

# Conflict Update # 44

April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2022

## Conflict Assessment

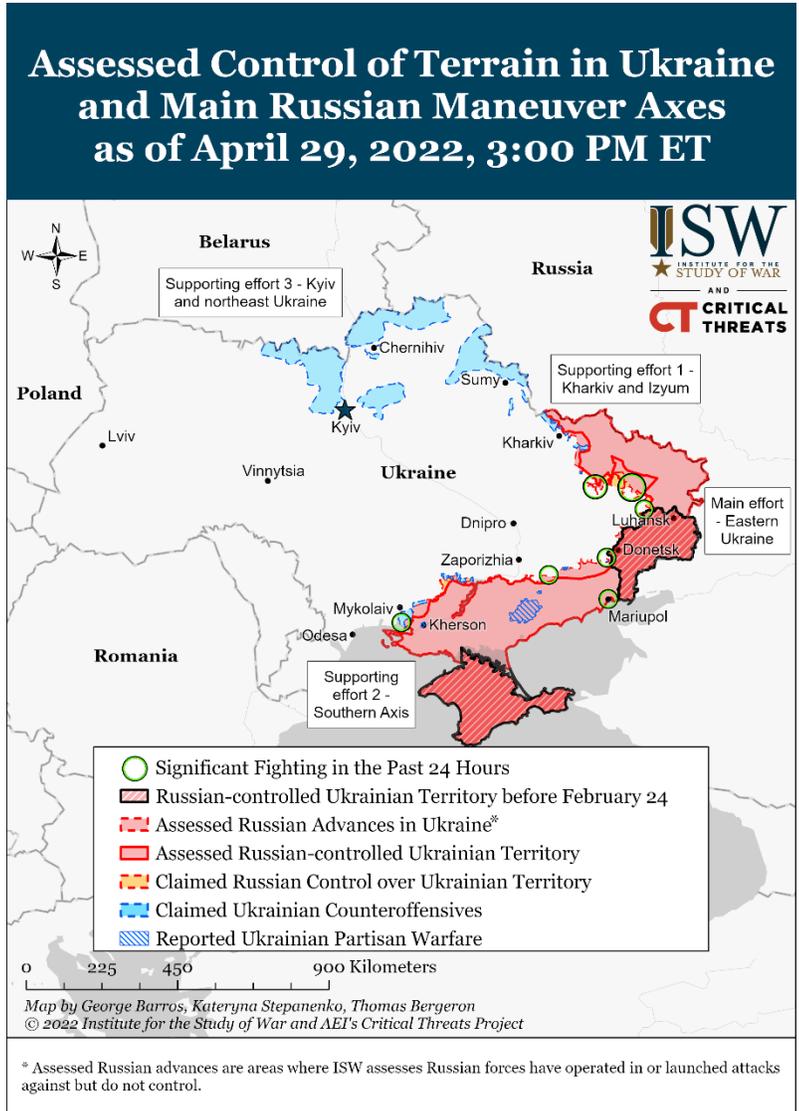
**Subordinate Main Effort—Mariupol** - Russian forces continued to redeploy from Mariupol on April 29 to participate in offensive operations northward to support Russia’s main effort to capture the entirety of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts. Ukrainian General Staff stated on April 29 that certain units from Mariupol are deploying to participate in offensive operations toward Kurakhiv (western Donetsk Oblast, about 50 km west of Donetsk City), and an anonymous senior Pentagon official reported that a “significant” number of Russian units have redeployed toward Zaporizhia Oblast since April 20, though ISW cannot independently confirm these redeployments.

Russian forces likely intend to leave the minimum force necessary in Mariupol to block Ukrainian positions in Azovstal and prevent partisan actions and are deploying as much combat power as possible to support offensive operations elsewhere.

**Subordinate Main Effort—Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts** - Russian troops continued to shell the entire frontline in Donetsk and Luhansk and secured several tactical advances on April 29. They reportedly captured Yampil (directly west of Severodonetsk) on April 28 and are likely preparing to conduct further attacks east in the direction of Lyman.

Pro-Russian sources posted social media footage of Russian forces using thermobaric munitions against Ukrainian positions in Avdiivka, and the Ukrainian Head of the Donetsk Regional State Administration Serhiy Haidai claimed that Russian troops employed phosphorus bombs in Ocheretyne on April 29. He additionally stated that Ukrainian forces today repelled an attempted advance on Orikhove and Svitlychne. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that intensified Russian fire against Ukrainian positions is intended to prevent Ukrainian troops from regrouping and that Ukrainian troops are conducting “an active maneuver defense” — moving mechanized reinforcements in response to Russian attacks as needed rather than conducting a strict positional defense.

**Supporting Effort #1—Kharkiv and Izyum** - Ukrainian forces today continued to repel attacks southwest and south of Izyum. Head of Kharkiv Regional State Administration Oleg Synegebov reported that Russian forces attempted to advance toward Slovyansk and Barvinkove through attacks on Brazhivka (25 km southwest of Izyum), Dovhenke (25



km south of Izyum), and Velyka Komyshevka (about 30 km southwest of Izyum) but suffered losses and retreated earlier today. Ukrainian General Staff claimed that elements of the 1st Guards Tank Army, the 35th Combined Arms Army, the 68th Army Corps, and unspecified Airborne (VDV) units remain active on the Izyum axis. A Pro-Russian military source additionally claimed that Russian forces are surrounding and pinning Ukrainian troops against the Oskol Reservoir, east of Izyum, but ISW cannot independently confirm this claim.

**Supporting Effort #2—Southern Axis** - Russian forces did not make any confirmed attacks in Kherson Oblast today and prioritized improving their tactical positions. Russian forces shelled several towns in Kherson, Zaporizhia, Mykolaiv, and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts.

**Supporting Effort #3—Sumy and Northeastern Ukraine** - There no significant activities on this axis in the past 24 hours.

### **Immediate items to watch**

- Russian forces attacking southeast from Izyum, west from Kreminna and Popasna, and north from Donetsk City will likely make steady but tactical gains against Ukrainian defenders.
- Russian forces will likely attempt to starve out the remaining defenders of the Azovstal Steel Plant in Mariupol and will not allow trapped civilians to evacuate but may conduct costly assaults on the remaining Ukrainian defenders to claim a propaganda victory.
- Russian forces are likely preparing to conduct renewed offensive operations to capture the entirety of Kherson Oblast in the coming days.
- Russia may continue false-flag attacks in and around Transnistria or move to generate a more serious crisis in Transnistria and Moldova more generally.

**Blasts, Bombs, And Drones: Amid Carnage In Ukraine, A Shadow War On The Russian Side Of The Border**— Early in the morning on April 27, a drone crashed in a muddy field southwest of the Russian city of Kursk, around 100 kilometers northeast of the border with Ukraine. Locals tracked down the destroyed device not long after, and posted photographs to Telegram and other social media.

The device appeared to be a Bayraktar TB2, a versatile Turkish-designed unmanned aerial vehicle capable of long-distance surveillance as well as dropping guided bombs or firing anti-tank missiles. It wasn't the Russians who were flying the drone.

And that wasn't the only unusual thing that happened in that part of Russia that same morning: There were also 2 unexplained explosions at Russian military and industrial sites -- one in Kursk and one near Voronezh.

Nor does it appear to have been Russians who flew low-altitude attack helicopters in the pre-dawn hours of April 1 around the time that a fuel depot exploded less than 50 kilometers from the Ukrainian border.

It's not clear how many incidents have occurred, or whether they resulted from air strikes, or missiles, or sabotage. An unofficial tally by RFE/RL, based on open-source reporting, counts at least a dozen since the war's beginning. The preponderance of evidence points directly at Ukraine, but the attacks have gone largely unheralded by Kyiv.

They've also been played down by Russia -- for reasons that, analysts said, include embarrassment that its formidable military is unable to protect the country from being attacked from a foreign location.

**Assessment of Russian failures** - On day 65 of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Russian forces continue to struggle in eastern Ukraine, failing to achieve a breakthrough. The Ukrainian defenses hold across the frontline, and in some places, the Ukrainians have been retaking lost territory.

In Mariupol, the Ukrainian defenders in the Azovstal steelworks plant are holding on.

On its daily estimate of the war, the British Ministry of Defense assessed that the Russian military has been suffering heavy casualties and achieving little gains in its renewed offensive in the east.

"The Battle of Donbas remains Russia's main strategic focus, in order to achieve its stated aim of securing control over the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. In these oblasts [provinces] fighting has been particularly heavy around Lysychansk and Severodonetsk, with an attempted advance south from Iziium towards Slovyansk. Due to strong Ukrainian resistance, Russian territorial gains have been limited and achieved at significant cost to Russian forces," the British Military Intelligence assessed.

The Ukrainian military hasn't just been putting up a stiff defense, it has been counterattacking in places. Over the last few days, the situation around Kharkiv, the second-largest Ukrainian city, has been tilting in favor of the Ukrainian forces. Ukrainian troops have entered the occupied town of Rus'ka Lozova and completely liberated Kutuzivka; the former is just 15 miles from the Russian border.

The Ukrainian Ministry of Defense claimed that as of Friday, Ukrainian forces have killed approximately 23,000 Russian troops (and wounded approximately thrice that number), destroyed 187 fighter, attack, and transport jets, 155 helicopters, 986 tanks, 435 artillery pieces, 2,418 armored personnel carriers, 151 Multiple Launch Rocket Systems (MLRS), eight boats, 1,695 vehicles, 76 fuel tanks, 72 anti-aircraft batteries, 229 unmanned aerial systems, 31 special equipment platforms, such as bridging vehicles, and four mobile Iskander ballistic missile systems.

Meanwhile, the supply of weapon systems to Ukraine continues at a frantic pace. U.S. President Joe Biden has proposed a \$33 billion security, humanitarian, and economic aid package to Ukraine. More than \$20 billion of that package would go toward the needs of the Ukrainian military, security services, and law enforcement. But the U.S. hasn't been the only one providing Ukraine with weapons.

Poland, which shares a common border and hatred of Russians with Ukraine, has been one of the largest contributors compared to gross domestic product of military aid to Ukraine. The Polish have sent air-to-air missiles and spare parts to refurbish and replenish the fleet of the Ukrainian MiG-29 Fulcrum fighter jets. In addition, they have sent hundreds of T-72 main battle tanks, which are very useful to the Ukrainians because they already operate that type of tank and thus required almost no time to familiarize themselves with the machine.

**'Ukrainian missile strikes' blow up oil facilities in Russia** supplying troops in Donbas as British intelligence says Putin's forces have 'yet to achieve a significant breakthrough' and many units are 'exhausted.'

Flames lit up the sky over Russia in the early hours after suspected Ukrainian missile strikes blew up two oil storage facilities supplying Putin's troops fighting for control of Donbas.

The Transneft-Druzhba Oil Depot, located in the city of Bryansk around 70 miles from the Ukrainian border, caught fire at 2am local time before a second fire broke out at a nearby military facility around 15 minutes later, Russian state media said this morning.

**Russia is making 'slow and uneven' gains in Ukraine, at 'significant cost' to its army, U.S., U.K. assess** - Russia fired missiles at locations across Ukraine on Thursday, but "the Battle of Donbas remains Russia's main strategic focus," Britain's Ministry of Defense said early Friday. "Fighting has been particularly heavy" around Iziium, but "due to strong Ukrainian resistance, Russian territorial gains have been limited and achieved at significant cost to Russian forces."

"We would assess that Russian forces are making slow and uneven and, frankly, we would describe it as incremental progress in the Donbas," a senior Pentagon official said Thursday. "Continued pushback by the Ukrainians" means there's a lot of "back-and-forth in the Donbas in terms of territory gained and/or lost by, frankly, both sides."

The U.S. has moved more than 60 percent of the 90 promised howitzers into Ukraine, and the first group of Ukrainian soldiers has been trained to use them, the Pentagon official said. Russia, meanwhile, has about 92 battle tactical groups (BTGs) in Ukraine, with another 20 still in Russia, in various states of combat readiness.

These "alleged 92" BTGs are almost certainly "undermanned, not well supplied, not well led, are on ground they're not familiar with, and they don't do maneuver all that well," said retired Lt. Gen. Mark Hertling, a former U.S. Army commander in Europe. Russia has been slamming Ukraine's Donbas forces with artillery, and while Ukraine's frontline troops wait for the U.S. howitzers to arrive, they have to temporarily "give up ground" to survive the shelling.

"That's what we're seeing now in several locations in the east and south," Hertling said. "We're seeing Russian forces temporarily take ground, then being pushed back by the smart, better led, more adaptive active defense of the Ukrainian army."

**Shootings Erupt on Russia-Ukraine Border** - Shootings erupted at two checkpoints on the Russian-Ukrainian border Friday, regional authorities said as Russia's military offensive on Ukraine continues to spill into its own territory.

"It was a restless morning in the border district of Rylsky," Kursk region Governor Roman Starovoit said on social media.

"Mortars were fired at a checkpoint in the village of Krupets at about 8:00 a.m. Retaliatory fire from our border guards and military crushed the firing point," he added.

**Ukraine cracks down on 'traitors' helping Russian troops** - nearly 400 people in the Kharkiv region alone have been detained under anti-collaboration laws enacted quickly by Ukraine's parliament and signed by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy after Russia's Feb. 24 invasion.

**Everyone Is Starting to Admit Something Frightening About Ukraine** - The conflict has become a proxy war between NATO and Russia, with more risks for everyone involved.

The war between Russia and Ukraine is swiftly evolving into a war between Russia and NATO. In one respect, this is good: It gives Ukraine a higher chance of repelling Moscow's invasion and even winning. In another respect, it is risky: The wider the war spreads, and the more Russia seems to be losing, the more compelled Vladimir Putin may feel to lash out with extreme violence.

This shift in the West's approach to the war was first signaled on Monday, when Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said the United States' goals in the war were not only to protect Ukraine as a democratic, sovereign country but also to "weaken" Russia as a military power. This has been obvious for some time, but even some U.S. officials were surprised to hear Austin express the fact so explicitly.

A few days later, Austin hosted a meeting of defense officials from 40 nations, as well as NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, at Ramstein Air Base, headquarters of NATO Air Command, in Germany, to coordinate military assistance to Ukraine. The meeting prompted Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to complain, "NATO, in essence, is engaged in a war with Russia through a proxy and is arming that proxy. War means war."

Back in February, on the day he invaded Ukraine, Putin warned that "whoever tries to hinder us" will face "consequences that you have never faced in your history"—which many took, reasonably, as a threat to use nuclear weapons. Putin later said he would regard direct NATO intervention as a threat to Russia, triggering those same consequences.

For that reason, President Joe Biden and other Western leaders have stopped short of sending their own troops or mounting a no-fly zone with their own planes, noting that doing so would mean declaring war on Russia, which could

set off World War III. In the first several weeks of the war, these leaders also declined to send Ukraine “heavy weapons,” including howitzers and artillery shells that, if fired from eastern Ukraine, could hit Russian territory.

In recent days, the Western nations have relaxed the limits on heavy weapons. Even the German parliament—which, for historical reasons, has steered clear of any sort of intervention in foreign wars, until two months ago—voted overwhelmingly to send Ukraine heavy weapons; earlier, the German chancellor boosted his country’s defense budget by extravagant sums.

On Thursday, Biden asked Congress for another \$33 billion in aid to Ukraine—two-thirds of it for military assistance, enough to keep the fight going for another five months. This is on top of the \$13.6 billion Biden requested just two months ago. To put this in perspective, the total sum slightly exceeds the \$40 billion that the U.S. spent on average each year to support its own 20-year war in Afghanistan.

Biden also invoked the World War II-era Lend-Lease Act to speed up the transfer of weapons from the U.S. military’s stockpile. That legislation authorized the lending of military equipment to foreign countries “whose defense the president deems vital to the defense of the United States.”

There it is, then, in Biden’s own proclamation: The defense of Ukraine is “vital to the defense of the United States.”

Perhaps in response to this surge in U.S. and NATO assistance—though also no doubt to step up his own army’s dreadful performance—Putin is moving closer to viewing the conflict not merely as a “special military operation” against Ukraine, which he has dismissed as a mythical country, but a full-fledged war against a global superpower. On Wednesday, he appointed Valery Gerasimov, the Russian chief of the general staff, to take command of the offensive in eastern Ukraine.

It is not inconceivable that Putin, seeing the war as a titanic struggle with the United States, might feel emboldened to dangle a peace feeler to Washington, if he ever feels like stopping the war at all. He may well feel more dignified negotiating with the president of the United States than he would with the president of Ukraine. Whether it’s in anyone’s interest to let him feel more dignified is another question. But if the war spirals out of control and seems on the verge of escalating to new, more far-flung horrors, doing so might be better than the alternative.

## Changing World

The world is changing before our eyes. Perhaps this is overdue.

Technological changes, social media platforms with massive influence on thinking, cyber-attacks as a weapon, financial warfare, the rise of the Millennials with a new, younger way of thinking, advanced unmanned weapons of war, the rise of the drones and an increasing trend of formally-dependent 3<sup>rd</sup> World countries bucking the systems of yesterday, all seem to point to a changing of the guard.

New technological “toys” and electrical cars demand different raw materials in the future. China has stolen a march on securing access to a huge number of strategic raw materials and the means of production, to ensure it has a major place at the table of the future.

The inability of a major nuclear power to subdue a smaller nation, first seen in Vietnam during the 1960’s, followed by Afghanistan, Syria, Georgia and now Ukraine, all point to a different type of war and world alignment forming before our eyes. Smaller nations are emboldened to align with a Great Power that suits their needs.

The rise of China as a global player continues, together with the reduction of Russian influence and the rise of medium-sized powers such as Turkey and South Korea exercising middle power diplomacy.

The current system of international relations has been based on the Peace of Westphalia 1648 and its core principles: national sovereignty, foreign and domestic policies separation, compromise as a means of reconciling conflicting national interests, equality of sovereign states, and negotiating relations between them.

All the subsequent systems were in fact more or less successful attempts to amend this order to ensure the balance of interests of leading states (known as the Great Powers). Attempts to reject any of the principles of the Peace of Westphalia of 1648 would inevitably lead to new conflicts. The Great Powers' aspirations to impose their own will on the rest of the world by force brought the nightmare of two world wars. Or, as some historians rightly point out, the Second Thirty Years' War of 1914-1945. (Time).

Now history repeats itself. Russia's war on Ukraine is a rejection of all Westphalian principles. Outside of China, are we seeing the elimination of a state where military, financial and social elements are harnessed into a single authoritarian entity?

Are we now seeing another change, just as when the Hapsburg, Ottoman and German empires were defeated? As colonialism was eradicated, leading to a number of new independent states.

The collapse of the Russian-led Soviet Union was not just a day in history. The hangover to this huge event has lingered for decades as smaller ex-Soviet nation states try to establish themselves on the international stage, only to be hampered by corrupt oligarchs and authoritarian leaders.

They see their western counterparts succeeding and profiting from freedoms they do not have. Russian aggression over the past two decades is the last of the old European major powers still trying to flex its muscles to the disadvantage of smaller neighboring countries.

It appears the Russian invasion of Ukraine may be the precipitator of global change. The aggression against Ukraine is a natural consequence of the continuous series of conflicts in which Russia took part after the collapse of the USSR. This is the decisive phase of the Third Thirty Years' War. No one can predict how long it will last.

There is one thing we can be sure: Moscow has consciously chosen the path of international relations archaization. It has chosen to consistently deny the primacy of international over national law, systematic violations of agreements, and withdrawal from any rules contradicting its aggressive ambitions. It has chosen to disrupt international bodies—these are all signs of the drive to replace the rule of law with the right of force. We should clearly understand that the Russian regime is not the only one in this endeavor.

Russia is at the forefront of the forces intent on rolling back the international relations system. How far will they go? That is the key issue. Prior to 2014, popular opinion among some experts was that Russia was counting on a second "Yalta" – in the sense of the world redistribution by blocs. However, Russia is currently unable to create influential international bodies, and all such efforts under Moscow's auspices are purely instrumental. However, the Kremlin is also reluctant to become a junior partner in international bodies.

So where does Russia go? Its goals move even further into the past, to the pre-bloc era of the Vienna Congress, a European prototype of the world concert, playing the music chosen by the Great Powers—very tempting for Russia.

After all, its leadership is still guided by the principles of the Holy Alliance (the League of the Three Emperors) and is using 'legitimacy' to deny the right of nations to self-determination and independent foreign policy. Just like the Romanovs did.

Some, like the Hungarian authorities, are still willing to do business with Russia on Kremlin terms. We know how European elites have consistently undermined European values in exchange for Russian money and energy. Angela

Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy neglected the interests of Europe to strengthen the positions of Germany and France. Back in 2008, they transformed the NATO Bucharest Summit into a Congress of Vienna look-alike.

The refusal to let Ukraine and Georgia into NATO was a de facto consent to Russia's aggression against both countries. The era of hybridity in modern international relations started. Since then, Russia has resorted to realpolitik to cover up the purely ideological motivation of its actions. And the West, meanwhile, has been using ideology as a facade for realpolitik. The fact is that the values-interests conflict deepens the crisis. That's what is happening now.

International organizations have shown a complete inability to stop the aggressor. The E.U. consensus decisions aimed at deterring and punishing Russia are systematically weakened by national governments. The U.N. is unable to work effectively. The Security Council is in need of reform—a country resorting to annexation, aggressive wars, and genocide should definitely not be its permanent member.

NATO still allows Russia to intervene in the enlargement issue, both directly and through cautious and amnesiac politicians. As current events show, NATO continues to pursue a policy of double standards. Its readiness to accept Finland and Sweden against the uncertain signals and constant delays on Ukraine's bid.

Right now, Russian leadership is confident it's got the right to destroy Ukraine. But the Ukrainian people's fierce resistance spoiled the game. Their longing for freedom has proven to be stronger. Only after the tragedies of Mariupol, Bucha, Gostomel, Chernihiv, Kharkiv and dozens of other places did the international community start to understand what they are dealing with. Each passing day brings horrible footage of the inhumane crimes of the Russian Army. But these tragedies could have been avoided if there were leaders who could defend the world order.

Otto von Bismarck said: "We live in a wondrous time, in which the strong is weak because of his scruples and the weak grows strong because of his audacity." It's that time again. The time of leaders who act decisively, making the dreams possible and realizing possibilities. Such people have been in business for a long time—those active visionaries like Steve Jobs and Elon Musk, bringing the future to humankind. Until recently, such people were very scarce in politics, because leadership is a burden of responsibility you take on voluntarily while everyone else shuns it.

However, a fundamental question arises here: how to avoid the transformation of the world order into equilibrium, the constant balancing of the interests of the same old Great Powers, which due to their force will remain untouchable? Obviously, such a scenario is wrong, as the Russian case proves clearly.

Henry Kissinger explained why: "Any system of world order, to be sustainable, must be accepted as just—not only by leaders, but also by citizens. It must reflect two truths: order without freedom, even if sustained by momentary exaltation, eventually creates its own counterpoise; yet freedom cannot be secured or sustained without a framework of order to keep the peace. Order and freedom, sometimes described as opposite poles on the spectrum of experience, should instead be understood as interdependent."

The world has changed and is changing before our eyes, but has the Great Game changed? That remains to be seen as does the emergence of new leadership, justice, equality and opportunity.

## Sanctions

**Malaysia diplomat's remarks on allowing Russia semiconductor exports raise fears Kuala Lumpur could be hit by sanctions** - Malaysia risks getting caught up in sweeping Western-backed sanctions on Russia over its invasion of Ukraine after a diplomat's suggestion Malaysia would consider "any request" from Moscow for the sale of semiconductors. This has raised fears that they can be hit by international sanctions.

**Norway Closes Access For Russian Trucks And Ships, Joins EU's Sanctions Regime Against Moscow** - Norway says it will close its borders and ports to Russian trucks and ships, joining sanctions imposed by the European Union over Moscow's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine.

The Storskog border crossing -- the only one between Norway and Russia -- will be closed for the transport of all goods that are listed on the EU sanctions list, Foreign Minister Anniken Huitfeldt told public broadcaster NRK.

But Russian fishing vessels, which often land their catch at ports in northern Norway, will receive exemptions from sanctions, Huitfeldt said on April 29.

**Russia aims to avert historic debt default with last-ditch dollar bond payments** - Russia looks to have averted a historic sovereign default on Friday by tapping its domestic reserves and attempting to make overdue dollar payments on its international debt obligations.

Earlier Friday, Russia's Finance Ministry said that it had attempted the dollar payments — a dramatic U-turn after the country had previously sought to make the payments on its dollar-denominated bonds in Russian rubles.

The ministry said it had made a payment of \$564.8 million on a 2022 Eurobond and a payment of \$84.4 million on a 2042 Eurobond, according to Reuters, with both in dollars — which was originally stipulated in the debt agreements.

The funds have reportedly been channeled to the London branch of Citibank but it's unclear whether they will reach their intended recipients. The payments were due to be made in April and had entered a 30-day grace period before official default on May 4.

**A growing number of European countries are signaling they have enough energy to stop relying on Russia** - As EU countries scramble to wean themselves off Russian energy, a trickle of member states have signaled that they are finding alternative sources of oil, coal, or gas and won't need to rely on Russia for long.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24 kick-started long-stagnating efforts to reduce the bloc's Russian energy dependence. But that dependence is profound: Russia supplied 41% of the EU's natural gas in 2019, the BBC reported.

"Bulgaria will not negotiate under pressure and with its head bowed," said Alexander Nikolov, Bulgaria's energy minister, the news outlet Novinite reported. "Bulgaria does not give in and is not sold at any price at any trade counterparty."

Austria's government also said on Wednesday that it would continue buying Russian energy, but that it was scrambling for alternative sources to fill its needs, Reuters reported.

The next day, the Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala said the country had oil for three months, gas for two months, and nuclear reserves for two years, the Czech outlet IROZHLAS reported.

Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania were the first EU countries to cut themselves off from Russian gas on April 1, using underground Latvian reserves to satisfy demand, Euractiv reported. Days later, Finland announced it was on track to replace Russian gas sources by fall, the outlet also reported.

**Could Asia save Putin from an EU energy ban? It's not so simple** - Leaning forward, arms resting on his desk, Russian President Vladimir Putin delivered a crisp message to leaders of the country's energy sector earlier this month: they needed to plan for a decline in Western imports by shifting their focus from Europe to Asia.

From the Kremlin's perspective, that directive makes sense. The United States, United Kingdom and Australia have already banned the import of Russian energy. And the European Union is under mounting pressure from the US and

members like Poland and Lithuania to institute an embargo on Russian oil and gas in response to Moscow's continuing war in Ukraine.

But a cocktail of infrastructure limitations, political pressure and poor economic demand could prevent Asian markets from absorbing energy supplies that would otherwise be headed to Europe if Brussels indeed bans all Russian hydrocarbons, according to analysts. Developed European nations account for almost two-thirds of Russia's gas exports and half of its oil sales.

Most Russian pipelines are geographically built to cater to European markets and cannot supply Asia. Two of Russia's biggest Asian customers — Japan and South Korea — are Western allies who will likely face intense pressure from the US to avoid any increase in energy imports. China, the largest importer of Russian oil, is witnessing an economic slowdown because of COVID-19 lockdowns that will only reduce its hunger for energy.

"If the EU does go ahead with a complete ban, I don't see how Asian markets will be able to make up for that demand," Hari Seshasayee, a global fellow at the Wilson Center, told Al Jazeera. "Russia might need to reduce its oil production by 30 percent by the end of 2022."

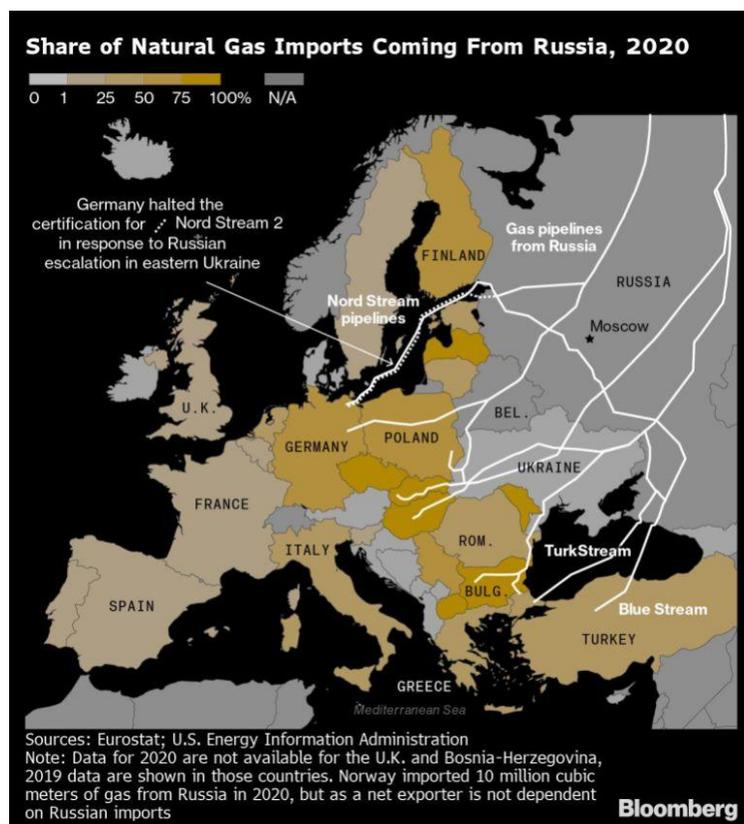
"Transportation infrastructure plays an important role, and it is not developed to the same extent with Asian markets as it is with Europe," Filip Medunic, a sanctions expert at the European Council on Foreign Relations, told Al Jazeera.

Those limitations aren't stopping Moscow from offering oil at subsidized prices, and India, the world's third-largest oil guzzler, appears to be biting: It increased its Russian oil imports in March. Russian and Indian officials also met last week to try to overcome an impasse over the shipping of coking coal to Indian steelmakers, which has declined since March over payment and logistics complications, Reuters reported on Monday, citing a trade source and Indian government source.

Then there is China. The world's largest oil importer purchased a third of all Russian oil in 2020. But the country has its own limitations, according to Wang Huiyao, president and founder of the Beijing-based Center for China & Globalization. China's dependence on crude imports means Beijing needs to maintain good relations with all of its major suppliers, Wang said, and wouldn't want to jeopardize those by reducing purchases from some nations to accommodate extra Russian oil.

**China and Russia are working on homegrown alternatives to the SWIFT payment system. Here's what they would mean for the US dollar** - In the aftermath of Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, some Russian banks were banned from SWIFT, the Belgium-based messaging service that lets banks around the world communicate about cross-border transactions. The ban has hampered cross-border transactions for Russia's trade and financial systems, isolating the country economically.

Now, both Russia and China are looking to establish alternatives to the US dollar hegemony.



## Nuclear

**Russian exasperation leading to .....?** – Reading Russian commentaries and statements of late it appears that Russia, and particularly senior military command folk, are increasingly exasperated with their dismal performance.

Firmly believing that entry into Ukraine would be rapid and greeted with enthusiasm from Ukrainians, they have been sorely tested, destroyed and disappointed. Massive losses of troops and equipment has literally reduced their fighting force to a semblance of an army, coupled with a thoroughly demoralized military structure and extremely antagonistic Ukrainian population, even those Russian-speaking folk who Russian forces were ostensibly “liberating.”

Add to this Putin’s naming of the invasion a “Special Military Operation” so as to avoid legal challenges under the Russian constitution but meaning that he now cannot enact conscription into “hot” and war zones, and one can see the level of operational exasperation increasing. It is a conscription stalemate.

The upper echelon of Russian control and social comment all believed that “upstart” Ukraine would be subdued in a matter of days.

Instead, they have been routed wherever they have fought on equal grounds, resorting to mass bombardment in order to succeed.

Increasingly there have been calls for mobilization of Russian forces in order to subdue their smaller neighbor. But their ranks and armor are decimated and largely incapacitated, with current reporting from the eastern Donbas showing further setbacks in the field.

Throw into the mix the US call yesterday to authorize \$33B (10x higher than to date) of further aid and funding to Ukraine and a form of Russian strategic panic appears to be setting in.

Mobilization will require Putin declare a “war” as opposed to the special military operation – introducing legal challenges in their system. Even should they do so, they do not have the capacity for success, certainly not with the cascade of heavy armor entering the conflict in favor of Ukraine.

So, what are their next steps? – tactical nuclear and chemical weapons.

Now that Ukraine is hitting targets within Russia itself in order to destroy military supply lines, the Russian people are seeing the war at first hand. It is now alongside them for the first time since WWII.

Russian social media is ramping up rhetoric for a full-scale assault, including nuclear attack, in order to “save the motherland” as they put it. With no counter comment, it may well see a fruitful call.

Watch this space.

**Nuclear attack?** - At the start of the week, Russia’s foreign minister warned that the threat of a nuclear war “cannot be underestimated” and said NATO’s supply of weapons to Ukraine was tantamount to the military alliance engaging in a proxy war with Russia.

Putin doubled down on the bellicose rhetoric Wednesday, threatening a “lightning fast” retaliation against any country intervening in the Ukraine war and creating what he called “strategic threats for Russia.”

He then appeared to allude to Russia’s arsenal of intercontinental ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons when he warned that Russia has the “tools” for a retaliatory response “that no one else can boast of having now ... we will use them if necessary.”

But strategists told CNBC that Putin is playing on risk aversion in the West and that the chances of a nuclear war are remote. “I think it’s outside the realm of possibility right now that there’s going to be a nuclear war or World War III that really spills over that far beyond Ukraine’s borders,” Samuel Ramani, a geopolitical analyst and associate fellow at the Royal United Services Institute, told CNBC.

“If there’s a border spillover right now, we’re still probably most likely looking at something like Moldova being vulnerable to an invasion,” he said. He noted that Russia has a long history of using “nuclear brinkmanship” as a way of preventing the West from pursuing security policies that it doesn’t like, with the escalation in hostile rhetoric aimed at deterring NATO members from making heavy arms deliveries to Ukraine.

Nonetheless, Ramani noted the threat posed by Russia could become more acute if it felt humiliated on the battlefield. In particular, military setbacks in Ukraine around May 9 could pose some danger. That’s Russia’s “Victory Day” — the anniversary of Nazi Germany’s defeat by the Soviet Union in World War II.

“Putin has had a history of escalating unpredictability if he feels that Russia is being humiliated in some way ... and if there are major setbacks, especially on around the 9th [of May] then there’s a risk of unbreakable action,” he said. “But also, there’s a logic of mutually assured destruction that hopefully will rein everybody in.”

Threatening nuclear attacks is part of Putin’s “playbook,” said William Alberque, director of strategy, technology and arms control at the International Institute for Strategic Studies think tank.

## Putin

**Putin Is Enraged: NATO Is Training Ukraine’s Soldiers On New Weapons** - How Will Russia Respond to NATO Countries Training Ukrainian Soldiers? – The Kremlin has repeatedly warned NATO countries against “interference” in the war with Ukraine and has indicated on more than one occasion that the West is already engaged in war with Russia – whether in economic terms or with regard to the constant flow of weapons and military equipment to Ukraine.

Ongoing training of Ukrainian soldiers in Poland, and potentially other parts of Europe, could become the next sticking point and a cause for escalation by the Russian side.

As Soviet-era weapons become increasingly difficult for NATO countries to procure, Western military aid packages will begin to include greater numbers of U.S. and NATO weapons. As that happens, Ukrainian soldiers will require greater levels of training to ensure that they understand how to use the weapons they receive.

American-made Javelin missiles, over 7,000 of which have been gifted to Ukraine by the United States so far, are operable by Ukrainian soldiers thanks to ongoing training on the Polish-Ukrainian border. Ukrainian soldiers who were present in the United States before the outbreak of the war were also given extensive training on how to use American weapons before returning to Ukraine to train other soldiers.

**Putin Says War Won’t End Until Ukraine Accepts Losing Crimea And Donbas** - When Russian President Vladimir Putin met with United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in Moscow this week, he laid out what it would take for Russia to cease its so-called “special military operation” in Ukraine.

Putin has previously expressed a desire to bring an end to the war in Ukraine, but this week suggested that he would not sign a peace deal with Kiev unless its government first agrees to “solve the issues of Crimea and Donbas” at least on a working level.

## Impacts

**New gas pipeline boosts Europe's bid to ease Russian supply** - Mountainous and remote, the Greek-Bulgaria border once formed the southern corner of the Iron Curtain. Today, it's where the European Union is redrawing the region's energy map to ease its heavy reliance on Russian natural gas.

A new pipeline — built during the COVID-19 pandemic, tested and due to start commercial operation in June — would ensure that large volumes of gas flow between the two countries in both directions to generate electricity, fuel industry and heat homes.

The energy link takes on greater importance following Moscow's decision this week to cut off natural gas supplies to Poland and Bulgaria over a demand for payments in rubles stemming from Western sanctions over the war of Ukraine.

**Indonesia Invites Zelenskyy To G20 Summit In November That Putin Plans To Attend** - Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has been invited to attend the Group of 20 (G20) summit in November by host nation Indonesia.

President Joko Widodo said on April 29 that he had invited Zelenskyy to attend the summit, which Russian President Vladimir Putin has confirmed he will attend.

**Analysis-Russia's Ukrainian Quagmire Providing Tough Lessons for China** - From countering a Western "information war" during a Taiwan conflict to using "shock and awe" to swiftly subdue the island's forces, Chinese strategists are soaking up lessons from Russia's Ukrainian quagmire, diplomats, scholars and analysts say.

Chinese military experts are discussing the conflict in private chat groups, offering their takes on Western involvement in Ukraine and Russia's perceived failings, say two scholars and four Asian and Western diplomats who are in touch with Chinese strategists.

Although their conclusions have yet to surface in official military journals or state media, Russia's failure to quickly crush the Ukrainian military is a key topic - as are fears about how well China's untested forces would perform.

"Many Chinese experts are monitoring this war as if they are imagining how this would unfold if it happened between China and the West," said Beijing-based security scholar Zhao Tong of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

## Widening of conflict and war

**'Reality of our time': Dutton warns Australians to prepare for war** - Defense Minister Peter Dutton has warned Australia needs to prepare for war in light of the looming threat from China and global insecurity spurred by Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine.

In an Anzac Day television interview, Dutton cast back to the Gallipoli campaign and the rising dictatorships of the 1930s in backing up Prime Minister Scott Morrison's comments this morning that the "arc of authoritarianism" was troubling the region.

He said the Ukraine war was "a replay, in part, of what's happened in the 1930s," referring to Nazi Germany's invasion of Poland and the beginning of World War II: "You don't need to over-egg it."

**Putin attacking Moldova and Georgia next is 'not off the table,' top Navalny aide warns** - There are growing concerns across the West that Russian President Vladimir Putin could expand his unprovoked war in Ukraine into other countries like Moldova and Georgia.

Vladimir Ashurkov, a top aide to imprisoned Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, told Insider that such scenarios are "not off the table."

"This full scale invasion of Ukraine was a shock to me. I didn't think that it would be possible, but two months ago it happened. To think whether Putin is capable of pushing the attacks over to Transnistria and Moldova, etc. — if he can he probably will," warned Ashurkov, the executive director of Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation. "It's not off the table that things like that can happen."

## Arctic Question

**Geopolitical Risk in the Arctic** - The opening up of this sea route transforms Russia's geopolitical dynamic. An ice free Arctic gives Russia influence over a new northern trade route. The lack of ice also opens up the possibility of more mining and drilling in the region. A prospect the US and Russians have openly welcomed.

Ownership of the region is disputed. Russia put in a claim to the UN to extend its exclusive economic zone across the region. If applied this would extend the other Arctic state's zones. The success of this claim would open up similar ones for the US, Denmark (via Greenland), Norway and Canada.

But this extension of territory could also stoke geopolitical conflict between the states, particularly if new mineral or hydrocarbon deposits are uncovered.

Other countries have also taken a keen interest in Arctic affairs through close proximity, Finland and Iceland are fairly obvious members. Others like the self-styled "near-Arctic state" China demonstrate its new global role. China is a global power on the lookout for new markets, sea routes and avenues of power to explore.

### Polar Silk Road

China has called for a Polar or Ice Silk Road and has sent an exploratory ice breaker Xue Long (Snow Dragon) to the region. It has also been investing in the Arctic such as the Yamal project and the hunt for rare earth minerals in Greenland.



Every move by China will be carefully monitored by its neighbour Russia who has watched painfully as China supplants it economically and diplomatically across much of the world. Russia will not be happy to see this happen in a region it views as its backyard.

### Economic Potential

The Arctic region is reckoned to contain massive oil and gas reserves. It is reckoned that there are 44 billion barrels of natural gas and 90 billion barrels of oil. The Arctic is home to many different metal deposits and around 10% of global fish stocks, all of this makes it a hugely tempting target for a resource hungry world.

But the harsh conditions even with global warming make exploiting any of it rather expensive. Some analysts put estimate that the price of a barrel of oil would have to hit over US\$ 100 to make it worthwhile drilling in the Arctic.