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## Russian and Ukrainian armies shaping up for initial military clash over Slavyansk

DEBKAFfile *Special Report* April 27, 2014, 7:21 PM (GMT+02:00)

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Ukrainian military buildup round Slavyansk

Russia and Ukraine were heading Sunday, April 27, for their first battle over the rebel-held flashpoint town of Slavyansk, debkafile's military and US sources report. The outcome will determine who controls the Donetsk region and possibly all of East of Ukraine – the separatists or the provisional government in Kiev.

With a superior, professional and well-trained force armed with a preponderance of fire power, the Kremlin has several options to choose from for this engagement:

1. To order the 11,000 troops, based at Rostov on Don 40 kilometers from the Ukrainian border, to cross over and head for Slavyansk and Donetsk.
2. To send a tank column against the 15,000 Ukrainian troops deployed over the weekend around Slavyansk. According to Russian sources, the force from Kiev is armed with 160 tanks, 230 armored personnel carriers and 150 pieces of artillery and missiles.
3. To send warplanes and helicopters from the giant Russian airbase of Tsentralniy - a prospect gaining ground in recent hours. This action would broaden the engagement into a major war operation between Russia and Ukraine.
4. Moscow, Kiev and their backers may understand how such a war began, but once it is under way, no one can tell how it will end.
5. In the event of a major escalation, Moscow will have to decide whether to throw into battle the special rapid deployment and paratroop units stationed at Tsentralniy, which are held ready for intervention in the Middle East and are now in reserve for action in Ukraine.
6. The Kremlin must decide whether to go for an overall invasion of Ukraine. debkafile's military sources report that the force poised on the border is smaller than the 40,000 estimated by Kiev. It consists of 15,000 armored corps soldiers with T-72B tanks and one division each of infantry and paratroops.

A Russian invasion would bring about the partition of Ukraine between the Russian-controlled East + Crimea and the sector ruled by the pro-Western administration of Kiev.

Moscow would find it hard to present this as a "peacekeeping" or "humanitarian" operation.

For Kiev, it might be the last straw that undermines its already shaky rule.

The Ukrainian army's capacity to beat the Russian invaders, or even stop them in their tracks, is close to nil. Its threat to blockade the more than a dozen towns where separatists are entrenched in official buildings is unconvincing.

Indeed, the Kiev government faces five fairly dismal prospects once a military collision begins:

- a) A full-blown military clash will test the limits of US and European readiness to come to its aid against Russian forces. The US and NATO are more likely to pitch in with condemnations and sanctions than by sending troops to the rescue. The Ukrainian government would find

itself exposed as incapable of defending itself and bereft of effective international protectors.

b) The Ukraine government has not been able to summon up international financial or economic assistance.

c) The 15,000 troops concentrated at Slavyansk have more or less scraped the bottom of the barrel of Ukraine's operational military assets. The 150,000-strong army is sizeable enough but it is not ready for war, and the loyalty of most units and their officers to the Kiev regime is questionable.

d) If the Ukrainian government opts nonetheless to enter into a lengthy battle with an invading Russian force, it will play into the hands of Moscow, which strongly objects to the May 25 general election. Any delay would further undermine the stability of the interim regime in Kiev.

e) The Obama administration would find itself in difficult straits. President Barack Obama has repeatedly warned Moscow of "costs" for failing to restrain the pro-Russian separatists' advances in Ukraine or pull its army back from the border.

He is finding it harder than ever to follow through on a concerted US-European economic and military challenge to Russia's military steps in and around Ukraine.

In a round of phone calls to British, French, German and Italian leaders Friday, Obama met reluctance on their part to join aggressive sanctions against Moscow over its threats to Ukraine, when they were weighed against the heavy costs to the deep and longstanding trade ties and business partnerships that Europe has developed with Russia.

Obama managed to persuade the G7 to agree on another round of penalties for Moscow but had to delay the announcement of specifics to Monday, April 28.

This frustration was registered in Obama's remarks in Kuala Lumpur Sunday: The United States will be in a stronger position to deter Vladimir Putin once he sees the world is unified in sanctioning Russia, he said. Russia isn't abiding by a deal reached to de-escalate the conflict. "Russia has not lifted a finger to help" he said and stressed: "The US and Europe must act collectively."

But America's allies have made it clear that a broad international coalition for a strong stand against Russia will not be forthcoming. President Obama is left with the option of striking almost alone, or climbing down from his threats.

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