

What Putin's General Was Doing in Ukraine, According to Top Secret Report
William M. Arkin - Newsweek



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A Top Secret report delivered to President Joe Biden says that Vladimir Putin's top general was in southeastern Ukraine last week to spur Russian forces to complete their operations in Donbas, paving the way for a faster conclusion to the war.

According to two senior military officials who have reviewed the report (they requested anonymity in order to speak about operational issues), it also speculates about the potential for Russian nuclear escalation.

"We've now seen a steady flow of [nuclear] threats from Putin and company," says a senior intelligence official. "It's almost to a point where Putin has achieved the impossible—transforming from madman into the boy who cried wolf—with each subsequent threat having less and less impact, even provoking mockery."

The official warns that from Putin's vantage point, though, deep dissatisfaction with the situation in Ukraine and fear of the west turning the tide might actually provoke a nuclear display of some sort—one intended to shock the west and bring a halt to the war.

The supply of western arms is also now a serious game changer, resupplying Ukraine while Russia is increasingly constrained.

"Escalation is now a true danger," says the senior official.

A nuclear demonstration

When Secretary of Defense [Lloyd Austin](#) said last week that the ultimate American objective was to "weaken" the Russian state, most observers took the retired Army general's remarks as a shift in U.S. policy, one from merely supporting Ukraine in its war against Russia to using the damage wrought by the war—militarily, politically, and economically—as a way to bring down Putin and transform Russia.

"NATO is essentially going to war with Russia through a proxy and arming that proxy," Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.

But the strongest reaction came from Putin himself. "If someone decides to intervene into the ongoing events from the outside and create unacceptable strategic threats for us, they should know that our response to those oncoming blows will be swift, lightning-fast," he told Russian lawmakers in St. Petersburg.

"We have all the tools for this—ones that no one can brag about. And we won't brag. We will use them if needed. And I want everyone to know this. We have already taken all the decisions on this."

What those decisions are remains a mystery to U.S. intelligence. But one of the U.S. senior intelligence officials tells Newsweek that there is speculation that the purpose of General Valery Gerasimov's trip to Ukraine was two-fold: to check on—and get a candid view of—the progress of the war, and to convey highly sensitive information to Russian generals there about what the future could hold, should the Russian position in southern Ukraine become even more dire.

"It's not exactly something that you say over the phone," the senior official says. "At this point, no one thinks that nuclear escalation will occur on the battlefield or originate in Ukraine". But if nuclear escalation occurs, they need to know what measures are expected from them during the shock period that the use of a WMD [weapon of mass destruction] would provoke. Do they attack? Do they hunker down and prepare for retaliation? Do they withdraw to Russia to defend the state?"

"To date, much of the public speculation about escalation has to do with a Russian nuclear attack on the battlefield or even a nuclear strike against NATO (or even the United States itself). But inside observers worry more about an intermediary step, a demonstration of seriousness or a display of Moscow's willingness to "go nuclear."

Such a display would be in accordance with formal Russian doctrine to "escalate in order to de-escalate": using nuclear weapons to shock the enemy into backing down. Experts say that a Russian nuclear display could come in the form of a warhead being exploded over the Arctic or a remote ocean somewhere, or even in a live nuclear test (something not done by Russia since 1990).

It would demonstrate Putin's willingness to escalate even further, but be a step below the declaration of a full-scale war.

"A demonstration attack is definitely part of Russia's repertoire," a senior U.S. Strategic Command (STRATCOM) planner who is an expert on Russian forces tells Newsweek. "Does it make sense? Would it achieve its objective? Is it a war crime? Don't look at it through our lens.

Think about it from Putin's. Back against the wall, no prospects of salvaging the war, the bite of economic sanctions. Shock might be what he needs to survive. It's counter-intuitive, but he could get to the place where stopping the fighting is his priority, through any means necessary."

Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland this past week told a Ukrainian [media outlet](#) that the U.S. and NATO were preparing for the possible use

of Russian nuclear weapons. "Unfortunately, since the beginning of this conflict, we have realized that the [nuclear] threats posed by Putin should be taken seriously. Therefore, the United States and our allies are preparing for this development."

A senior U.S. defense official briefing the news media on Friday said that the [Pentagon](#) was continuing to monitor Putin's nuclear forces "the best we can" and so far saw no active preparations of a direct threat. He said Secretary Austin was being briefed "every day."

So far, he said, Austin sees "no reason to change" the nuclear posture of the United States. The statement presaged the kind of tit-for-tat posturing that both sides might find themselves in, a kind of Cuban Missile Crisis that could in itself further escalate.

Is this how nuclear war starts?

When General Gerasimov arrived near Izium, Ukraine, last week to huddle with General Aleksandr Dvornikov, the newly appointed commander of the Donbas operation, the report on the state of the war was not good. Russian army progress on the ground continued to be slow or stalled, with Ukrainian forces not just effectively holding their line but pushing the Russian invaders back.

Russian reinforcements were gradually reaching the Ukraine border, but one-third of the 90 or so battalion tactical groups (of some 1,000 soldiers each) were still on Russian soil. And the forces on the ground were steadily depleted—through soldier deaths and injuries, through equipment losses, through unreliable supply lines and through sheer exhaustion.

And while artillery and missile attacks along the front lines had indeed increased, the effects were far less than Russian planners projected. Air strikes, while still significant over the battlefield, were also less effective, the majority now being executed with "dumb" bombs due to Russia's exhaustion of its supply of precision-guided munitions.

Moscow hasn't been able to accelerate production of new weapons due to supply chain clogs, largely the result of sanctions. This week, in a sign that those shortages were real, the first Russian submarine was used to launch long-range Kalibr cruise missiles from the Black Sea, and Russian Onyx anti-ship missiles were used to attack a military airfield near Odesa.

Russia began its latest offensive in Donbas on April 18, but two weeks later it hasn't sorted out its supply lines. Ammunition, fuel and food are still not reaching the troops. What is more, the Russian medical system is overwhelmed and ineffective. Some 32,000 Russian troops are estimated to have sustained injuries so far in the war, according to U.S. intelligence projections. Russian authorities are afraid of provoking even more domestic unhappiness with the war.

Ukraine is increasingly and openly attacking and sabotaging military targets on Russian soil, further complicating the logistics situation. All through the war, Russian forces in Belarus and Western Russia have been immune to attack, with aircraft operating freely from airfields and missiles shooting from secure launch areas. At

first, this built-in immunity was intended to avoid Belarus entering the war, and it was cautiously implemented to avoid further escalation.

"There were a couple of Ukrainian attacks on Russian soil in the first two weeks of the war," a U.S. military contractor working on the Pentagon air staff writes to Newsweek, "but the four key airfields in Belarus and the two dozen in Russia and the south were able to operate with no interference.

But once the stalemate happened and Russia started attacking Ukrainian fuel supplies and ammunition sites outside the battlefield, Ukraine decided to escalate by attacking similar Russian sites. The Ukrainians don't have many weapons that can reach very deep into Russia, but they are succeeding in attacking some significant sites, weakening Moscow's prospects of sustaining a long-term campaign."

Though Putin told Russian legislators meeting in St. Petersburg this week that "all the objectives will definitely be carried out" in the war, U.S. military observers don't see how that can happen, given the country's performance so far and the difficulty of resupplying. They also wonder which objectives Putin is referring to.

There has so far been complete defeat in the north; the prospect of regime change in Kyiv is zero; the offensive in Donbas is not going well; Mariupol was a two-month diversion and drain; and other than capturing most of Kherson state in the first weeks, the campaign has been a startling disappointment.

"Russia has now abandoned any goal of taking Kharkiv" (Ukraine's second largest city) as Ukrainian forces push them back, says the second senior U.S. intelligence official.

"And it increasingly looks like their campaign in the west [in Mikolaiv, Odessa, and Dnipropetrovsk states] is more intended to pin down Ukrainian defenders, to prevent them from shifting to the front lines, than it is in conquering the regions."

In short, nothing Russia is doing is weakening Ukraine, puncturing its high morale or changing the calculus on the battlefield. Even the long-range attacks are failing.

"There have been attacks on railways, electrical power, storage and even airfields to impede Ukraine from receiving and moving western weapons," says the Air Staff contractor, "but even these strategic strikes have been ineffective. Weapons are scarce. Aircraft are in disrepair and continue to be vulnerable. More railroad lines are opening rather than closing."

The Russians are "trying to set the proper conditions for ... sustained offensive operations" the Senior U.S. Defense official told reporters Friday. The Pentagon is officially projecting a general mobilization inside Russia and a war that could go on for months if not years.

But the first senior U.S. intelligence official tells Newsweek, "I don't see it," saying that developments on the ground don't support the notion of a war that Russia can sustain.

"I can see how, from Putin's point of view, the only option could be to shock NATO and the West into recognizing just how dire things are for them, that indeed the Russian state is threatened."

The official doesn't disagree with Austin's statement nor the Biden administration's approach. He just thinks Washington is underestimating how threatened Putin and his advisors feel.

"Gerasimov may have visited the battlefield to spur on the troops, but I hope he also sat down for many vodka shots, lamenting that Putin's war is a shit-show of epic proportions, and that Russia is the one responsible for this war's hellish fire."