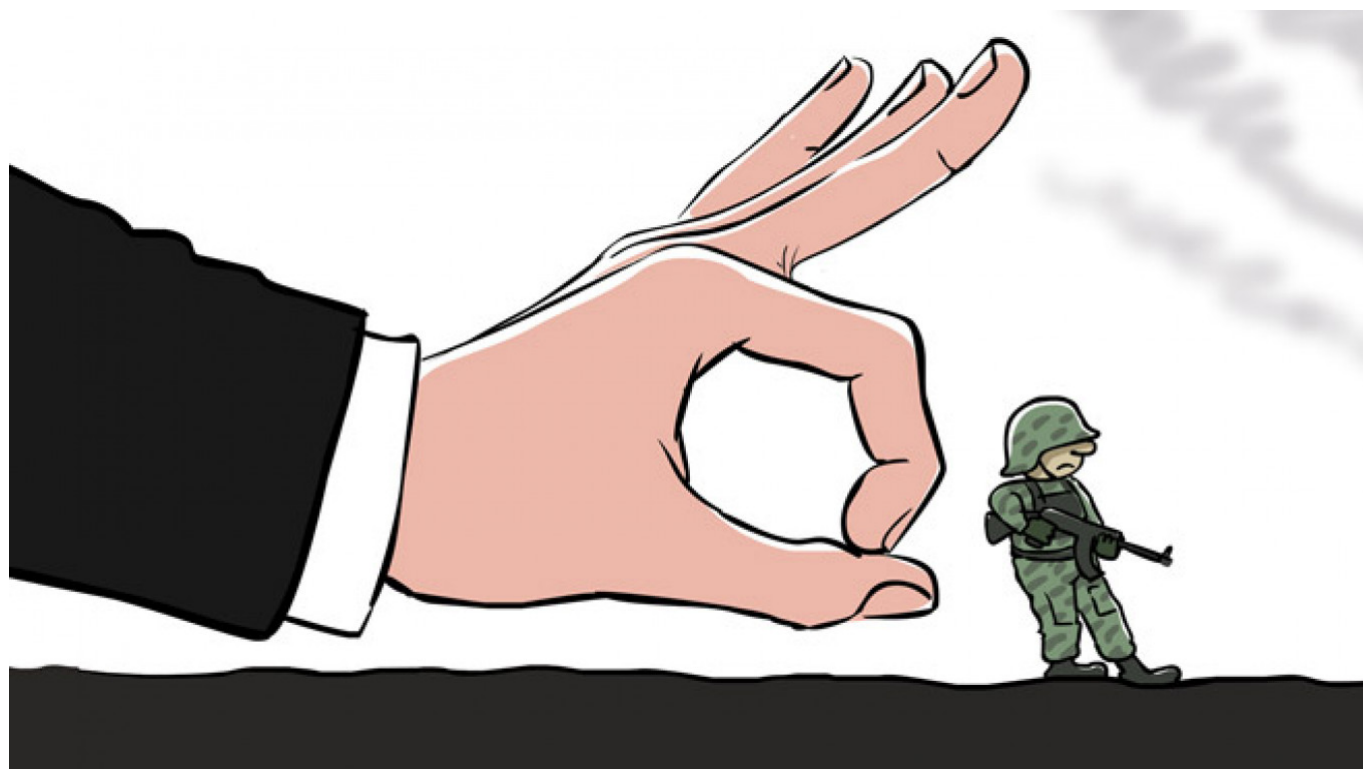


Russia Lost the Long Game at Debaltseve

By [Alexander Golts](#)

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The main event of last week was the military victory by what President Vladimir Putin called "yesterday's tractor drivers" in Debaltseve. That statement is an almost verbatim replay of this very old Soviet-era joke: "TASS reports that a peaceful Soviet tractor came under fire from Chinese territory. The tractor immediately returned fire, destroying three enemy squadrons, then started its engines and flew into orbit. The tractor driver is reported to be feeling fine."

In today's case, a mug shot of these so-called "tractor drivers" would show a striking resemblance to Russian generals.

As a result, the separatists won a few more square kilometers of territory, occupied an important railway junction and took control over a major road hub.

What did the victors gain as a result? True, they did improve their tactical position somewhat and created an opportunity for a further offensive. But that is all they did, and I doubt that

such an attack will ever occur. After all, Russia has only limited capabilities for fighting this type of hybrid war.

As I mentioned previously in this column, the Kremlin has only two or three dozen units of high readiness forces that can achieve victory in a short-term conflict — with "short-term" the key word in that sentence. Obviously, those units are now worn out after months of fighting a hybrid war, and no replacements exist.

This would explain the attempts to force conscripts to sign contracts for continued service as professional soldiers. What's more, the secretive nature of the war has caused dissatisfaction among soldiers who chose to make the army their profession. Several such contract servicemen rebelled in Murmansk after learning that they were to be posted to long-term commands on "the Russian-Ukrainian border." All of this casts doubt on the Kremlin's military achievements in Ukraine.

As for Debaltseve, the military victory there is probably a political failure. After all, according to the logic of Russian officials, it turns out that the separatists can simply ignore President Vladimir Putin's will.

Doesn't that make it seem rather ridiculous that Putin would have spent a sleepless night in Minsk hammering out an agreement with the leaders of France and Germany that the separatists would deign to sign? That document clearly stated that on Feb. 15 the gunfire must stop and both sides must begin withdrawing their heavy equipment.

And yet, after signing that paper, the leaders of the self-proclaimed republics suddenly decided to continue fighting. Of course, it was Moscow, and not the separatists, that decided to continue the war. It is anyone's guess as to why Putin took such a dismissive attitude toward his own long hours of diplomatic work.

I suspect that the decision to seize Debaltseve was meant as revenge for the latest European Union sanctions.

That said, it is important to recall that French President Francois Hollande and German Chancellor Angela Merkel said before the Minsk meeting that it would be their last attempt to make the peace process work. And that is why they went so far as to prepare documents specifically for the separatists to sign.

That calls to mind these words of former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill: "We seem to be very near the bleak choice between War and Shame. My feeling is that we shall choose Shame, and then have War thrown in a little later, on even more adverse terms than at present."

It is unlikely those world leaders will agree to that sort of humiliation again. The failure of the peace process means that, among other things, Russia is fundamentally incapable of keeping its agreements. It is impossible to make agreements with someone who violates that agreement the very next day.

In fact, the Ukrainian crisis marks the collapse of the existing world order. Putin is not fighting for control over a few economically depressed areas of the Donbass. He is fighting

for the right to sit at the same table with the "great powers" where they redraw national borders.

But even if the West was willing to indulge Putin's desire, the time has long passed for individual leaders to determine the fate of other countries. The resulting impasse has put the West at a total loss as to how to proceed: Sanctions clearly have not forced Putin to change his policy, it is pointless to try to reach an agreement with him and it is impossible to go to war against a nuclear power.

If to extrapolate the previous Cold War to the current one, I suspect that the world is again experiencing something like the late 1940s. Ahead lie modern-day versions of the Korean War, the Cuban Missile Crisis and the wars in Vietnam and Afghanistan.

Already, a Western diplomat serving in an embassy somewhere is composing a "long telegram" that will lay the foundation for the new confrontation between Russia and the West, and a new set of leaders will come to power who, like former U.S. President Ronald Reagan and former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, will bring those rules to life.

As for Russia, it can now look forward to playing the unenviable role of a raw materials appendage for China. The only consolation is that events play out faster in the modern world, and so Russia will hit a dead end sooner rather than later.

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