of operation envisaged by European Union members or the United States. Western states swiftly rejected Russia's September proposals as little more than an effort to freeze the conflict; an outcome deemed favourable for Russia. The key EU members and the United States seek something closer to a lasting settlement. In its turn, Russia will therefore be concerned that more ambitious proposals encouraged by EU members or the United States are an effort to manipulate the situation and bolster efforts to rebuild and transform Donbas according to a vision of a liberal democracy Ukraine. Russia can therefore be expected to resist efforts to return the two people's republics to Kyiv's control. They would no doubt point to the Gowan report's recognition that 'limited force' may be required, which could be interpreted as the pretext to push the envelope and transform a peacekeeping mission into something closer to peace enforcement in line with a more expansive set of goals.

Still, some observers are sanguine. It has been argued that Russia's position might soften after its presidential elections next month. While there have been gestures of nervousness from the Kremlin around the elections, it seems unlikely Putin would have mentioned peacekeepers back in September if elections were the main obstacle to securing his consent. Rather, Russia's concern is to ensure a peace operation falls in line with its expectations. In any event, it is difficult to imagine a peacekeeping force on the ground before Russia's elections.

The question of resources

Indeed, even if all the parties reached agreement for a peace operation, it remains to be seen whether sufficient resources could be mustered. This is the second big obstacle that stands in the way of a peace operation.

> It can be taken for granted that Russia would veto the deployment of forces from NATO member states – and Russian troops would not be agreeable to Ukraine.

A trained peacekeeping force of 20,000 is fairly large. For comparison, it matches the size of the largest UN-mandated deployment at present, which is in Congo.

The Gowan report suggests that forces should come from non-NATO European countries and CIS states. It specifically names Austria, Belarus, Finland, Kazakhstan and Sweden. It is hard to imagine these states contributing anywhere near the required numbers of soldiers to provide the backbone to a peace operation. While Belarus's defence minister says his country is prepared to send personnel, he indicated that Belarus could presently contribute only 100 appropriately-trained troops, although state officials have remarked it is prepared to provide more. Moreover, many of the states mentioned have limited peacekeeping experience. Kazakhstan has a total of five military experts deployed on peace operations according to the latest UN figures. Belarus also has five personnel deployed, to the UN Interim Force in Lebanon, and, although it has traditionally emphasised its reluctance to commit troops outside the country, this position visibly shifted against the backdrop of the Ukraine war.

In any case, a minimal peacekeeping force that freezes the conflict in the Donbas will remain unacceptable to the Ukrainian government, EU members and the United States. At the same time, a peace operation that seeks to restore control over the self-styled people's republics to Kyiv will continue to be viewed with suspicion by Moscow, even though it would presumably still wield tremendous influence. One might maintain that efforts should nonetheless not be spared in trying to forge agreement, yet this runs the

risk that an ill-defined set of goals will fuel further violence. It would risk failing to remember the lessons of peace operations in places such as Yugoslavia, as outlined in the UN's Brahimi report of 2000. A peace operation that papers over the different visions of stakeholders to the conflict – lacking a 'clear, credible and achievable mandate' – may only weaken the ongoing precarious situation.

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