

Despite the Odds, Putin May Still Invade Ukraine

By [Alexander Golts](#)

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During his annual live call-in show last week, President Vladimir Putin told viewers that he would not send Russian troops into the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine. That is a sure sign he is planning an invasion in the near future. After all, Putin also recently said Russia's Army and Federal Security Service are not involved in any way in eastern Ukraine. Nobody takes that claim seriously, especially when a vigilante "people's governor" in Slovyansk appeals to Putin to deploy Russian peacekeeping forces in the Donetsk, Luhansk and Kharkiv regions.

A quick defeat of the weak Ukrainian Army is guaranteed, but Russia's rapid-deployment force is not strong enough to occupy several Ukrainian regions.

Moscow canceled a planned U.S. surveillance flight over Russian territory last week which would have fallen under the Open Skies Treaty. Such flights are the only legal option available now for obtaining objective information about the military situation at the Russian-Ukrainian border. But on Monday, a Open Skies Treaty intelligence flight was conducted over Russian territory, according to a State Department official.

Western sources estimate that anywhere from 20,000 to 50,000 Russian troops have assembled along the Ukrainian border. NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe, U.S. Air Force General Philip Breedlove, recently said Russia had concentrated enough forces to march all the way across Ukraine to the self-proclaimed Transdnestr republic in only five days.

With the Ukrainian Army in complete disarray and the authorities in Kiev unable to formulate clear orders for its law enforcement agencies, few factors stand in the way of Putin following his Crimea game plan to invade eastern and southern Ukraine. According to a April 2 [article in Vedomosti](#), a number of Russian forces could be sent to join possible operations in Ukraine. These include units from the Kantemirov 4th Guards Tank Division and the 2nd Guards Motorized Infantry Division from the Moscow region; the 76th Guards Airborne Assault Division from Pskov; the 31st Guards Airborne Assault Brigade from Ulyanovsk; the 106th Guards Airborne Assault Division from Tula; and the 23rd independent Motorized Infantry Brigade from Samara. In all likelihood, this list also includes Special Forces of the Main Intelligence Directorate. These are practically all of Russia's elite units.

Former Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov's military reforms were primarily aimed at ending the concept of a mass-mobilization army that had prevailed in Russia for almost 150 years. Serdyukov rejected the myth that hundreds of thousands of conscripts could quickly and effectively fill the ranks, opting instead to form a dozen battle-ready groups composed of professional soldiers who can deploy within hours of receiving orders. The world witnessed Russia's new rapid deployment capability during its Crimean special operation.

The question is whether Moscow will manage to follow the same scenario in eastern and southern Ukraine. When the Kremlin began creating its rapid-deployment forces, it had no idea it might need them to capture Ukraine. Once international coalition forces withdraw from Afghanistan, radical Islam threatens to spill over into the former Soviet republics of Central Asia. Russia shares an even longer border with Kazakhstan than it does with China, and that border exists more on paper than in fact. Russia is hurriedly forming rapid deployment forces to counter this potential threat. They will probably include four divisions and five brigades of airborne troops, four brigades and eight individual regiments of Marines, units of the Main Intelligence Directorate, or GRU, three or four elite army formations and support forces for the Air Force and Navy. Defense Ministry plans indicate that those forces will be composed of volunteer soldiers in the coming years. Of the 50,000 contract soldiers the Russian Army recruits annually, it sends a significant number to staff these forces. The Russian Air Force already has up to 20 battalions composed entirely of contract soldiers, and there is every reason to believe that the 30,000 to 40,000 troops assembled near Ukraine's southern and eastern border in February represent the backbone of Russia's future rapid-deployment forces.

Under the current conditions, those forces are adequate for seizing the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine. The question is whether it will be possible for Moscow to hold those

territories. After all, it was easy enough to sever Crimea from the rest of Ukraine by simply blocking the highway and railway through the narrow Isthmus of Perekop. But it would not be that easy to do in the Donetsk, Luhansk and Kharkiv regions of Ukraine. Russian forces would have to create a full-fledged border where none had ever existed, severing hundreds of roads linking the captured regions with the rest of Ukraine. It would mean setting up checkpoints on all of the major roads to prevent Ukrainian forces from entering the captured territory. That task would need an occupation force of at least 100,000 professional soldiers and officers — more than Russia has.

Russian strategists developed their rapid-deployment force to fulfill missions that U.S. General Colin Powell defined when he was chairman of the U.S. joint chiefs of staff — that is, to achieve a quick military victory and then immediately withdraw. A quick Russian defeat of the weak Ukrainian Army is all but guaranteed, but Russia's rapid-deployment force is not strong enough to occupy several regions of Ukraine.

But none of this proves that Putin will not order Russian troops to cross the border in the coming days. He has brilliantly confounded analysts several times in the last few weeks. That is not because the analysts were somehow incompetent but because they based their analysis of Putin on rational arguments. The problem is that rational arguments seem to have little place in today's Russia.

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