On August 10, Russian-backed separatist forces launched their largest combined arms assault against Ukrainian forces in the past two months. Ukrainian forces repelled the offensive, which targeted military positions twenty kilometers east of the highway between separatist-held Donetsk City and the strategic government-controlled port city of Mariupol. The attack came one week after negotiations in Minsk stalled over the issue of bilateral withdrawals of heavy weapons from the front line in eastern Ukraine. Its timing suggests that Russia and its separatist proxies are again escalating offensive operations in an effort to extract strategic concessions from the Ukrainian government.

Over the past week, separatist officials condemned Ukrainian negotiators for freezing ceasefire negotiations. Separatist officials also called on the leaders of the other “Normandy Four” countries, France, Germany, and Russia, to pressure the Ukrainian government to accept an agreement that would force both sides to withdraw weapons from flashpoints all along the front line. Both separatist and Russian officials may view “Normandy Four” negotiations as most their effective point of leverage to pressure Kyiv. In the wake of the separatist attack on August 10, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko called for an urgent meeting of the foreign ministers of the “Normandy Four,” a call the separatists have since echoed, indicating that the talks serve their interests. Separatist and Russian officials may view “Normandy Four” negotiations as most their effective point of leverage to pressure Kyiv.

Although talks among the “Normandy Four” have yet to be confirmed, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov spoke to his Ukrainian counterpart on the day of the attack. Lavrov reiterated another long-standing Russian demand that Kyiv conduct direct negotiations with the separatist leadership in order to defuse the conflict. In light of this diplomatic posturing, the August 10 separatist assault and the accompanying uptick in separatist multiple launch rocket system (MLRS) attacks across the front line suggest that Russia and its proxies are poised to increase the tempo of offensive operations in an effort to apply pressure on Kyiv. It remains unclear whether or not this escalation will culminate in an offensive maneuver targeting the Donetsk-Mariupol highway. ISW has previously assessed this highway a necessary precondition for any eventual offensive on the strategic port city of Mariupol along the Azov Sea coast between Russia and the Russian-annexed Crimean Peninsula.