

Russia's ploy with UN forces in the Donbas

Tadeusz Iwański, Jan Strzelecki, Wojciech Konończuk

On 5 September, during a press conference at the BRICS (Russia, China, Brazil, India and South Africa) summit in China, the Russian president, Vladimir Putin announced that Russia would propose a draft resolution to the UN Security Council on the deployment of UN peacekeeping forces in Donbas. A relevant document was submitted on the same day. Moscow's initiative, however, does have a few conditions. The peacekeeping forces would offer protection to the OSCE mission in Donbas and be deployed only on the demarcation line between the Ukrainian forces and the forces of the separatists backed by Russia. Furthermore, their deployment would take place after both parties to the conflict have withdrawn heavy matériel. President Putin also emphasised that the deployment of the UN peacekeeping forces should be agreed during direct negotiations with separatist leaders and must be approved by the UN Security Council.

The Ukrainian side has been probing the possibility of the deployment of UN forces in Donbas as an alternative to the Minsk Accord since 2015. However, it was only on 3 February 2017 that the draft proposal for deployment of an armed UN peacekeeping mission was presented in the speech of Kostiantyn Yelisseyev, deputy head of the administration of President Petro Poroshenko. Officially, Kyiv announced it during a telephone conversation of the participants of the so-called Normandy Format (France, Germany, Ukraine and Russia) during a summit of its heads of state on 24 July this year. According to President Poroshenko, the need to deploy UN peacekeeping forces and to vest them with the UN Security Council's mandate is an effect of "Russia's categorical unwillingness to achieve peace in Donbas." On 22 August, the Ukrainian president stated that he intended to present a detailed plan for the deployment of the mission in Donbas during the next session of the UN General Assembly (12–25 September). Before that, Ukraine also suggested that an armed OSCE mission be deployed in the region.

Commentary

- The Russian proposal is above all of a tactical character because Moscow's primary goal is to torpedo Kyiv's initiative concerning the deployment of peacekeeping forces in the occupied part of Donbas and at the same time to put the blame on Ukraine and the USA for the expected failure of the Russian proposal. The Kremlin's initiative can also be linked with the recently observed hardening of the US stance on the conflict, particularly including with the announcement that arms supplies to Ukraine are possible. Signs of this include President Putin's ambiguous statement in which he warned that US weapons

supplies to Ukraine might lead to the conflict spilling over onto the territory of Ukraine and to “the separatists sending weapons to other conflict areas critical for those who pose problems to them.” President Putin’s statement, which was in essence blackmail addressed to the USA, may suggest that Russian weapons will be supplied to other areas where US forces are engaged.

- Moscow in fact is not interested in the deployment of UN peacekeeping forces in Donbas. Their presence would not be beneficial to the Kremlin as it would potentially restrict Russia’s full freedom of action in the conflict area, which includes periodically escalating the conflict in order to apply pressure on Kyiv. However, Moscow is trying to simulate efforts to end the conflict, thus manifesting its constructive stance on the Ukrainian conflict to the West. This is partly effective, one proof of which is the statement of the German minister of foreign affairs, Sigmar Gabriel, who called the draft resolution “a change in Russia’s previous policy that we cannot waste.”
- President Putin’s words have met with a negative reaction in Ukraine. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement that Russia, being the aggressor country, cannot be a participant of the peacekeeping mission under the aegis of the UN and that its deployment does not require consent from the self-proclaimed ‘republics’ in Donbas. Iryna Herashchenko, deputy speaker of the Verkhovna Rada (Ukrainian parliament) and Ukraine’s representative in the Trilateral Contact Group in Minsk, rejected Putin’s initiative, viewing it as an attempt to distort the idea of the deployment of the UN peacekeeping forces in the conflict area in Donbas announced in Kyiv. The conditions of deployment of the peacekeeping forces put forward by the Kremlin are unfavourable to Ukraine, because this would mean recognising the separatists as a subject of international negotiations, while the UN mission would only extend to the contact line that would maintain the situation of the lack of international supervision on the Ukrainian-Russian border in Donbas (currently controlled by Russian services and separatist forces). Not all the details of the Ukrainian initiative concerning the UN peacekeeping mission are known at present. It envisages the deployment of peacekeeping forces across the entire territory that is outside the central government’s control between the demarcation line and the Ukrainian-Russian border. Peacekeeping forces would monitor the security situation and the demilitarisation process in the region. In Kyiv’s intention, the deployment of the international mission will contribute to freezing the conflict.
- The Ukrainian ideas of deploying an armed UN or OSCE armed mission which have appeared since 2015 have never been officially presented in the form of an open concept nor have they been ever presented in the form of a coherent concept or put forward as a resolution on the UN forum. Most likely, Kyiv was probing these issues via diplomatic channels but they did not receive support from France and Germany and were in fact sabotaged by Russia (despite the suggestions that it might support them which Russia made from time to time).
- The Ukrainian proposal of deploying peacekeeping forces fits in with the context of Kyiv’s other actions concerning Donbas. Since spring, the government has been preparing an act under which Russia will be recognised as an aggressor and the territories of Donbas which are currently outside the central government control will be recognised as temporarily occupied territories. The act is also expected to vest the president with the

right to announce martial law and to use armed forces in Luhansk and Donetsk Oblasts. The final wording of the act has not been agreed as yet; the government is planning to put the document to a vote in parliament already this year.

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