

# Conflict Update # 363

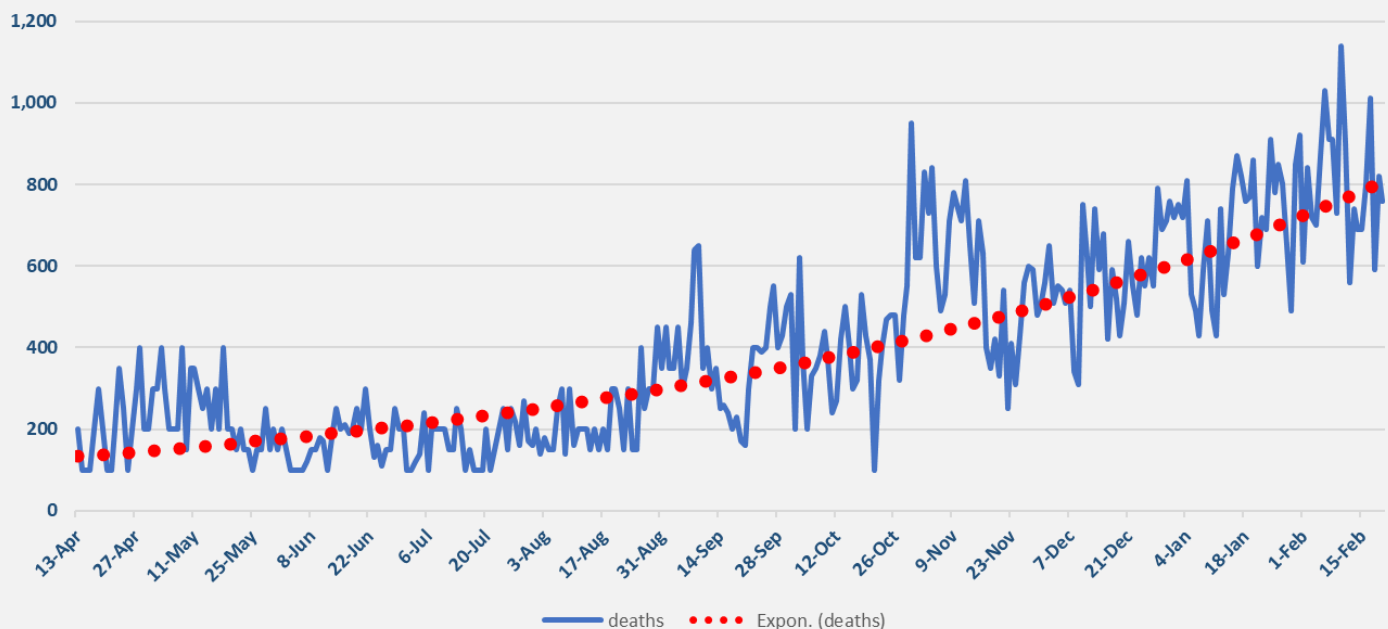
February 21<sup>st</sup>, 2023

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## Conflict Assessment

**Russian losses** – **144,440** (760) soldiers killed, 3,326 (+10) enemy tanks, 6,562 (+9) armored combat vehicles, 2,338 (+4) artillery systems, 471 (+0) MLRS systems, 243 (+0) air defense systems, 299 (+0) warplanes, 287 (+0) helicopters, 2,023 (+5) UAVs of the operational-tactical level, 873 (+0) cruise missiles, 18 (+0) warships/cutters, 5,210 (+1) trucks and tankers, 4 Iskander Missile Launchers (+0), 239 fuel bowsers (+0) and 226 (+1) units of equipment.

Russian troop deaths by day



## Key Takeaways

**Elite Russian brigades 'combat ineffective' after heavy losses: UK** - High Russian troop losses in eastern Ukraine are having an impact on Putin's offensives in the region, British defense officials have said.

In its daily update, the UK MoD said Russia has suffered many casualties, particularly in Bakhmut, as well as Vuhledar, where "'elite' 155th and 40th Naval Infantry Brigades have sustained very high losses" and thus are "likely combat ineffective."

The MOD said on Monday that Russian forces were facing political pressure to present gains to coincide with the first anniversary of Putin's full-scale invasion on Friday, February 24.

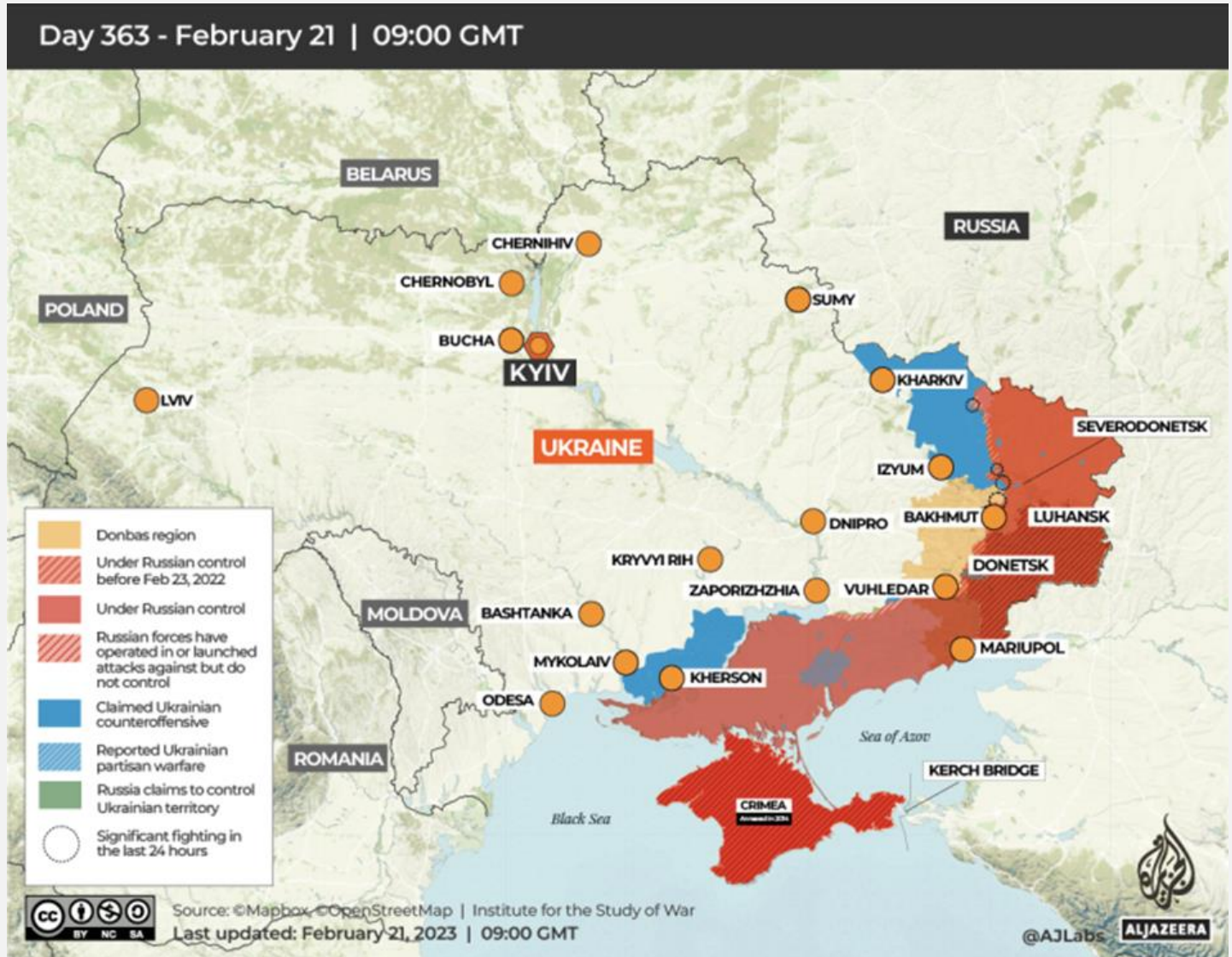
"It is likely that Russia will claim that Bakhmut has been captured to align with the anniversary, regardless of the reality on the ground," the defense officials said, adding that if there is no progress in the spring offensive then "tensions within the Russian leadership will likely increase."

Another western assessment said Russia was struggling to replace equipment and probably lacked the resources to increase the intensity of its winter offensive in the Luhansk Oblast.

ISW said on Sunday that there had been "enormous" Russian tank losses, enough for around 16 regiments.

Russian forces almost certainly still have some reconstituted mechanized units in reserve, but these limited reserves to the Luhansk Oblast front line will be "unlikely to change the course of the ongoing offensive dramatically," ISW said.

While Russia might "temporarily" gain momentum, Russian forces will probably "culminate well short of its objectives and likely short of achieving operationally significant gains," it added. (**Comment** – Precisely the opinion in our Updates over past weeks).



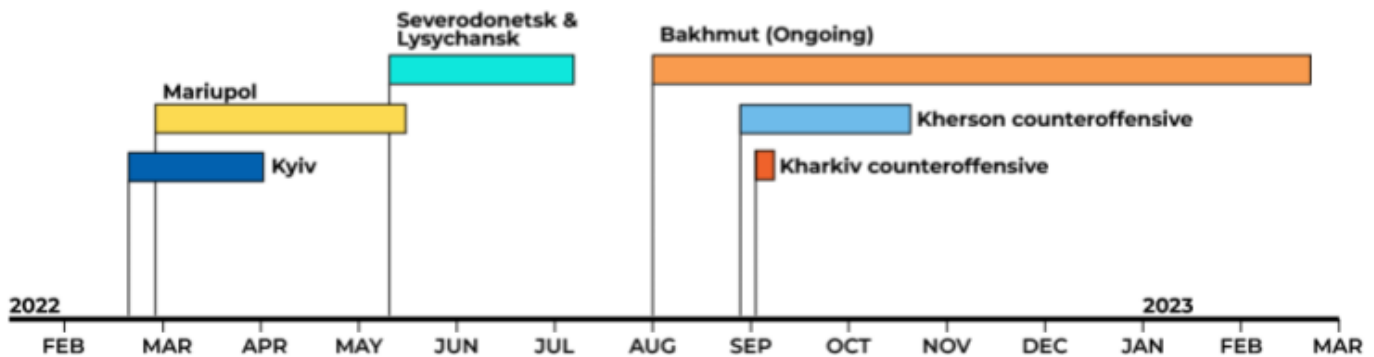
**Telegram Channel last night** – I was watching coverage on a Telegram channel last night of the Vuhledar battle last week. Ukrainian snipers following up behind regular troops, were targeting Russian soldiers from afar.

As the camera moved forward during a lull in the fighting, hundreds of bodies of fallen Russian soldiers scattered all around a wooded area came into view. Ukrainian soldiers were surprised by the number of casualties, expressing horror and sympathy for the enemy dead.

It was literally wall-to-wall bodies in the forest, with Ukrainian folk moving from one to the next trying to determine identities and army units. Absolute human carnage.

# Major battles across Ukraine

Since February 24, 2022, Russia has orchestrated several offensives across Ukraine, capturing key cities and strategic ports. In response, Ukraine has launched multiple counteroffensives to regain lost territory.



Source: ISW | February 19, 2023



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**Ukrainian forces were confronted** by a fresh wave of Russian attacks across the front line in the east over the past 24 hours as Moscow struck civilian and infrastructure targets, killing at least six civilians, Kyiv said.

**Russian official hits out at critics over 'fortress city' Bakhmut** – A member of one of Russia's puppet occupation authorities in eastern Ukraine has hit back at criticism that it is taking too long for Moscow's troops to capture the Donetsk city of Bakhmut. For months, Ukrainian forces have been resisting an intense offensive there at high cost to both sides.

Yan Gagin is a military adviser to Denis Pushilin, the head of the so-called Donetsk People's Republic established and maintained by Russia on occupied Ukrainian territory since 2014. Gagin told the state-run Tass news agency on Monday it is only "a matter of time" before Bakhmut is captured, but said there is no rush to seize the city.

"I believe that we should not hurry," Gagin said, referring to Bakhmut by its Russian name "Artyomovsk." He added: "When I am asked about why it takes so long, I simply invite such people to the frontline: come and see what it looks like to be here to understand why we are moving forward so slowly."

"We are now trying to spare personnel and strike the enemy manpower as accurately as possible. By and large, the seizure of Artyomovsk is a matter of time, but I would not hurry and would keep grinding down the enemy. This is practicable, and this has already been tested."

**Comment** – Yet the Kremlin is close to pronouncing victory in Bakhmut. Another case of Russian disinformation.

**The Belarusian regiment fighting for Ukraine** - In the early morning of Feb. 8, the coldest winter day yet in Ukraine's capital city, military recruits set off on a bus to a nearby training base for a day of marching, shooting, and medical training. As the bus rounded a corner, the wide expanse of the frozen Dnipro River—Ukraine's main artery—suddenly came into view. "Now that's something worth fighting for," one recruit said.

The recruit was not Ukrainian but a 42-year-old former IT worker from Belarus. Like the 10 other soldiers on the bus, he is one of hundreds of Belarusians fighting for Ukraine as part of the Kastus Kalinouski regiment—a group that opposes Belarus's support for Russia and is named after a 19th-century anti-Russian Belarusian revolutionary. The regiment, which was formed last March, has fought alongside the Ukrainian army in front-line hot spots, from the defense of Kyiv to battles in eastern Ukraine.

The stakes are high for the crew, made up of former IT workers, crane operators, chefs, and others. Aside from facing battlefield danger, they risk never being able to go home safely again. Yet for them, the payoff is worth it. Some, fleeing repression, settled in Ukraine before Russia invaded and are now fighting for their new home. Others see in the regiment a chance to hone their combat skills and eventually bring the fight to Belarus; for them, only violent revolution can free their country from the grip of its dictatorial leader, Aleksandr Lukashenko.

The former IT worker, who preferred not to give his name for security reasons, recently started on the two-month path to join the regiment. The first month includes training in basic combat skills, while the second entails learning the tasks that prepare recruits for mortar, reconnaissance, and medical groups. These groups are divided up into two battalions, named after fallen regimental soldiers. While the officers are Belarusian, they are commanded by the Ukrainian Defense Ministry's Main Intelligence Directorate, like other units in Ukraine's army staffed by anti-Kremlin Chechens, Georgians, and Russians.



Trudging through the snow to their shooting range, the soldiers in training were a motley group. Many were in their mid-30s, but at least one soldier appeared to be well into his 60s. Some, like one young soldier struggling to climb a snowy hilltop, were out of shape, in sharp contrast to their Ukrainian trainers from Ukraine's Special Operations Forces.

The regiment doesn't treat its soldiers like special forces recruits, said commander Denis Prokhorov, a 27-year-old soldier who first came to Ukraine from Belarus at the age of 19 to fight against a Russian-backed separatist movement



in the east. "We do things more softly," he said, contrasting it with his own harsher military training. "We don't want to hurt them."

What the recruits lacked in physical fitness, they made up for in determination. Merely traveling from Belarus to Ukraine risks immense personal danger.

Oppression in Belarus is so great even some nonpolitical Belarusians have joined the regiment. Zoltan said that even though he had not been targeted by the Belarusian state for political activity, he felt that the smallest slip could send him to jail. "The atmosphere is such that sooner or later you'll be sentenced ... for as long as they want," Zoltan said.

**Putin's war will continue until at least 2027: former Russian Commander** - Former Russian commander Andrey Gurulyov recently predicted that Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine might drag on until at least 2027 or maybe even longer.

His remarks came as part of a televised segment posted to Twitter on Sunday with English subtitles by Anton Gerashchenko, adviser to the Minister of Internal Affairs of Ukraine. The ex-commander was asked whether Russia should use certain military weapons before the end of the war or fight with ordinary and less advanced ones without GPS or satellite.

"The first is to bite your lip and to win with what you have and at the same time, in the 'scalded cat' mode do what needs to be done. That's all. Do not wait for any end of the war—do not wait for anything. This end of the war may take a long time. In general, I predict that it will be 2027-2030, not earlier," said Gurulyov, who is in the State Duma.

He continued: "During this time, if it is only biting the lip, we will be saddled to carry on. We need to win with modern weapons. We need to deploy them in the troops. That's all."

**Belarus says Ukraine army groups massed at border, risking its security** - Belarus said today there was a significant grouping of Ukrainian troops massed near its border and warned that this posed a threat to its security.

"At present, a significant grouping of the Ukrainian army is concentrated in the immediate vicinity of the Belarusian-Ukrainian section of the state border," the defence ministry said in a post on Telegram.

"The probability of armed provocations, which can escalate into border incidents, has been high for a long time," it said, adding that it would take "measures to adequately respond" but would act in a restrained way.

**Comment** – Just like the Nazi's in 1939 along the Polish border – False flag event as they say.

## Containment

**Italy is open to sending fighter jets to Ukraine alongside other Western allies** - Italy is prepared to send up to five fighter jets to Ukraine if other Western allies start doing so, the Italian newspaper la Repubblica reported yesterday.

According to the article, Italy does not want to be the first ally to send fighter jets "for political reasons," adding that this strategy will give the impression that Italy is compelled to follow the lead of the allies.

**Wagner may test West's response by attacking Baltics – Lithuanian president's aide** - Russia's mercenary group Wagner may try to test Western defence mechanisms by attacking the Baltic states, Kęstutis Budrys, President Gitanas Nausėda's chief national security advisor, said.

Wagner Group is a Russian paramilitary organisation that has also been called the de facto private military of Russian President Vladimir Putin. The company operates outside the confines of the law, as such entities are technically illegal in Russia.

It has a presence across Africa, particularly in countries involved in internal or regional strife, and a rumored presence in the Western Balkans. The Wagner mercenary group has also been involved in the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine.

The founder and owner of Wagner is Yevgeny Prigozhin, a close confidant of Putin.

“Yes, they can test the [West's] response mechanisms and give the Kremlin a political opportunity to say that it has nothing to do with that. As is happening in Africa,” Budrys said in an interview with the delfi.lt news website when asked if Russia could carry out provocations in the Baltics using mercenary groups.

Western countries have raised concerns over the growing influence of the group in Africa after the deployment of mercenaries in Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, and Mali. Kosovo's Foreign Minister also recently claimed that Wagner operatives were present on the border with Serbia, hinting they were involved in recent unrest between Serbia and Kosovo.

**Leopard tanks like a Mercedes, says Ukrainian soldier training in Germany** - A Ukrainian soldier compared Germany's Leopard 2 tanks to a Mercedes as he underwent training with them ahead of their arrival on the battlefield, saying he hoped they would bring a breakthrough in the war.

Asked about the difference between Western and Soviet systems, he said: "You can imagine it like the difference between a Mercedes and a Zhiguli" - referring to a Soviet car sold under the brand name Lada in the West.

**Ukraine appeals to Canada's rail manufacturers to repair war-damaged lifeline** - Ukraine wants Canada to lend its expertise — and donate crucial railway parts — to keep its embattled passenger and cargo rail system running as landmines and missile strikes threaten to stall the country's lifeline.

The state-owned rail company, known in Ukraine as Ukrzaliznytsia, has been operating almost as a paramilitary unit to keep essential goods and people moving from one end of the vast country to the other, Kyiv said.

The Railway Association of Canada represents Canada's three major rail companies: Canadian National Railway, Canadian Pacific Railway and Via Rail, as well as Canadian rail manufacturers.

The association is working to figure out what parts Ukraine needs most, and where to get them in Canada.

**Russia isn't building up airpower near border Kyiv says** - here are no signs of a buildup of Russian aircraft near Ukraine's borders and any attacks are likely to be from behind the front lines.

Ukrainian officials are downplaying the idea that Russia is gathering combat aircraft near the border for a major operation across their country.

There is no accumulation of enemy aircraft on the borders of Ukraine, Ukrainian Air Force spokesman Col. Yuri Ignat told reporters Monday at the Ukrainian Media Center.

“It is impossible to bring aviation to the borders, because aviation requires airfields,” Ignat said. “Where they were, there they are.”

The Russian Air Force, he added, has spread some 700 aircraft over “the same 40 airfields as a year ago.”

That includes airfields in Belarus, occupied Crimea, territory in eastern Ukraine still held by Russians and Russia proper, Ignat said.

Ignat's comments Monday largely echo those made last week by Andrii Yusov, spokesman for the Ukrainian Defense Intelligence directorate (GUR).

"We have information about the presence of approximately 450 tactical aircraft and about 300 helicopters, half of them attack helicopters," Yusov told the Kyiv Post.

"They are placed mainly on the territory of the Russian Federation at least 200 kilometers from the border, concentrated in different locations but outside our fire range," Yusov said.

**Ukrainian mechanics refurbish captured Russian tanks to battle Moscow's forces** - Located in a secret military repair yard behind the front line in Kharkiv in Ukraine's east, this small workshop has been repairing captured Russian equipment for redeployment against Moscow's forces.

Since the start of the war on February 24, 2022, members of the Ukrainian 14 Mechanized Brigade say they have repaired nearly 100 Russian armored vehicles that have since been redeployed against Moscow's forces.

One of the challenges the mechanics have is working with equipment that the Ukrainian military does not have such as the BMP-3 infantry fighting vehicle. They say they download Russian manuals from the Internet.



## Comments, Updates, Developments and Reports

**The surprise trip by US President Joe Biden to Kyiv** on Monday will send a message that the US fully backs Ukraine and will continue to do what is necessary to reinforce Kyiv's ability to resist's Russia's year-long invasion. The visit is as symbolic as it is important. It comes after the Munich Security Conference already had showcased European backing of Ukraine and also comes amid concerns that China could aid Russia in its war.

The most important part of the trip is that it continues to showcase the point Biden has made during his presidency that "America is back." The trip was clearly a closely held secret and it came as the US President was supposed to be going to Poland during the one-year anniversary of the invasion of Ukraine. Poland would have been an easier visit, but the importance of being in Ukraine on the eve of the year's anniversary is clearly a key moment in history.

**Comment** – Over the past few years there has grown a belief that the US is softer than before and that a Russian long-held desire to emasculate NATO and the EU and push to reclaim Soviet-era hegemony is nigh.

Putin's long-standing interference in bordering country affairs continues, which we can presently see in Moldova over the past 24 hours, where insurrectionists plying a Moscow line of "resistance" are rampaging around claiming to be protesting in the name of food costs.

Putin and the Kremlin will continue down this path and usurp political control wherever they can – if they believe they can and that the US and NATO is weakening. Putin believes decades of western resolve is waning.

They interfere in internal affairs and political elections willy-nilly as suits their geopolitical desire and ambitions, as was seen in the 2016 US election and as reported by various American investigative committees and agencies.

They need to be stopped, and the sole thing Russia and Putin understand is force and a powerful steadfastness and determination to stand up to them and put them in their place.

It is increasingly clear that this now needs to happen on a permanent basis. They – Putin and his cohorts – need to fully grasp that the world is fed up and done with their subterfuge and clandestine escapades around the globe.

Yesterday the US announced it is introducing actions and policies to drive the Wagner Group – a furtive group ostensibly privately-owned and controlled but under the direct command of the Kremlin – from African countries where they are committing atrocities and grabbing wealth such as diamond mines and other raw material source industries.

There is a weakening of Russian control and hegemony in the Balkans and Central Asian zones, and the longer their Ukrainian invasion continues the less able they will be to fund these funny businesses of theirs around the globe.

Russia is a pirate and terrorist nation, raining down terror and fear on smaller countries, and bullying its way to dominance wherever they can.

They will not stop at Ukraine, but advance into Moldova, Baltics, Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania among others.

We must stop them now.

**Biden promises to ‘bolster Poland’s energy security for generations’** - Biden has again lauded NATO during his visit to Poland, as he thanked Warsaw for its support of Ukraine.

“As I told my Russian counterpart ... you’re gonna get to NATO-ization of Finland. Turns out, I didn’t know Sweden was coming along, as well,” he said.

“But all kidding aside, I think if we keep our heads and we are focused, I think we’re in a better position than we’ve ever been. And I want to thank you President [Duda] for how Poland is supporting Ukraine.

“It is just incredible the way you’ve welcomed 1.6, 1.7 million Ukrainians.

“We’ve reaffirmed our ironclad commitment to NATO’s pledge of security, including guaranteeing that the command headquarters for our forces in Europe are going to be in Poland, period. We’re also launching a new strategic partnership with plans to build nuclear power plants and bolster Poland’s energy security for generations.”

**Impact of Russia’s New START treaty move ‘unclear’: US Department of State** - A spokesman for the US Department of State has said it is “unclear” if Putin’s move to suspend Russia’s participation in the New START nuclear treaty will have a “practical impact”.

“We haven’t seen any reason to change our nuclear posture, our strategic posture just yet,” Ned Price told CNN.

The United States announced publicly this year that Russia was not in compliance with the New START treaty, he said, adding Washington will watch to see what steps Moscow actually takes.

**‘Nobody is attacking Russia’: US, NATO decry Putin speech** - After Putin’s combative speech in Moscow, White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan told reporters, “Nobody is attacking Russia. There’s a kind of absurdity in the notion that Russia was under some form of military threat from Ukraine or anyone else.”



NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg also responded to Putin's address with identical words.

"Nobody is attacking Russia," Stoltenberg said, "Russia is the aggressor."

**Comment** – It is high time that the West penetrate Russian social media airwaves and channels in order to promulgate the truth regarding Putin's abhorrent invasion of his smaller neighbor, millions of whom have blood relatives in the Russian Federation. It is time to return the Russian disinformation favor, but with truthful stories about what their leader is up to.

**Italy's Meloni dismisses Putin speech as 'propaganda'** - Italy's prime minister has denounced Putin's marathon state-of-the-nation speech as "propaganda."

"A part of my heart hoped for some different words, for a step ahead. It was propaganda," Giorgia Meloni said during a visit to the Ukrainian city of Irpin.

Her trip to Ukraine came a day after US President Joe Biden visited the Ukrainian capital.

Meloni, who took office in October, had repeatedly said she wanted to go to Kyiv before the February 24 anniversary of Russia's invasion. She was due to hold talks with Ukrainian President Zelenskyy later on Tuesday.

**Comment** – This Italian leader has clout and gumption. She stands up for what she believes in – bodes well for the Italian and EU future.

**China 'deeply concerned' about war** - Beijing is "deeply concerned" about the year-old conflict in Ukraine, which appeared to be "intensifying and even getting out of control", China's Foreign Minister Qin Gang said.

Beijing initiated a "no limits" partnership with Moscow shortly before Russia's invasion of Ukraine last February and has avoided using the word "invasion" or condemning Russian actions.

The US has warned of consequences if China provides military support to Russia, which Beijing yesterday denied.

"We urge certain countries to immediately stop fueling the fire," Qin said during a speech at the Lanting Forum on global security in Beijing, stressing that China would "work with the international community to promote dialogue and consultation, address the concerns of all parties and seek common security".

Qin was speaking as top diplomat Wang Yi was expected in Moscow for possible talks with Putin.

**Japan promises to 'lead the world' in fighting Russian aggression with \$5.5 billion in Ukraine aid** - Japan pledged \$5.5 billion in humanitarian aid to Ukraine on Monday, nearly quadrupling the amount of money Tokyo has promised to Kyiv since Russia invaded its neighbor nearly a year ago.

"Japan is in a position to lead the world's efforts to support Ukraine in its fight against Russian aggression and to uphold a free and open international order based on the rule of law," Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said Monday.

Tokyo had previously pledged to send Kyiv \$600 million in financial assistance and \$700 million worth of humanitarian aid including medical supplies and food assistance. It also joined Western allies in imposing strict sanctions on Russia over its invasion.

Last summer, Kishida said in a speech that Russia's invasion gave warning that "Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow" – and he echoed that language Monday.

"Russia's aggression against Ukraine is not just a European matter, but a challenge to the rules and principles of the entire international community," he said.

**Biden offers 'strong support' to Moldova amid rising Russia tensions** – U.S. President Joe Biden met with Moldova's president in Poland on February 21 to offer support amid increasing bellicosity from Moscow as the former Soviet republic expresses fears it could be the next target in the Kremlin's sights after Ukraine.



The White House said afterward that Biden "reaffirmed strong U.S. support for Moldova's sovereignty and territorial integrity" in his talks with President Maia Sandu (pictured).

Biden highlighted Washington's efforts "to help Moldova strengthen its political and economic resilience, including its democratic reform agenda and energy security, and to address the effects of Russia's war against Ukraine," the White House said.

**Ukrainian volunteers risk their lives caring for abandoned pets amid Russian shelling** - The Russian invasion has not only triggered a massive humanitarian crisis; it has also left hundreds of thousands of pets abandoned by owners who fled to seek safety.

As well as caring for the animals that roam the streets, one volunteer also has 13 cats and 14 dogs at her home.

In 2021, there were 267 homeless dogs in Druzhkivka, a town that had a pre-war population of 54,000. Since the invasion, volunteers are now feeding more than 900 dogs and almost 1,400 cats that roam the pockmarked streets.



## Putin & Russia

**Putin will be 'in panic' over Joe Biden's Kyiv trip, Ukrainian MP says** - Ukrainian officials and lawmakers have been buoyed by President Biden's surprise visit to Kyiv, interpreting the trip as a sign of American commitment to Ukrainian victory and Russian defeat, despite continued offensives and threats of escalation from Moscow.

Biden met with Zelensky and other Ukrainian officials in the capital on Monday, as air raid sirens sounded across the country in fear of Russian cruise missile attacks. Biden said on Twitter that his visit was intended to "reaffirm our unwavering commitment to Ukraine's democracy, sovereignty, and territorial integrity."

"When Putin launched his invasion nearly one year ago, he thought Ukraine was weak and the West was divided," the president wrote. "He thought he could outlast us. But he was dead wrong."

Oleksandr Merezhko, a member of the Ukrainian parliament representing Zelensky's Servant of the People party, told Newsweek the "historic visit" indicated that Ukraine's victory was a "top" priority for the White House.

"I'm sure that after this visit, Putin is in panic," said Merezhko, who is also the chair of the Ukrainian parliament's foreign affairs committee. "He understands he has already lost and the U.S. firmly believes in Ukraine and its victory."

**In latest diatribe against West, Putin tries to normalize war, isolation for Russians** - One of the few concrete proposals that Putin made during his nearly two-hour address to the nation was that all participants in the "special military operation" -- as the Russian government calls its unprovoked invasion of Ukraine last February -- should be granted two weeks' home leave every six months.

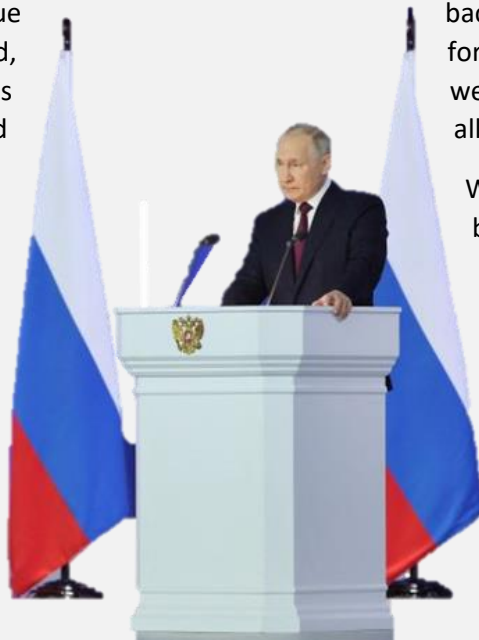
It was one of many indications in the speech that the Kremlin is preparing Russians for a new normal of war and continued confrontation with the West for the foreseeable future.

"The main idea of the speech, as I understood it, was normalization," political analyst Kirill Rogov wrote on Facebook. "The normalization of war. The normalization of repressions. Funerals, prisons...."

Standing against a subdued light-blue acerbic criticism of the US and EU and, for unity with reassurances that all is -- for Russian families, businesses, and

He reiterated his false claims that the for "direct aggression toward the east" As he has repeatedly done, he painted trying to seize control of its neighbor Russia and "its historical lands which

"I am addressing you during a our country, a period of across the world, and crucial the future of our country and our the podium. "It is a period during placed on all of us."



background, Putin alternated between for the Russian audience, a mixture of calls well with the economy and that the future all citizens who do not rebel -- is bright.

West -- particularly Washington -- aims by fomenting "neo-Nazism" in Ukraine. a war of aggression in which Russia is by force as a defensive fight to protect are now called Ukraine."

complex...transformational period for fundamental, irreversible changes historical events that will determine people," Putin said just after he took which colossal responsibilities are

Early in the address, Putin said that Russia would conduct what it calls the special military operation in Ukraine "step by step, carefully, and consistently," signaling following multiple battlefield setbacks for Moscow's forces in 2022, it won't be over soon. At the end, he said that "Russia will meet any challenges because we are one country, one big nation."

**The message:** The Kremlin intends to continue the war in Ukraine until it achieves its goals, no matter how long it takes, and that no one should live in expectation that Russia's relations with the West will be mended anytime soon.

"The key idea running through the whole speech was buying loyalty," political analyst Yekaterina Shulman wrote in a Facebook post. "The citizens get money and benefits. Officials get careers and money. Everyone gets gratitude -- everyone is good and united. It was very touching. The theme of internal enemies or evil bureaucrats was generally absent: All enemies are external."

"War as a way of life," wrote journalist Maria Slonim, "and the norm for life under Pu[tin]."

Returning soldiers, Putin said, would be given advantages in educational placement, hiring, and government service. Putin promises special fund for relatives of soldiers killed in Ukraine

He said he understands the difficulties faced by relatives of Russian soldiers who have died fighting in Ukraine and pledged to provide them with "targeted support" via a new special fund.

"We all understand, I understand how unbearably hard it is now for the wives, sons, daughters of fallen soldiers, their parents, who raised worthy defenders of the fatherland," the Russian president said. (**Comment** – Obviously he needs soldiers for recruitment, something he is failing at, otherwise why incentivize them?)(**Comment** – He is targeting fallen soldier families with messages of promise and goodwill – again unmasking he has a problem in this regard).

The speech came as the Russian massive invasion of Ukraine approaches the one-year mark on February 24, with no clear end in sight. Although Putin devoted no time to the issue of casualties, Western officials including U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken have put the number of Russian soldiers killed and wounded in Ukraine at more than 200,000.

He did not discuss the conduct of the war or mention the setbacks Russia has faced on the battlefield, including its withdrawal in November from the Ukrainian city of Kherson, the only regional capital that Moscow occupied after the invasion and the capital of one of the four Ukrainian regions that Russia claimed to have annexed in September.

Putin paid particular attention to the economy, portraying it as successfully shifting to a war footing and holding out the prospect of higher salaries, better benefits, and affordable housing for defense industry workers.

"Today our factories, our design bureaus, our research groups...are doing everything for victory," he said. "We have to strengthen the guarantees for these workers."

Putin talked up the new military technologies he claimed Russia is developing, asserting that in many cases they "exceed foreign analogs."

**(Comment** – Once a projectionist, always a projectionist. It is in the Russian blood to portray events as you would like to see or believe them to be. Projectionism permeates all elements of Russian life, its all they have known for centuries. With Putin projecting what he would like things to be when they are not so, look in the mirror image for the truth.)

Digging in his heels, Putin pledged in closing that "Russia will meet any challenges because we are one country, one big nation."

Remarks like that gave journalist Asya Kazantseva a "strong feeling of dysphoria, as if our simulation is being run by an insane ChatGPT with the settings turned all the way up."

"Everything seems to be real, but it doesn't make any sense," she wrote.

**Putin raises tension on Ukraine, suspends START nuclear pact** - Putin suspended Moscow's participation in the last remaining nuclear arms control pact with the United States, announcing the move Tuesday in a bitter speech in which he made clear he would not change his strategy in the war in Ukraine.

Putin emphasized, however, that Russia isn't withdrawing from the pact yet, and hours after his address the Foreign Ministry said Moscow would respect the treaty's caps on nuclear weapons. It also said Russia would continue to exchange information about test launches of ballistic missiles per earlier agreements with the United States.

**Putin's nuclear treaty move 'deeply irresponsible': Blinken** - Putin's decision to suspend Russia's participation in the New START nuclear arms control treaty is "deeply irresponsible," US Secretary of State Antony Blinken says.

"The announcement by Russia that it's suspending participation is deeply unfortunate and irresponsible," Blinken told reporters in Athens.

"We'll be watching carefully to see what Russia actually does," he said. "We'll of course make sure that in any event, we are postured appropriately for the security of our own country and that of our allies."

**US Has declared war says Russian state TV** - Russian propagandist has claimed on state TV that the U.S. has declared war on the country following reports of the White House's approval of targeted strikes on Crimea.

In a video uploaded to Twitter by the account TheKremlinYap on Saturday, Russian journalist Igor Korotchenko claimed the U.S. had crossed a red line by supporting the strikes.

Korotchenko's comments follow on from a previous statement made by the U.S. Under Secretary of State Nuland.

In the video translated by TheKremlinYap, an account that tracks Kremlin propaganda, Korotchenko hit out at the U.S.

He said: "After the U.S. crossed every imaginable and unimaginable red line, today the U.S. State Department actually announced that it was going to war with Russia."



"I assume that this is how we should interpret Nuland's statement. There is no need for halftones. The U.S. is an enemy of Russia, a military adversary."

He added: "If it expects massive missile strikes on Russian territory to be carried out with their help, but as if by someone else's hands, then perhaps we can regard this as a casus belli (cause for war) and react accordingly."

Korotchenko said he wanted Russian officials to "give adequate, conceptual, doctrinal, and military responses to this audacious statement of the United States, and appropriate measures should be taken. What kind of measures? We shall see."

Michael Clarke, professor in the War Studies department at King's College London, described Korotchenko's comments as "bluster."

**Russia's Security Council chief meets top Chinese diplomat in Moscow** - The head of Russia's influential Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev, has told China's top diplomat that Moscow and Beijing must stick together against the West, according to reports carried by Russian state news agencies.

Patrushev and Wang Yi held talks in the Russian capital on Tuesday.

A close ally of President Vladimir Putin, Patrushev told Wang that Moscow backed China's position over Taiwan, Hong Kong and Xinjiang, according to a statement cited by the RIA Novosti news agency.

**Russian state TV website goes down during Putin speech** - Russian state media websites broadcasting President Vladimir Putin's address to the country's two houses of parliaments on Tuesday suffered an outage during his speech. Reuters journalists in multiple locations were unable to access the All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company (VGTRK) website or the Smotrim live-streaming platform for periods during the speech.

A message on the VGTRK website said that "technical works were being carried out" while the Smotrim website was not loading.

**In China, worries about a weakened Russia prompt a rethink** - In China, worries about a weakened Russia prompt a rethink concern that a Russian setback in Ukraine would cripple China's partner against the West helps drive Beijing's push for an end to the war Any Chinese military support for Ukraine would stir up greater resentment against Xi Jinping's leadership in the West.

China's leadership is growing worried that increased Western military support for Ukraine will severely weaken Russia, a key partner for Beijing in its heightened competition with the U.S. and its allies. (**Comment** – Our Update spoke about this factor in an earlier edition).

## Sanctions

**G7 foreign ministers pledge to keep up economic pressure on Russia** - G7 foreign ministers have said their countries will continue to impose economic costs on Russia over its offensive in Ukraine.

"We will impose further economic costs on Russia, and on individuals and entities – inside and outside of Russia – that provide political or economic support to these violations of international law," the ministers said in a joint statement.

They also urged the international community to reject what they described as Moscow's "brutal expansionism."

The G7 comprises Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States.

**Russia's dark tanker fleet gets stretched sailing thousands of miles** - Russia assembled a huge fleet of tankers to beat western sanctions. They're struggling to get the job done, writes Bloomberg oil strategist Julian Lee.

The European Union banned almost all seaborne crude imports from Russia back in December, forcing Moscow to divert the shipments thousands of miles to China and India.

But as the fleet of Russian and Russia-friendly tankers makes those longer-distance deliveries, it's getting stretched out, making the country increasingly reliant on European-owned vessels again. That matters because they are barred from carrying Russian oil — and cannot get insurance to do so — if the cargo costs more than \$60 a barrel.

Before the EU crude import ban and an accompanying G7 price cap were introduced, almost half of Russia's crude exports from its western ports were carried on ships owned by European firms. That share collapsed to about one-quarter in the first month after the sanctions came into effect on Dec. 5 and was filled with Russia's own vessels and ships from the shadow fleet, shown as "unknown" in the chart above.

But in the second month, most of those Russia-friendly vessels were still engaged on their first post-sanctions voyages. With insufficient tankers available to maintain the flow, the share of the trade carried on European ships rebounded to more than one-third.

The figures will ebb and flow. Most of the Russian-owned and shadow-fleet tankers are now on their way back after discharging their cargoes in India, so it's likely that their share of the Russian trade will rebound again in February, but after that the reliance on European vessels could climb again.

### **Trade Shift**

The shift that caused this has been swift.

At the start of 2022, European buyers took 89% of the crude shipped out of ports in western Russia, India took almost none. A year later, the positions had been reversed, with 85% of shipments heading to ports in India and just 6% remaining in the Mediterranean.

That has had a dramatic impact on the average distance a barrel of Russia's crude has to be hauled to get it to a buyer which, in turn, raised the length of time cargoes are on the water and the number of vessels needed to maintain the flow.

The trade-weighted average journey of a barrel of Russian crude exported from the country's main export terminals in the Baltic rose from less than 3,000 miles in January 2022 to more than 9,000 miles a year later. The initial increase was driven by a slump in flows to customers in the Baltic region — Poland, Lithuania, Finland and Sweden — and northern Europe — principally the Netherlands and Germany. They were initially replaced by buyers in the Mediterranean, where a refinery owned by Lukoil PJSC boosted its processing of Russian crude.

Longer journeys mean more time at sea and require more ships to keep the flow moving. Voyage times on key routes measured from vessel tracking data show that it takes 66 days for a tanker to complete a round-trip journey from the Baltic or Arctic to the west coast of India, as long as there are no significant discharge delays when it reaches its destination.

Most deliveries to China are discharged at ports in Shandong province, entailing a round-trip journey from the Baltic of 123 days, or more than four months. Russian cargoes are typically carried from the Baltic on Aframax-sized vessels, capable of carrying about 700,000 barrels of crude. Ships of this size are also used within the Black Sea and to Turkey. Cargoes loading in the Arctic and those moving from the Black Sea to India are typically carried on larger Suezmax vessels, which can carry about 1 million barrels of crude.