Russia is trying to undermine Ukraine's sovereignty

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Tensions between Russia and Ukraine have flared anew after the Russian Navy fired upon and seized three Ukrainian ships near the Kerch Strait on November 25. In an unprecedented move, the Ukrainian Parliament subsequently enacted martial law in 10 of Ukraine's 27 regions. According to President Petro Poroshenko, the move was warranted by the extraordinary nature of the circumstances, which represented the first open attack by Russia on the Ukrainian military.

But in truth, Russia's latest act of aggression is neither extraordinary nor unexpected. Since the beginning of its confrontation with Ukraine in 2014, Russia has consistently followed a strategy of multi-dimensional coercion against Kyiv. This has entailed multiple attempts at subversion and destabilization via the informational, economic, and military domains.

Even before the start of the current conflict, Ukraine has been a primary target of Russian disinformation. A targeted information campaign served as the pretext for Russia's invasion of Crimea, in which Moscow announced annexation as a measure to protect the rights of ethnic Russians in the region. Today, Russia continues to spread disinformation that paints Kyiv as an aggressor supported by fascists, and Moscow as simply responding to attack. In much the same vein, Russian President Vladimir Putin has accused President Poroshenko of provoking the recent Kerch Strait incident in an effort to boost his standing ahead of the 2019 Ukrainian elections.

Ukraine has also been the victim of countless Russian cyber operations. In late 2016, President Poroshenko declared that Russia was waging a full-fledged cyberwar against Ukraine, involving an estimated 6,500 cyber attacks within the span of two months, including hacks of Ukraine's treasury and power grid.

These attacks have continued; Ukraine's government recently uncovered a new "backdoor" program utilized by a Russian-associated cyber threat group to install malware on, and collect information from, governmental computers. And as Ukraine's 2019 elections approach, fears are growing that Moscow may use the opportunity to launch a debilitating cyberattack — one that could impact national unity and the confidence of Ukrainians in their own government.

Russia's offensive is also economic in nature. Since 2014, Russian actions in and around the Sea of Azov has inflicted severe economic damage to Ukraine. According to an analysis by Reuters, Ukraine has lost tens of billions in energy reserves, military equipment, and natural resources as a result of Russia's annexation of Crimea.

Now occupying both sides of the Kerch Strait, the only entrance into the Sea of Azov, Moscow has capitalized on every opportunity to economically constrict Ukraine. Thus, the newly-built bridge across the Strait is too low for many container ships to pass through, and has been used by Russia to delay and stop Ukrainian and foreign merchant ships. Between mid-May and August, for example, an estimated 148 vessels have been detained in this fashion. And in the wake of the Kerch Strait incident, Moscow has barred non-Russian ships from entering or leaving the Azov Sea, effectively blockading the Ukrainian ports of Berdyansk and Mariupol. With these two ports jointly accounting for some seven percent of the Ukrainian economy, such a blockade will have significant economic ramifications for the entire country.

Moreover, while the Kerch Strait incident represents the most visible use of Russian force in the Azov in recent years, Moscow has been steadily building its military presence in the area. Ukraine's president now estimates that there are about 80,000 Russian troops, 1,400 artillery and missiles systems, 3,200 tanks and other armored vehicles, and 800 aircraft in the occupied Donbas region and on the Crimean peninsula. These forces, Ukrainian officials fear, could be used to control the Sea of Azov, and from it to invade a large swath of Ukrainian territory.

As the foregoing suggests, it would be incorrect to presume – as many European nations appear to have done – that the recent Kerch Strait skirmish represents an anomaly. The evidence is overwhelming that Russia's latest move against Ukraine isn't an outlier, but rather represents the new normal in an extensive – and ongoing – Russian effort to undermine Ukraine's sovereignty.

The sooner Western nations treat it as such, the better.

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