



Eastern Ukrainian woman, one of over 1 million internally displaced persons due to conflict, has just returned from her destroyed home holding all her possessions, on main street in Nikishino Village, March 1, 2015 (© UNHCR/Andrew McConnell)

Peacekeepers in the Donbas

By Michael P. Wagner

Since the conflict in Ukraine began in 2014, over 10,000 people have died in the fighting between Russian-backed separatists and Ukrainian forces in the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine. The Ukrainian government has repeatedly called for a peacekeeping mission to halt the bloodshed, so Russian President Vladimir Putin surprised the world on

September 5, 2017, when he proposed introducing peacekeepers into Eastern Ukraine to protect the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe–Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (OSCE-SMM). Despite halting progress since that time, restarting a peacekeeping mission remains an important opportunity.¹ Many experts remain wary and dismiss it as a politi-

cal ploy; they have suggested calling Putin's bluff. However, they also realize the idea of a properly structured force with a clear mandate operating in support of an accepted peace agreement could offer a viable path to peace that is worth exploring.²

Putin envisions a limited deployment of peacekeepers on the existing line of contact in Donbas to safeguard OSCE-SMM personnel.³ Such a plan could be effective in ending the conflict and relieving immediate suffering, but it could also lead to an open-ended United Nations (UN) commitment and make long-term resolution more challenging. Most importantly, freezing the conflict in its current state would solidify Russian control of the separatist regions, enabling it to maintain pressure on Ukraine by adjusting the intensity level as it desires. This plan would also prevent the Ukrainians and Russian-backed separatists from implementing many of the Minsk II Accord tenets—including instituting

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constitutional reforms and reestablishing control of sovereign borders—effectively blocking Ukraine from seeking North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) membership.⁴ A more comprehensive peacekeeping mission than Putin’s could address these issues and ease Russia’s economic and governance burdens, return sovereignty to Ukraine, and deliver important constitutional reforms to the people.

The existence of a legitimate peace agreement is rightly considered one of the key components of a successful peacekeeping operation.⁵ The Minsk II framework must be updated to address outstanding questions such as sequencing actions and authorizing a peacekeeping force with an international civilian administration. The mandate of the force should be tailored to match its size and capabilities to avoid creating unrealistic expectations.⁶ Operating with the consent of all parties under a viable peace agreement, this force would primarily deploy under Chapter VI of the UN Charter. It would also require Chapter VII authorization to compel compliance with the peace agreement; protect civilians; oversee the return of Ukraine’s estimated 1.7 million internally displaced persons (IDPs); and safeguard critical civilian infrastructure to include roads, gas and oil supplies, and power distribution facilities.⁷ The force cannot effectively perform these missions if it is limited to operating solely along the line of contact. The force must have sufficient capacity to secure the international borders, the separatist areas of Luhansk and Donetsk, and a 75-kilometer (km) artillery buffer zone on the Ukrainian side of the line of contact. This broader geographic area and a Chapter VII authorization in the mandate would give the mission a credible capability to respond to violations and address issues that flair up. The existing OSCE-SMM of 1,078 personnel, including 600 monitors from 44 countries, should remain in place and integrate with the UN peacekeeping force for protection as it executes its mission, expands its reach, and verifies compliance.⁸

Perhaps the most critical component of the agreement would be an interim

civilian administration (ICA) to maintain control of the separatist regions during the transition. An ICA would fill the void in local governance while the Ukrainian parliament would amend the constitution to implement the decentralization requirements of Minsk II and necessary political changes to form legitimate local governance structures throughout the Donbas.⁹ The former UN Transitional Administration for Eastern Slavonia, Baranja, and Western Sirmium in Croatia after the Balkan wars offers precedence for such a transitional authority under UN auspices.¹⁰

Most discussions of the appropriate size of peacekeeping and counterinsurgency forces focus on force-to-population ratios with minimal concern for other considerations such as terrain, lengths of borders, population density, and the existence of a legitimate peace agreement.¹¹ These analyses are also not particularly well grounded in history.¹² The most commonly cited ratio of forces to population is 20:1,000, with others suggesting ratios as low as 2.8:1,000, depending on levels of violence.¹³ Donetsk and Luhansk have a combined total of approximately 7 million people and 53,200 square km representing approximately 15 percent of Ukraine’s prewar population and 9 percent of its territory, along with a significant amount of its industrial capacity.¹⁴ The separatist-controlled portions account for an area roughly the size of Kosovo or one-third of the 53,200 square km of Luhansk and Donetsk, with an estimated 2.8 million people still in the separatist areas.¹⁵ Assuming that up to 1.2 million of the estimated 1.7 million IDPs return to the Donbas, the peacekeeping force could be responsible for a population of up to 4 million people. Using pure ratio-based calculations, the size of a peacekeeping force could range from 11,200 to 80,000.

With this as a general range, we must also consider the other factors that could complicate or simplify the mission. Key issues that tend to warrant a larger force include the dense urban terrain in several major cities, an international border of just over 400 km, and a line of contact approximately 500 km long, with around

90,000 heavily armed combatants facing each other.¹⁶ Countervailing trends that will dramatically reduce force requirements include the existence of a peace agreement, relatively open agricultural land outside the cities, and limited ethnic tensions. Additional challenges a force might face would likely include criminality, conflicts surrounding returning IDPs, and the remnants of separatist and nationalist militias as well as any stay-behind Russian elements. Based on these factors, a force of approximately 20,000 peacekeepers would be suitable, if appropriately organized and outfitted. It would require a wide variety of capabilities, including unmanned aerial vehicles to help patrol the borders, rotary-wing aviation assets, target acquisition radar to identify any indirect fire attacks in violation of the peace agreement, and a robust intelligence analysis and fusion capability to better share information and ensure more focused and effective employment of the force. The mission should include civilian police and a military formation consisting of a mix of armor and infantry forces to ensure sufficient manpower to patrol the urban areas and sufficient firepower to protect itself and the mission. Twenty thousand troops would be sufficient to field two brigades of peacekeepers in each *oblast*, or region, with a headquarters staff and the additional enabling capabilities. To put this in context, it is nearly the same number of troops as in the International Security and Assistance Force’s Regional Command East during the Surge in 2010–2011 for about half of the population, just over one-tenth of the land mass, less challenging terrain, and a more permissive threat environment.¹⁷

Identifying troop-contributing countries that have sufficient capacity to execute a mission and are acceptable to all parties involved will be challenging. One option is to recruit from non-NATO, OSCE member countries to avoid placing NATO troops close to Russia’s borders, or relying on Russians to enforce a peace in a conflict that they are a party to. If NATO or Collective Security Treaty Organization countries participate, it must be proportional. Another option would be to select a power like Brazil or

India to lead the mission. Their participation could expand economic opportunity in Ukraine and help guarantee Russian compliance out of fear of angering another power. Ukraine would welcome any boost to its development efforts as it attempts to recover from the conflict and seeks to disarm, demobilize, and reintegrate tens of thousands of fighters. In either case, OSCE monitors would be present to help assure the peace is being fairly enforced, and the interim civilian administrative authority would still be responsible for administering the separatist regions.

Vladimir Putin's proposal to introduce a peacekeeping force into Ukraine might be disingenuous, but with thoughtful modifications it could promise Eastern Ukraine a real opportunity for peace. The mandate must include Chapter VII authority and be carefully designed to implement and enforce a mutually agreeable and beneficial solution to the conflict, including a transitional administration. A force of approximately 20,000 peacekeepers that is appropriately equipped with key capabilities would be robust enough to deter any violators and maximize the effectiveness of a relatively small force. Several questions must still be addressed, such as the phasing of the peacekeeping force's deployment, structure of the interim civilian administration, and role of the relevant international organizations and specific authorities. A properly structured force with a clear mandate, however, could offer Ukraine and Russia a welcome opportunity for peace. JFQ

Notes

¹ *Ukraine: The Line*, Briefing No. 81 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, July 18, 2016), 10, available at <www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/eastern-europe/ukraine/ukraine-line>; Steven Pifer, "Test Putin's Proposal for U.N. Peacekeepers," Brookings blog, September 13, 2017, available at <www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/09/13/test-putins-proposal-for-u-n-peacekeepers/>.

² Alexander Vershbow, "Real Peacekeeping in the Donbas Will Put Putin to the Test," *The Hill*, September 21, 2017, available at <www.thehill.com/opinion/international/351512-real-peacekeeping-in-the-donbas-will-put-putin-to-the-test>; Carl Bildt, "Is Peace in the Donbas Possible?" European Council on Foreign Relations, October 12, 2017, available at <www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_is_peace_in_donbas_possible>.

³ Some reports indicated Vladimir Putin suggested that Russia or another Commonwealth of Independent States country could provide the troops. See "Russia Drafts UN Security Council Resolution to Send Peacekeepers to Ukraine," RT News (Moscow), September 5, 2017.

⁴ "Minsk Agreement on Ukraine Crisis: Text in Full," *Telegraph*, February 12, 2015, available at <www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/ukraine/11408266/Minsk-agreement-on-Ukraine-crisis-text-in-full.html>; "Ukraine Ceasefire: New Minsk Agreement Key Points," BBC, February 12, 2015, available at <www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31436513>; *Ukraine*, 9, highlights how Ukrainian military leaders are critical of the political and military leadership in country.

⁵ *Report of the High-Level Panel on Peace Operations on Uniting Our Strengths for Peace: Politics, Partnership and People*, A/70/95-S/2015/446 (New York: United Nations, June 17, 2015), 10, available at <www.globalr2p.org/media/files/n1518145.pdf>.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 11, 41.

⁸ "Status Report as of 4 October 2017," Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), October 6, 2017, available at <www.osce.org/special-monitoring-mission-to-ukraine/348246>; and "OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine: The Facts," OSCE, March 24, 2015, available at <www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/116879>.

⁹ *Ukraine*, 7; Oldrich Bures, "Wanted: A Mid-Range Theory of International Peacekeeping," *International Studies Review* 9, no. 3 (Autumn, 2007), 410–411; Marek Kolodziejcki, Nereo Penalver, and Pamela Valenti, *Economic, Social, and Territorial Situation of Ukraine: In Depth Analysis* (Brussels: European Parliament, November 17, 2014), 13, 19; "Minsk Agreement on Ukraine Crisis"; and "Ukraine Ceasefire: New Minsk Agreement Key Points."

¹⁰ Ivan Simonovic and Ivan Nimac, "UN-TAES: A Case Study," *Croatian International Relations Review* (January–March 1999), 5–9, available at <<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/90d8/cdd98c5dce5ab0f10144ad-d444327c5d4657.pdf>>; and "Croatia: UN-TAES," United Nations, December 22, 1997, available at <https://peacekeeping.un.org/mission/past/untaes_b.htm>.

¹¹ I include counterinsurgency operations in this analysis because the fighting in Ukraine is at least superficially an insurgency, with Russia supporting separatists in Eastern Ukraine that question the legitimacy of the government in Kyiv.

¹² Riley Moore, "Counterinsurgency Force Ratio: Strategic Utility or Nominal Necessity," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 24, no. 5 (2013), 856–857, 859–860; David Michael Green, Chad Kahl, and Paul F. Diehl, "Predicting the Size of UN Peacekeeping Operations," *Armed Forces and Society* 24, no. 4 (Summer 1998), 487–491.

¹³ *U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 22–23; Moore, "Counterinsurgency Force Ratio," 859–861. Moore examines ratios offered by James Quinlivan (20:1,000), John McGrath (13.6:1,000), Steven Goode (2.8:1,000), and Moore, who describes a density of 40:1,000 throughout most of France's unsuccessful efforts in Algeria versus a 0.15:1,000 density during Thailand's successful campaign against its communist insurgency. The *Report of the High-Level Panel on Peace Operations*, 41, reports that in 2015, United Nations Peacekeeping density totaled 106,000 troops, responsible for covering 11 million square kilometers.

¹⁴ Kolodziejcki, Penalver, and Valenti, *Economic, Social, and Territorial Situation of Ukraine*, 19.

¹⁵ Bildt, "Is Peace in the Donbas Possible? Conflict Background," North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Kosovo Force, available at <<https://jfcnaples.nato.int/kfor/about-us/history/conflict-background>>. This highlights that, at the highest point, levels in Kosovo reached 50,000 NATO troops to enforce a tenuous peace in an ethnically charged environment.

¹⁶ *Ukraine*, 4, 8; Bildt, "Is Peace in the Donbas Possible?"

¹⁷ "Regional Command East: Overview," Institute for the Study of War, Washington, DC, available at <www.understandingwar.org/region/regional-command-east>.