

## Video: US Presidential Election, Prospects of Kiev Military Advance against Donbass

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*For the past several years, **the war between Ukraine and the breakaway and still-unrecognized Donetsk People's Republic and Lugansk People's Republic** has settled into a tense routine of attritional trench warfare, punctuated by sniping, clashes between patrols, small-scale raids, offensive minelaying, and ambushes using anti-tank guided missiles. There have been few operations by units larger than company. The front line has remained almost entirely unchanged. At the same time, both sides have been preparing for the possible next round of high-intensity warfare. What would happen if the fighting were to break out again?*

That particular prediction is made more difficult by the very fact of the long lull in high-intensity fighting during which both sides have undergone a certain degree of transformation which remains relatively unknown to the other party. Both sides have seen certain material improvements, though apparently nothing dramatic.

Ukraine's armored vehicle fleet still relies on the same, but now even more worn out vehicles it went to war with in 2014. The planned re-equipment with the Oplot MBT never took place, and even the upgraded T-64BU Bulat was found to be flawed. Therefore the elderly T-64BV remains the main tank of Ukraine's forces. Light armored vehicle fleet has seen some improvement thanks to domestic production and deliveries from former Warsaw Pact member states. If there is one area where Ukraine's military may have made a major step forward, it is the artillery, using the large store of inactive weapons for Soviet-era reserve forces. However, artillery munition production continues to be a problem.

While the number of Ukraine's brigades has grown, the military experiences major problems with recruitment and retention, meaning that many of these brigades have the strength of a reinforced combined arms battalion.

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On Novorossia's side the situation is hardly different. DPR and LPR units continue to use the same types of equipment they used during the campaigns of five years ago. The numeric strength does not appear to have changed much, either, and here too recruitment and retention remains a problem.

The other factor making predictions difficult is the level of morale of these two forces that have been bogged down in an apparently endless war that is beyond their power to finish. The combination of trench warfare boredom and terror means it is debilitating to the units' morale and proficiency if they are forced to remain in the trenches for too long. While the most offensive-capable forces are kept out of the trenches as mobile reserves, they too can

only maintain their state of alert for so long before losing their edge.

Paradoxically, this state of affairs give an advantage to the side that intends to go on the offensive, because the preparations for the attack and associated training would imbue the troops with the hope that, after the next big push, the war will finally be over. At the same time, both sides know such an offensive would be an exceedingly risky proposition, because if it fails, it will grind down the attacking side's most effective units and render the army vulnerable to a counteroffensive to which it would not be able to respond.

Therefore the likelihood of renewed fighting also heavily depends on who actually makes the decision. While local leaders may be cautious enough, foreign ones in distant capitals may have different considerations in mind.

A big unknown hanging over the future of the Donbass is the position of **Joe Biden**, the Democratic Party nominee and the potential winner of the November elections. Biden has already played a highly destructive role in the politics of Ukraine and the US-Russia relations. It is Biden that blackmailed Poroshenko into firing the Chief Prosecutor Shokin due to his interest in the corrupt dealings of the Burisma energy company which infamously had Joe's son Hunter on its board of directors. It is also Biden who held a lengthy, 30-45 minute telephone conversation with Poroshenko on the day MH17 was shot down and promptly came out blaming Russia for it, even as the wreckage was still smoking where it fell. Biden identified himself as a Russia foe much earlier, during the 2012 vice-presidential debates where he positioned himself as being "hard on Putin", which in retrospect proved to be an early indicator of where the second-term Obama administration foreign policy would go. It also goes without saying Biden is an ardent promoter of the "RussiaGate" effort to paint Donald Trump as a Russian agent/stooge/fellow traveler/useful idiot.

At the same time, Biden's line against China has hardened as well, which may have implications for US-Russia relations during the probable Biden presidency. As late as May 2019, Biden would describe People's Republic of China as "they are not bad folks", adding that "they are not competition to us", comments that may yet come to haunt him on the campaign trail. However, once the COVID-19 broke out of control in the United States, Biden sought to out-do Trump in his accusations the high US death toll was due to China misleading the United States on the nature of the virus and not allowing US public health officials access to Wuhan and China's epidemiology labs. Even before that, Hunter Biden resigned from boards of directors of China-based firms. While that might have been motivated by his, and his dad's, desire to keep a low profile due to the scrutiny Hunter's business dealings have attracted during Donald Trump's impeachment proceedings, it may also have been preparation for Joe Biden's anti-China pivot.

The emergence of PRC as Biden's perceived number one international adversary may mean a desire to improve relations with Russia in the way that Trump, compromised from the start by RussiaGate and without a history of own anti-Russia rhetoric to fall back on, could never deliver. Biden, however, is in the same position as Nixon was in the late 1960s. His earlier anti-Russian rhetoric and actions now make him nearly immune from the same sort of accusations which, even though false, nevertheless effectively stuck to Trump. Nixon's own enthusiastic participation in McCarthyite witch hunts made it possible for him to do what his Democratic Party predecessor Lyndon Johnson could not: end Vietnam War, engage in arms control treaties with USSR and "go to China" in order to exploit the growing divide between the two main Communist powers. Biden has the political capital necessary to repeat the

process: end the war in Afghanistan (something he had proposed already as vice president), enter into arms control treaties with China and...go to Moscow, which is currently seen in Washington in the same way that Beijing was in the 1970s, namely the secondary challenger which needs to be peeled away from the primary one. Moreover, just as in the early 1970s, United States of the 2020s is wracked by a massive internal crisis requiring international retrenchment in order to focus on internal reforms.

But that optimistic scenario remains less likely than the prospect of renewed escalation. Nixon-era United States was not suffering from the hubris of American Exceptionalism. On the contrary, it was a country full of self-doubt and under no illusion concerning the limits of its power. It entered into arms control treaties because it did not feel it could win them. Disasters abroad and at home notwithstanding, the US elite still has not been shaken out of its complacency, and it does appear to sincerely believe it can win a strategic and conventional arms race against both China and Russia. We have not seen any indications so far that Biden intends any moderation in the area of foreign policy or returning to a policy of cooperation with Russia. One should expect that, in the event of Biden victory, Ukraine will launch an offensive against the Donbass shortly after the inauguration, in other words, in February or March of 2020. This offensive would accomplish two objectives for Biden. One, it would establish his hawkish, "patriotic" bona fides, make him look "presidential" in the eyes of the mainstream media and the national security establishment. Secondly, it would allow the US to exert even more pressure on Germany and other EU member states concerning North Stream and other areas of cooperation with Russia.

In order to achieve these goals, particularly the second one, the offensive would not need to overrun the Donbass, in fact, that would not be the aim at all. Rather, the goal would be to force Russian forces to intervene directly in support of the Lugansk and Donetsk republics to justify depicting Russia as the aggressor in the matter. And even if the republics' militaries can cope with the UAF assault on their own, the sheer level of violence will still make enough headlines to satisfy Biden's requirements. Whether Zelensky wants that kind of escalation for his country is almost irrelevant. Both he and Biden know very well what the balance of power in that relationship is. Ukraine is a failing state seriously dependent on foreign financial assistance in the form of continual IMF loans, debt rescheduling, favorable trade deals, etc. Biden knew how to use these levers to achieve an important change in Ukraine's politics that benefited him personally, he will not hesitate to use them again.

Moreover, even if Biden were driven by the Nixonian motives described above, it's doubtful the foreign policy Deep State would allow him to do that. Biden's own conversations with Poroshenko no doubt contain great many embarrassing moments whose release would instantly embroil him in a massive scandal. The fact that Donald Trump was impeached solely due to the desire of national security apparatchiks to continue their pet war in Ukraine is indicative of their power to make foreign policy quite independently of their supposed civilian bosses.

The situation is further complicated by the widening rift between the Western neo-liberal world and conservative societies of eastern European countries. This includes a large part of the Ukrainian population which is committed to traditional values. The rapidly deteriorating social and economic situation in Ukraine contributes to a further antagonism of this part of the society towards the forcefully imposed Western ideology and its local agents. Another point of tensions is the existing contradictions between the Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchy) and the artificially assembled pseudo-church organizations in Ukraine. The Moscow Patriarchy is returning to its former position among the Ukrainian faithful. In the

event of a further dissatisfaction of the society by the declared pseudo-Western way of development, positions of Russia and the Moscow Patriarchy will strengthen even more.

While a Ukrainian offensive is relatively unlikely in 2020, its probability increases considerably in 2021, particularly in the event of a Biden victory. The conflict in Ukraine has lasted this long mainly because Ukraine's current sponsors in the West are not interested in ending it, irrespective of what the will of the Ukrainian people might be. The situation will get even worse should the US presidency be taken over by someone with a well-established hostility toward Russia who believes his aims would be better served by another bloody campaign on the Donbass.

The next US administration will employ every option that it has in order to prevent the return of Russian influence in the country. Besides furthering the conflict in eastern Ukraine, it will expand efforts against it in the ideological sphere as well, likely including direct provocations.

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