

Video: Ukraine Between Biden and a Hard Place. A Major Military Campaign against Donbass is Contemplated

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Joe Biden’s extensive interest in Ukraine during his tenure as Obama’s vice president meant that US attention towards the country would instantly be elevated once the new administration came into power. The Burisma scandal which implicated Hunter Biden and which became a problem for Joe Biden on the campaign trail, combined with Biden’s own apparent frailty and avoidance of extensive public engagements, have meant that Biden himself is in fact yet to have a telephone conversation with Zelensky.

However, whether he deliberately chose to outsource Ukraine policy to his trusted advisors or they are taking initiative in order to fill the vacuum of power left by their boss’ incapacity, US Ukraine policy has taken a number of new twists and turns in the less than two months of the Biden Administration.

https://southfront.org/wp-content/uploads/video/02.06.2021_FPD_Ukraine_Between_Biden.mp4

The Biden Administration’s actions so far indicate a certain degree of impatience with the goings-on in Kiev which is behaving in an all too independent fashion on many issues. Kiev’s decision to nationalize Motor Sich, an aircraft engine manufacturer whose purchase was sought by Chinese investors thus robbing Ukraine of a significant influx of badly needed hard currency, took place after Washington had expressed displeasure at Chinese companies’ foothold in Ukraine which moreover brings with it access to Soviet-era technologies attractive to China’s aerospace industries.

This action was taken in spite of the considerable risk of Chinese retaliation, which indeed occurred in the form of China’s Foreign Ministry informing its Ukrainian counterpart that it would no longer respect their wishes concerning economic activities in the Crimea, something that Chinese firms have thus far shied away from. The US Embassy in Kiev’s instant endorsement of Zelensky’s shutdown of three opposition TV stations and the placement of sanctions, in violation of Ukraine’s own laws, on one of Ukraine’s opposition leaders Medvedchuk on the grounds that these were involved in spreading so-called

“Russian disinformation” suggests that Washington was at the very least aware of the move and may even have prompted it. US sanctioning of Igor Kolomoysky on the basis of his corrupting Ukraine’s politics indicates that Zelensky had not gone far enough in fulfilling Washington’s wishes. In doing this Washington demonstrated it is willing to publicly humiliate Zelensky should he fail to display appropriate deference to their wishes. The question at this point becomes, in which direction will Washington push Zelensky? How far, what means will Washington use to get its way, and to what extent will Zelensky resist?

The greatest service that Ukraine could render Biden’s administration is to launch an all-out assault on Novorossia. A pitched battle between Ukrainian and DPR/LPR forces would instantly create the appropriate headlines and provide the necessary additional pretexts to condemn Russia and introduce more economic sanctions. It would then deliver the outcome that no amount of phony poisonings of Navalny could, namely the suspension or even shut-down of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which has become such a thorn in the side of the Anglo-Saxon powers.

A major military campaign involving several brigades supported by airpower and the now-operational Bayraktar TB-2 drones in an effort to replicate Azerbaijan’s success against Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh would place Moscow before the unenviable choice of abandoning the Donbass to its fate or committing its regular military forces to battle in Novorossia’s defense.

Whether Ukraine’s political leadership is willing to undertake such a desperate measure, in a country whose president suffers from a 20% approval rating and which has seen extensive protests against the recent sharp increase in utility costs, is another question. On the one hand, Ukrainian troop movements near the Donbass have generated considerable attention, and exchanges of fire between Ukrainian and Novorossian forces appear to have continued at an elevated pace over the past several weeks. At the same time, no extraordinary measures such as the recall of reservists or closure of borders in order to prevent military-age males from leaving the country have been observed. While Ukraine’s Rada is considering laws making draft evasion more harshly punishable, these laws will not have an immediate impact, and appear to be a reaction to the failure to build up a professional army of volunteers or even to give the draftees a positive reason to serve. It has even been pointed out that the Ukrainian troop movements have been so ostentatious and lacking in even elementary efforts to preserve concealment and surprise that they represent a “war of nerves”, an exercise in brinksmanship, and possibly an effort to simulate action for the benefit of Washington, rather than genuine preparations for an offensive. A train carrying a reinforced tank company that had been spotted slowly passing three different railroad crossings in eastern Ukraine over the course of several days looks much like an operation staged for the benefit of ubiquitous smart phone cameras.

Therefore the likelihood of the Ukrainian military opting for a large-scale offensive remains low due to the fear of heavy and pointless losses which might cause Ukraine’s military morale to collapse, with unpredictable consequences. Small-scale raids to capture select positions, shelling of Novorossia’s towns and cities, even a staged atrocity, remain more plausible and attractive from the political point of view. Ukraine’s most dangerous military capability is represented by Bayraktar drones, cruise missiles like the Neptun, and short-range ballistic missiles currently in service and being developed, because their use would not entail the danger of major Ukrainian personnel losses. Moreover, Novorossia’s forces would be hard pressed to retaliate in kind against such strikes and Russian efforts to do so

would be highly provocative internationally and would carry the risk of causing Ukrainian civilian casualties. Fortunately for Novorossia, the drone park remains fairly small and the drones themselves are vulnerable to Novorossia's air defenses, while the cruise and ballistic missiles are still years from large-scale operational deployment. The sort of missile bombardment that would represent a genuine threat to Novorossia's unrecognized republics is still years away. By the time such a serious threat could materialize, Novorossia's forces would likely have their own means of retaliation in the form of barrage munitions, also referred to as "suicide drones" that could be produced on the spot in Donetsk and Lugansk. However, Ukraine's current capabilities are sufficient to launch provocations, including the bombardment of civilian targets as was the case in Mariupol in 2014.

That Ukraine's military is unwilling to risk another misadventure against Novorossia is evident enough, as is Zelensky's reluctance to go down in history as the president who destroyed Ukraine. These considerations are unlikely to be salient for decisionmakers in Washington, who need Ukraine to advance US interests and are rather less concerned about the US advancing Ukraine's interests. But the lengths to which Washington is willing to go to pressure Zelensky are still unclear, though the possibility of outright blackmail raised its head when a prominent Maidan propagandist Dmitry Gordon announced that on March 15, the "Ides of March" immortalized by the assassination of Julius Caesar, Ukraine would face a trial of historic proportions once a certain bombshell news story was revealed. While March 15 came and went with no bombshells or even duds, Gordon did reveal that the event consisted of a Bellingcat "investigation" into the SBU plot to lure Wagner PMC contractors into Ukraine in order to have them put on trial. The "bombshell" aspect of the Bellingcat effort is that the plot failed because of a highly placed source in Zelensky's own presidential cabinet, who leaked it to Russian intelligence services. Considering Bellingcat's reputation as a firm which does info-warfare "hits" on designated targets and Gordon's hyping of the potential impact of the film once it becomes public, one has to consider the possibility that Bellingcat is part of a campaign to blackmail or even oust Zelensky from office should he fail to satisfy Washington's demands.

As noted previously, Zelensky has taken a dim view of Washington's meddling in Ukraine's affairs, though it remains to be seen whether he is able to stand up to even his own national security officials who ostensibly are subordinate to him but in reality take orders from Washington. Lacking the independent power base that allowed Poroshenko to resist Washington's initiatives for "reforming" Ukraine's economy, Zelensky may yet prove the ideal president from Washington's perspective, if not Ukraine's.

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