

# Conflict Update # 185

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## Conflict Assessment

**Russian losses** – 54,250 (+200) soldiers killed, 2,202 (+3) enemy tanks, 4,701 (+11) armored combat vehicles, 1,306 (+4) artillery systems, 312 (+0) MLRS systems, 168 (+0) air defense systems, 251 (+1) warplanes, 216 (+0) helicopters, 911 (+3) UAVs of the operational-tactical level, 215 (+0) cruise missiles, 15 (+0) warships/cutters, 3,571 (+21) trucks and tankers, 76 fuel bowsers and 114 (+0) units of specialized equipment.

### Key takeaways

**Ukraine delivers another blow to Russia as it breaches front line on Oskil River** - Ukrainian soldiers have broken through Russia's frontline along the Oskil River, exposing an important supply route and swathes of territory that the Kremlin has promised to defend.

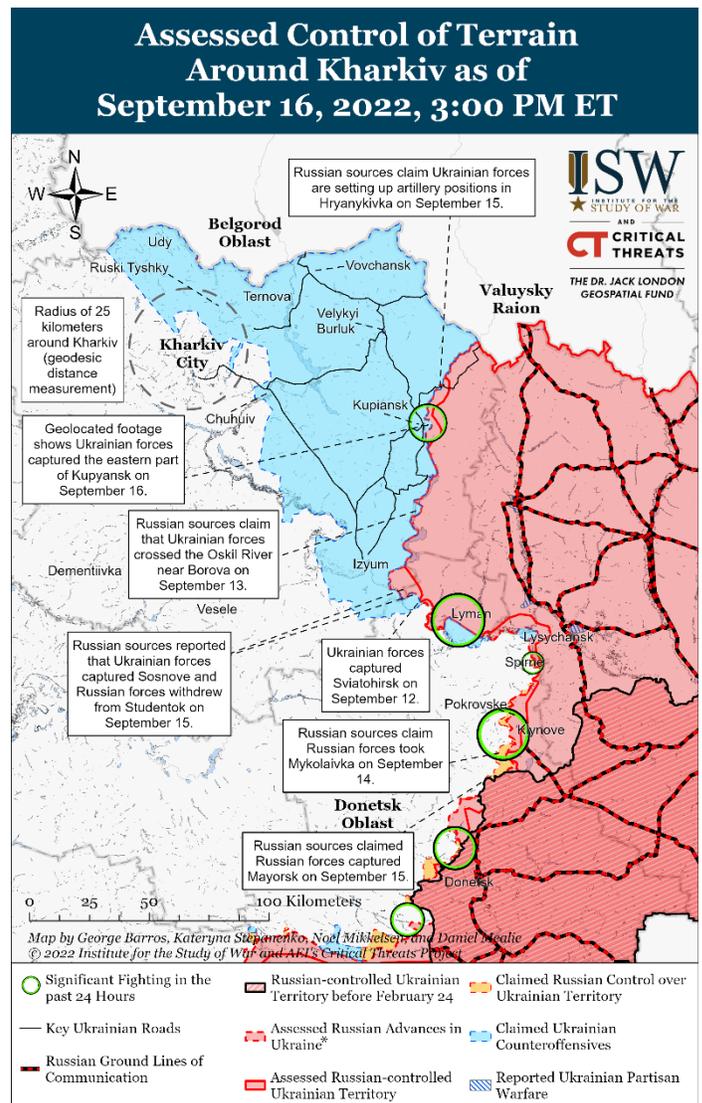
Fighting has focused on Kupiansk since Russian forces fled a surprise Ukrainian offensive around Kharkiv in northeast Ukraine last week but now military bloggers from both sides have said that Russia's defence has crumbled once again.

"Kupiansk has surrendered. The enemy is on the left bank of the Oskil," the pro-Russian military blogger Vladlen Tatarsky told his 450,000 subscribers last night.

Withdrawing Russian battalions settled on the left bank of the Oskil River, calling this their new "front line." The Kremlin stated that their forces had not been defeated, but merely instructed to move to this new front line along the Oskil River.

Western commentators confirmed the development. James Rushton, a British military analyst based in Ukraine, said he didn't think that Russian forces would be able to hold their defensive line along the Oskil River for much longer.

"The Ukrainians have already crossed it," he said. "Considering they now control all of Kupiansk, half of the city is on the eastern bank, any defensive line the Russians might try to form along the river is already very vulnerable."



Russian forces fled across the Oskil River, which runs north-south from central Russia into Ukraine, after a surprise Ukrainian offensive recaptured roughly 2,500 square miles of territory, an area nearly equal to the size of Devon.

The British MoD said that a Ukrainian breach of the Russian frontline along the Oskil River would humiliate the Kremlin, which has made capturing and then defending Luhansk a priority and threaten its final logistics hub to Donbas from the Russian city of Belgorod.

"This line sits along the border of Luhansk Oblast, part of the Donbas, which Russia aims to 'liberate' as one of its immediate war aims," it said. "Any substantial loss of territory in Luhansk will unambiguously undermine Russia's strategy." It added that "Russia will likely attempt a stubborn defence of this area, but it is unclear whether Russia's front line forces have sufficient reserves or adequate morale to withstand another concerted Ukrainian assault."

The Oskil River meanders south through fertile farmland in Ukraine before joining the Seversky Donets River which flows into Donbas. It lies 75 miles east of Kharkiv and 110 miles to the northwest of the city of Luhansk which pro-Russia rebels have controlled since an uprising in 2014 against the central government in Kyiv.

The US-based Institute for the Study of War also confirmed that Ukrainian forces had broken through Russia's northeastern frontline. "Russian forces are likely too weak to prevent further Ukrainian advances along the entire Oskil River," it said.

**Putin threatens increased attacks on Ukrainian civilian infrastructure if reported Ukrainian attacks on Russian military positions in Russian Federation territory continue.** Putin said that Russia has been "rather restrained in our response" to Ukrainian "terrorist acts [and] attempts to damage our civilian [sic] infrastructure" in a question-and-answer session with reporters following the Shanghai Cooperation Organization meeting on September 16. He continued "more recently, the Russian armed forces have dealt a couple of sensitive blows" that are "warning shots," and threatened that more serious attacks could follow. Putin did not explicitly refer to the reported Ukrainian strikes on the base of the Russian 3rd Motorized Rifle Division near Valuyki that occurred on September 16, nor did he make clear which Russian actions he was referring to. But Russian forces have increased attacks on civilian infrastructure throughout Ukraine over the past several weeks as Russian media personalities increase explicit calls for such attacks.

Putin's comments are likely in part a response to criticism by Russian milbloggers, who attacked the Kremlin for failing to protect Russian territory and for failing to respond adequately. One milblogger asked if the Kremlin still regards Belgorod Oblast as part of Russia, part of the "special military operation" zone, or part of Ukraine. Another blamed the reported Ukrainian attack on Valuyki on the so-called "regrouping" of Russian forces (referring to the initial language the Russian Ministry of Defense used to describe the rout of Russian forces in Kharkiv Oblast) and warned that another "regrouping" could allow Ukrainian forces to attack other critical Russian areas. Putin has increasingly shown a determination to appease the milbloggers and the constituencies they speak to and on behalf of, even at the expense of the uniformed Russian military and the Russian Ministry of Defense.

**Ukraine counterattack effective - not beginning of war's end** - Ukraine's counterattack against Russian troops is effective but likely does not signal the war's end, according to NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg.

He told BBC Radio on yesterday: "It is of course, extremely encouraging to see that Ukrainian armed forces have been able to take back territory and also strike behind Russian lines.

"At the same time, we need to understand that this is not the beginning of the end of war, we need to be prepared for the long haul."

**Multiple pro-Russian officials killed in single day across Ukraine** - Multiple Russian-installed officials have been killed in a single day across Ukraine, with Kyiv ramping up efforts to recapture territory that was seized by Russian forces during the course of the war.

On Friday morning, authorities said Ukraine struck government buildings in the occupied Kherson region at least five times using U.S.-supplied High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS), killing at least one person and wounding others.

Ekaterina Gubareva, the deputy head of the Russian-installed administration in Kherson, said that at the time of the strike, a meeting was underway between the heads of the city and municipal districts.

**Huge explosion as pro-Russian officials hit by Ukraine HIMARS** - Ukraine struck its occupied Kherson region at least five times on Friday using U.S.-supplied High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS), causing a huge explosion at a building where officials of the Russian-installed administration were holding a meeting, authorities said.

A video published by Russian state-run news agency RIA Novosti shows a huge plume of smoke rising from the building of the Kherson regional administration. Another video shows extensive damage to Kherson's district court building.

Kherson has been under Russian control since the beginning of March. However, Ukraine is waging a counteroffensive in the region, and has had success in another counterattack in the Kharkiv area in the northeast of the country.

**Ukrainian forces reportedly shelled targets** in Valuyki, Belgorod Oblast, Russia, overnight on September 15-16.

**Ukrainian forces struck Russia's occupation headquarters in Kherson**, likely using HIMARS, and are continuing ground maneuvers in three areas of Kherson Oblast as part of the ongoing southern counteroffensive.

**Forced Russian mobilization campaigns are likely depleting male populations** in parts of the claimed territory of the Russian proxy Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR) along the front lines.

**Russia's battered army has no quick fix in Ukraine** - Russian forces sent fleeing by Ukraine's recent counterattack are attempting to establish defensive positions and regain their footing. It is a difficult pivot under ideal conditions, and so far Moscow's forces show signs of struggling to adapt.

Battlefield setbacks are just one challenge facing the Kremlin as it tries to secure its territorial gains in Ukraine and fend off nascent criticism at home. Kyiv's forces this month have retaken dozens of settlements and more than 3,000 square miles of Russian-controlled ground, according to government officials.

Russia has lost hundreds of heavy military vehicles—including over 100 tanks—in recent days, according to open-source intelligence reports. It also lost several pieces of classified electronic-warfare equipment that are now in the hands of Western-allied forces. Many Russian soldiers—in the thousands, by some estimates—have either surrendered or will become prisoners of war.

Ukraine's advance will also allow its rockets to hit targets deeper within Russian-controlled areas, potentially in occupied parts of Ukraine such as Crimea and in Russia itself.

Russia still retains significant forces deployed in and around Ukraine and vast stores of weaponry and ammunition, giving it the potential to react and hit back. While Kyiv has seized the initiative in routing some of Moscow's front-line troops, it is far from uprooting all Russian forces occupying its territories.

Ukraine could also face more opposition in pushing further into Russian-controlled regions, military analysts say. Kyiv's recent gains near Kharkiv, in the northeast, were achieved using surprise and by finding weak points in Russia's long

and thinly protected front line, according to soldiers involved in the fight. Achieving such surprise again may be difficult and Ukrainian forces are advancing into regions where Russian forces are more dug-in than near Kharkiv.

Igor Girkin, a military observer and former intelligence officer who commanded irregular Russian forces in Donbas in 2014, wrote in his increasingly popular Telegram channel that Ukrainian success came thanks to failures in how senior Russian leadership conducted the war.

If Russia continues as they it has since February, he wrote, “we will, in the end, suffer a crushing defeat in this war.”

Russia’s combination of battlefield losses and growing internal dissent could increase pressure on Moscow to double down on its fight, analysts said.

Russia will struggle to update or replace the lost equipment because Western sanctions are limiting Moscow’s access to advanced electronics. And if word spreads that Russia’s advanced defenses have been compromised, its prospects of selling such gear in export markets will diminish, further weakening its arms industry, analysts say.

**Russian 'Fencer' fighter jet destroyed by Ukraine air defense** - Ukraine destroyed a Russian Su-24 aircraft, also known as a "Fencer" jet, its armed forces said Friday, as war between the nations continues.

"During the current day, the Defense Forces aviation has hit 4 areas of the focus of military equipment and 1 support point. The losses of the enemy are being specified," the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine said in an unverified situational update on Facebook. "In addition, our air defense units in different directions destroyed a Su-24 aircraft, two winged missiles and one Gulf of the invaders."



An Su-24 aircraft is manufactured by the Moscow-based Sukhoi Design Bureau Joint Stock Company and the Novosibirsk Aircraft Production Association, according to Airforce-Technology.com.

The update comes as Ukraine's armed forces continue a counteroffensive, hoping to retake control of some regions, such as Kherson and Izium.

**Ukraine just captured another rare Russian electronic warfare vehicle** - The vehicle from the Taran-M signals intelligence, or SIGINT, system was captured after the rout of Russian forces in the Kharkiv region.

The potential intelligence windfall from the electronic warfare battle in Ukraine continues, with the first confirmed capture of a vehicle from the Russian Taran-M signals intelligence, or SIGINT, system. The vehicle, captured by Ukrainian forces in the ongoing counter-offensive in the east of the country, is the latest addition to a growing collection of seized modern Russian electronic warfare (EW) equipment, which ranges from containerized components of vehicle-borne systems to airborne jamming pods.



The vehicle in question was reportedly captured by the Ukrainian Army in Kharkiv Oblast, from where Russian forces have recently retreated en masse, as you can read about here. The vehicle has been identified by various sources as an

R-381T2M, part of the wider R-381TM Taran-M SIGINT system, which typically involves multiple vehicles, although these can also operate independently.

The R-381TM Taran-M is an upgrade of the Cold War-era R-381T Taran, described in Russian parlance as an 'automatic radio intelligence complex.' The job of this system is to monitor radio signals, eavesdropping on enemy forces' communications across a range of frequencies. As well as providing raw intelligence in the form of intercepted communications, the Taran is also able to geolocate emitters, providing commanders with critical data on the actual positions of enemy forces. As such, it provides very high-value battlefield awareness of land forces, aircraft, and even naval ships in its vicinity.

**Russia is running out of options to recruit more soldiers** - Russia's retreat following Ukraine's counteroffensive has focused minds in Moscow and Western capitals on what Putin will do next to replenish his depleted forces.

Ukraine estimates more than 50,000 Russian troops have died during the war and the Kremlin has been forced to find new ways to replenish its troops including recruiting from prisons and homeless shelters.

In the face of Ukraine's counteroffensive pro-Kremlin bloggers and some television pundits have upped their calls for mobilization which would force Russian citizens to fight.

Part of the problem is the Kremlin's description of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine as a "special military operation" which gives Russian troops an opt-out at the end of their contracts.

Declaring mobilization would not only be unpopular, particularly in the biggest cities of Moscow and St Petersburg; it would require declaring the military operation a war, which an admission that the invasion was not going to plan.

"Putin certainly has a problem. This is one of those rare occasions where in terms of propaganda presentation they have boxed themselves into a corner," said Keir Giles, senior consulting fellow of the Russia and Eurasia program at London's Chatham House think tank.

"If you frame it as a special military operation and then you say 'actually we are at war' and actually mobilize, that in itself is an admission of failure, which is something that they have not done," he told Newsweek.

"It doesn't matter how you package why it was a failure, it's still the case that that is a setback, which can't be explained away," he said.

"They would have to say for the first time 'we are not winning.' That does not mean they can't do a partial mobilization by stealth," Giles said, referring to the Kremlin calling up reserves with particular grades of service obligation.

**Russian retreat exposes military weaknesses** - Russia's retreat from Kharkiv, north-eastern Ukraine, has exposed key weaknesses in the supplies and staffing of the nation's armed forces, Russian veterans and military bloggers say.

"You have no idea how tired I am to say hello to someone in the morning and then have to identify his remains later the same day," one Russian officer serving as a marine in Ukraine reportedly confided over the phone to a former colleague back home, who published it on his Telegram channel.

"Just yesterday two of my sniper groups were destroyed by a tank. Three men died instantly, the fourth one fought for his life for an hour and a half, another one in critical condition was taken to hospital. We have hardly any men left, and we are holding a front line dozens of kilometres long."

While Russian officials and state media are trying to play down the Russian forces' retreat from Kharkiv, individual war reporters, veterans and influential military bloggers are acknowledging numerous challenges within closed messaging channels.

Blogs and Telegram channels are littered with stories of inadequate equipment and personnel, compounded by a rigid operational hierarchy.

One Telegram channel, sharing experiences of soldiers in the field in Ukraine shortly after the latest retreat, describes how even deploying a small surveillance drone needs to be approved by a senior officer or a general, considerably slowing down understanding of enemy positions.

Another channel on Telegram, reportedly run by a Russian special forces veteran, has posted a photo of a Russian soldier sporting an arm patch embroidered with the words: "There is no opponent worse than your own commander who is a..." using an expletive to describe him.

Despite rumors of low morale, Russian war reporters and paramilitary soldiers serving in Ukraine are not suggesting that widespread desertion in the field contributed to the latest rout in eastern Ukraine. They say it is much more likely that units simply obeyed an order to retreat.

Some Russian fighters on another channel joke bitterly that the "special military operation" - as the Russian government publicly terms it - "has no goals, it only has a path".

There are not only concerns about poor leadership. Basic equipment appears to be in such short supply that it is having to be crowdfunded. Dozens of public social media groups are collecting money for a whole range of kit - everything from drones to socks and underwear.

One of them, called "The People's Front", says it has raised about 1.5bn roubles (£15m, \$17m) over the past three months, and has already spent it on uniforms, helmets and flak jackets, as well as first-aid kits, binoculars and thermal imagers.

Despite such fundraising, hundreds of pleas have been posted online from dozens of military units - including pilots of Russia's most modern fighter jets - for specific items, such as fire-proof uniforms, torches and two-way radios.

But the issue is not just a lack of equipment, it is a lack of troops.

Russia is frantically recruiting and drafting new units and is believed to be sending several of these quickly assembled scratch units to Ukraine every 10 days, following training of just a week or less.

**Multiple explosions in Russia-occupied Melitopol** - Five explosions went off in Ukraine's Melitopol, a town currently occupied by Russia, says Vladimir Rogov, a local occupation "official."

The town's legitimate mayor Ivan Fedorov also reported five explosions but mentioned the locality of Bohatyr 25 miles away from Melitopol as the location. He noted that this is where Russia moved part of its troops and weaponry.

The outlet has also reported that a group of partisans had destroyed a railroad track in the region which Russia used to transport munitions and fuel from Crimea. The track was damaged, and nobody was hurt. (Novaya Gazeta).

**Explosions kill senior officials installed by Moscow** - Dual blasts inside Russian-held territory kill occupation officials in Ukraine. Russian-backed authorities in the cities of Luhansk and Kherson in eastern and southern Ukraine said two Moscow-installed officials had been killed in separate attacks on government buildings.

**ISW: Ukraine captures all of Kupiansk** - Ukraine's army has captured all of Kupiansk in the Kharkiv region, continuing offensive operations east of the Oskil River, as per the US-based Institute for the Study of War.

Serhiy Velychko of the Ukrainian army says both banks of the Oskil River within the city limits have been captured; this was later confirmed by Radio Free Europe Russia. Vladlen Tatarsky, a Russian blogger, also says "Kupiansk was surrendered."

**Ukraine trolls Russia on gift of 'thousands of tons' of ammo, keeps gaining** - The Ukrainian Defense Ministry is declaring it has seized massive troves of munitions that it promises to use against the invading armed forces.

In a sarcastic Twitter post, the ministry said Friday that it had "received thousands of tons of ammunition as a gift" from Russia's forces over the past week. The ministry's post follows reports of Ukraine's success in reclaiming occupied land in the country's south and northeast. But the "gift" of seized ammunition will be returned to Russia, the ministry added.

"Please note that we do not accept gifts from murderers, torturers, looters, or rapists," the ministry said in its post. "In the coming days, we will return everything, right down to the last shell."

**Disastrous troop management compounds Russia's missteps** - Wars are planned in offices but fought on the ground, and the Russian army's strategic errors in the Ukraine war point in particular to insufficient oversight of its rank-and-file fighters.

After the start of Moscow's invasion on February 24, signals have emerged that many Russian soldiers have no clear idea of the war's goals with some initially thinking they were simply being mustered for maneuvers.

"The Russian army is an army of lies," General Burkhard, chief of the French armed forces, told AFP as early as May.

"People lied by saying that the Ukrainian army wouldn't fight, that Russia's forces were ready for war, that their leaders knew how to command," he said.

Six months into the invasion, Western analysts still describe the Russian army as riddled with falsehoods and corruption, and desperate to tell President Vladimir Putin's inner circle what it wants to hear.

"Senior officers are only thinking of their medals and how to take care of their career. But the soldiers only want to survive," said Alexander Grinberg of the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security.

"Putin demands results that are unrealistic, and nobody tells him the truth, even in private," said Grinberg, a former member of Israel's military intelligence service.

Deaths or injuries of Russian generals and officers have also taken a toll, experts say, since army training programs appear to have deteriorated in recent years, making it harder to tap competent replacements.

"They have a problem with training superiors, notably because there aren't enough non-commissioned officers" who have risen through the ranks and should be "experts in their field," a senior French military chief told AFP.

Russia tends to give promotions mainly to older soldiers, he said, "and if your only relation with subordinates is one of power, when only the oldest get promoted... launching an attack becomes complicated."

The effect on morale will only worsen as the conflict drags on, no matter Russia's advantage in terms of sheer troop numbers.

"An army is the sum of its competences and its capacities. Without a solid infrastructure for recruitment, training and innovation, the Russian sum has considerably diminished," French military historian Michel Goya said.

"Russia's ability to maneuver has been weakened, poorly replaced by smaller and less capable units," he said.

## Sanctions

**US issues new Order to block Chinese investment in technology in the US** - President Biden issued an executive order Thursday to increase scrutiny of foreign investments in areas considered critical for U.S. economic power, aimed at countering Chinese access to key technologies.

The order expands the duties of the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) to block foreign acquisition of firms that might give adversarial countries, especially China, insight into “microelectronics, artificial intelligence, biotechnology and biomanufacturing, quantum computing, advanced clean energy, and climate adaptation technologies.” In a first for the executive branch, the order explicitly ties CFIUS activities to the national security priorities of the Biden administration, including supply chain resilience, data protection and cybersecurity.

**Germany takes over Rosneft refineries in move to secure energy supplies** - Germany says it has taken control of a major oil refinery owned by the German unit of Russia's Rosneft as a step to bolster energy security for the country amid oil and gas cuts by Moscow in retaliation for Western sanctions against it because of the invasion of Ukraine.

The German Economy Ministry said in a statement on September 16 that it had placed the Rosneft unit under the trusteeship of the industry regulator, the Federal Network Agency, giving it control of the PCK Schwedt, MiRo, and Bayernoil refineries.

"Rosneft Deutschland accounts for around 12 percent of Germany's oil-processing capacity, making it one of the largest oil-processing companies in Germany," the statement said.

"The trustee administration counteracts the impending threat to the security of the energy supply and lays an essential foundation for the preservation and future of the Schwedt location," it added.

Rosneft Deutschland did not comment on the move, but Rosneft said it could go to court to challenge the decision, which it said was illegal.

Across Europe, countries have been racing to bolster their energy supplies as they tighten sanctions on Russia, the continent's main oil and gas supplier.

## Impact

**Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant reconnected to Ukraine's electricity grid** - The Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant has been reconnected to Ukraine's electricity grid, the International Atomic Energy Agency reports.

The facility's engineers have repaired one of the four main external power lines that have all been damaged during the Ukraine War.

Enerhoatom, Ukraine's nuclear power operator, reported shutting the plant down on 11 September, several days after the facility was disconnected from the Ukrainian power grid.

The plant first disconnected from Ukraine's grid on 25 August; its own electricity needs were powered by the local thermal power plant.

**India's Modi voices concern over Ukraine war at meeting with Russia's Putin** - The Indian leader's comments at a meeting in Uzbekistan came a day after Putin said China's Xi Jinping had raised concerns about the conflict.

**How will Russia's poor Ukraine showing ripple in the Middle East?** – The stunning turn of events in the war in Ukraine was head-spinning, reflected in dramatic headlines in the media around the world.

“Ukraine is turning the tide against Russia.” “Ukrainian victory shatters Russia's reputation as a military superpower,” shouted a second. “Russia withdraws more forces from northeast Ukraine as Kyiv presses advance,” read a third.

Seven months after the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the tide seemed to turn in the war, as Ukrainian forces registered victories in the northeast. In a symbolic action that seemed unimaginable a few months ago, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky visited the liberated town of Iziom on Thursday, just 14 km. from the front.

With its bold counteroffensive, Ukraine regained thousands of square kilometers of territory, and pushed Russian forces out of countless towns and villages – including the strategic railway hub of Iziom.

If the world was surprised at the initial difficulties the Russians faced when they invaded Ukraine in late February, if it was impressed by the Ukrainian ability to repel Russian advances on Kyiv and on April 2 force a Russian withdrawal from the capital, and if it was shocked by the sinking 12-days later of the Moskva, the flagship of Russia's Black Sea fleet, then it was completely stunned by this current counteroffensive and the recent turn of events.

From Washington to Wellington, Berlin to Beijing, statesmen, politicians, and military experts are wondering what has happened to the vaunted Russian army. What has happened to Moscow's military might? And how will Russia's underwhelming showing in Ukraine and its current losses affect geopolitics?

Nowhere is the question of what has happened to the feared Russian Bear at the forefront of decision-makers' minds as it is in the Middle East, an area of intense competition for influence between Russia, the US and China.

Ever since its move into Syria in 2015 to prop up Syrian dictator Bashar Assad, Russia has been a permanent physical fixture in the neighborhood – a big fixture and an important fixture that other countries took into account when determining policy.

Even before 2015, Russia was a force in the region, using military and economic aid, as well as diplomatic support, to project power throughout the region. This influence increased significantly over the last dozen years amid a perception in many regional capitals that the US was an unreliable ally intent on leaving the Mideast.

And the influence soared into another sphere altogether after Russia's military intervention in Syria.

Over the last decade, ties flourished between Russia and Egypt, as well as between Russia and Saudi Arabia. The Saudi and Egyptian calculations were clear. If the US was unreliable, or if it linked arms sales to various human rights demands, then they should look for a partner that does not have such demands, and that conducts a values-free foreign policy.

Russia's influence in the region explains why the Mideast countries – including Israel – were reluctant to come out strongly against Russian President Vladimir Putin when he first invaded Ukraine. They were afraid of the damage Putin could do to their national interests if he wanted to.

### **But now things are changing.**

One of the various reasons given for Putin's decision to invade Ukraine was to deal a blow to American dominance in the world, to project power and reassert Russia's role as the dominant superpower. But the opposite is taking place, and rather than looking strong and invincible, rather than projecting power, Russia's setbacks are projecting weakness and making it look spent and unorganized. Nothing illustrates this more than the sudden dependency of Russia – the world's second-largest exporter of arms – on Iranian-manufactured drones.

In the meantime, regional countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the Gulf states, which still feel threatened by Iran and had recently looked to Russia for arms, now will look elsewhere, as the Russian war machine fumbles in Ukraine.

This will lead to a possible realignment, with nations casting their eyes toward Beijing and Washington. For weeks there have been rumors that Chinese President Xi Jinping will soon make a visit to Saudi Arabia. Such a visit would be highly symbolic, signaling that the Chinese are eager to seize an opportunity afforded by Russia's troubles in Ukraine.

The poor Russian performance in Ukraine will also likely lead countries in the region to try to improve ties with the US.

When US President Joe Biden visited Saudi Arabia in July, he appeared to go there looking for the Saudis to increase oil production to bring down global oil prices. Back then it appeared that the US needed the Saudis much more than the Saudis needed them.

Now things are changing. The Saudis, who were then cozying up to the Russians, just as they were distancing themselves from the US, still face the same threat from Iran and its proxies that they always have. But now the Russians look far less attractive, something that could lead them to take steps on their end to improve ties with the US.

It may also move them closer to Israel. If the Saudis still feel they can't rely on the US, if Russia is not what they thought it was, then – as the Iranian threat still looms large for the Saudis, even more so if a new Iranian nuclear deal is signed – this could lead to more Saudi overtures toward Israel.

### **And then there is the situation in Syria.**

It is from Syria that Russia has been able to project its power throughout the Mideast for the last seven years. Its military losses in Ukraine, however, have forced Russia to draw down its considerable presence in Syria, something that will have an impact on Syria, Iran and Israel.

While in the past Russian forces were key to Assad staying in power, as Russia removes troops from Syria, Assad will become more dependent on Iran. And if Iran gets more and more entrenched inside Syria, this will invite even more Israeli activity there.

Some argue that this will only increase the likelihood of an Israeli-Russian confrontation over the skies of the country. Remember as well that the desire to maintain the deconfliction mechanism that has been in place in Syria since 2015 – a mechanism that prevents accidental Russian-Israeli clashes – was one of the main reasons that kept Israel from fully supporting Ukraine and condemning Russia, at the start of the war.

The recent Russian setbacks in Ukraine make it more imperative than ever for Russia not to get involved in any military confrontation elsewhere. That is good news for Israel, which continues – according to foreign reports – to strike at Iranian and Hezbollah assets inside Syria. One of Israel's concerns was that to limit these attacks, Russia might embed their forces with Iranian units to prevent Israeli action, knowing that Israel would not willingly attack Russian positions. The last thing Moscow needs right now, however, is another military entanglement anywhere in the world.

At the same time, as Russia's prestige is taking a hit in Ukraine, it has become all the more important for it to retain its control of Syria as a base for its activities in the Mideast. Having a presence in Syria allows its presence to be felt throughout the region.

There is, however, another way for Russia to make its presence felt throughout the region, and that is something Jerusalem doesn't want to see: using its base in Syria, as well as a presence it still maintains in Libya, to be a disruptive force in the region. If Putin fails miserably in Ukraine, he may be tempted to take revenge on the West by harming its interests, sowing instability, and disrupting the world order elsewhere – first and foremost in the Middle East.

## **Humanitarian**

**Why do Russian executives, including 4 connected with Gazprom, keep dying in strange ways?** - A string of deaths among wealthy Russians has this in common: The circumstances are always unusual.

It's getting hard to keep track.

When Ivan Pechorin's body was found washed onto shore near Vladivostok, Russia's easternmost metropolis, it marked the 12th time this year that a wealthy Russian executive had died in strange circumstances.

"Strange circumstances" may be an understatement. Some of these men are said to have fallen out of windows. Some have died in reported murder-suicides. They have drowned or been drowned, hanged or been hanged — depending on who you believe. They have died in Russia, Western Europe and in Washington, D.C.

An oil executive magnate was found in his bathroom, his wrists slashed. The man who ran corporate security for the same company was found hanging in his garage. A shipping CEO was found in his swimming pool, a gunshot wound to his head.

- **Leonid Shulman** - Position: Gazprom Invest, transport head - Date of death: January 2022 - Place: Leningrad region, Russia, residence's bathroom - Circumstances: A suicide note was found next to his body, according to Russian state media.
- **Alexander Tyulakov** - Position: Executive at Gazprom - Date of death: February 2022 - Place: St. Petersburg residence's garage - Circumstances: A suicide note was found on his body.
- **Mikhail Watford** - Position: Ukrainian-born Russian billionaire - Date of death: February 2022 - Place: Surrey, U.K., residence's garage - Circumstances: British authorities have not found evidence of a crime.
- **Vasily Melnikov** - Position: Russian businessman. Owner of Medstorm - Date of death: March 2022 - Place: Nizhny Novgorod, Russia, apartment - Circumstances: His wife and two sons were found dead beside him.
- **Vladislav Avayev** - Position: Former vice-president at Gazprombank - Date of death: April 2022 - Place: Moscow, luxury apartment - Circumstances: His wife and 13-year-old daughter were found dead beside him.
- **Sergey p\Protosenya** - Position: Former executive at Novatek - Date of death: April 2022 - Place: Lloret de Mar, Spain, in a residence's garden - Circumstances: He was hanged from a handrail. His wife and daughter were found dead in their beds with blunt axe hits and stab wounds.
- **Alexander Subbotin** - Position: Board member at Lukoil - Date of death: May 2022 - Place: Mytishchi, a city just northeast of Moscow - Circumstances: He reportedly died from a heart attack while visiting a shaman.
- **Yuri Voronov** - Position: CEO of Astra-Shipping, a subcontractor to Gazprom - Date of death: July 2022 - Place: St. Petersburg, Russia, residence's pool - Circumstances: Found with gunshot wounds to the head and a pistol next to his body.
- **Dan Rapoport** - Position: Latvian-born Russian businessman and outspoken Putin critic - Date of death: August 2022 - Place: Washington D.C., luxury apartment - Circumstances: He reportedly died in a fall from his apartment.
- **Ravil Maganov** - Position: Chairman of Russia's Lukoil oil giant and outspoken Putin critic - Date of death: September 2022 - Place: Moscow, below a Kremlin hospital's window - Circumstances: He was reportedly hospitalized for heart problems and depression, and then "fell out of a window".
- **Ivan Pechorin** - Position: Aviation Director for Russia's Far East and Arctic Development Corporation - Date of death: September 2022 - Place: Washed up, Beregovoe, 100 miles from Vladivostok, Russia - Circumstances: He reportedly drowned at Cape Ignatyev, Vladivostok. His body was found in Beregovoe two days later. He possibly fell from his boat.
- **Vladimir Nikolayevich Sungorkin** - Position: Editor-in-chief of the Russian state newspaper, Komsomolskaya Pravda - Date of death: September 2022 - Place: Village of Roshchino, Khabarovsk Krai, Russia - Circumstances: He reportedly suffered a stroke and suffocated while on the way to lunch.

Perhaps the oddest of these stories is the case of former oil executive Alexander Subbotin, who died in May. Russian state media said he had been found at the house of a shaman in the Moscow region, dead of a heart attack. According to Newsweek, he was seeking a hangover cure.

Pechorin, the man found this week near Vladivostok, was an executive involved in the energy industry in the Russian far east. No fewer than eight wealthy Russians with ties to the country's critical energy sector have died this year.

Pechorin was the aviation director for Russia's Far East and Arctic Development Corporation (KRDV). He was said by local authorities to have "fallen overboard" from a boat that was sailing near Cape Ignatyev in the Sea of Japan.

"On September 12, 2022, it became known about the tragic death of our colleague, Ivan Pechorin," a statement from the company said.

### **Friends or foes of Putin?**

Nearly all the accounts have come shrouded in mystery or hard-to-believe detail and — not surprisingly — they have given rise to a slew of conspiratorial-sounding theories and amateur sleuthing:

Surely someone is killing all these people? Surely Putin, who has been known to order attacks on his enemies, must be somehow tied to the deaths? Has falling out of favor with the Kremlin led to falling inexplicably from windows?

Complicating matters for investigators — amateur or professional — is the fact that some of these men were friends of the Kremlin; some were critics. Their companies profited from good relations with the Kremlin — or suffered from Putin's war. In some cases, both may have been true.

Perhaps the most suspicious of all these stories was a pair of deaths of executives from Lukoil, Russia's largest private oil company. That's because Lukoil took an early public stand against the war in Ukraine. In March, the company issued a statement calling for the "immediate cessation of the armed conflict."

What to make of it all? In some cases, suicide seems plausible, given that some of the individuals had lost enormous amounts of money due to the sanctions imposed after Putin's invasion. Suspicion of foul play is of course understandable — given the nature of the deaths and the fact that Putin's Kremlin has a history of ordering the killing of its enemies.

But beyond that, it is impossible to know where the truth lies. At least not yet. Perhaps the most one can say is that taking all the explanations at face value seems a stretch. And that will explain why so many people — the amateurs and professionals both — are doing no such thing.

**Discovery of mass grave in Iziium prompts call for war crimes tribunal** - As the Ukrainian city's five-month ordeal ends, the evidence of dead bodies and survivors' testimonies suggests Iziium could be another Bucha.

Standing in the gloom, Maksim Maksimov pointed to the spot where he was tortured with electric shocks. Russian soldiers took him from his cell in the basement of Iziium's police station. They sat him on an office chair and attached a zig-zag crocodile clip to his finger. It was connected by cable to an old-fashioned Soviet military field telephone. And then it began. A soldier cranked the handle, turning it faster and faster. This sent an excruciating pulse through Maksimov's body. "I collapsed. They pulled me upright. There was a hood on my head. I couldn't see anything. My legs went numb. I was unable to hear in my left ear," he recalled. "Then they did it again. I passed out. I came round 40 minutes later back in my cell."

The Russian army occupied the police station in April. This followed a furious month-long battle with Ukrainian forces who had based themselves on a hill next to Iziium's Soviet war memorial. According to Maksimov, a 50-year-old publisher, the soldiers rounded up anyone suspected of having pro-Ukrainian views. He had stayed behind to look after his elderly mother.

They sought veteran servicemen, home guard volunteers and city hall officials. The Russians turned up with a list of names. Some local politicians appear to have collaborated. They included several city council deputies and a retired police chief Vladislav Sokolov, who became Iziium’s new pro-Vladimir Putin “mayor.”

Residents were unable to say how many people vanished during Russia’s five-month occupation of the city. One answer could be found on Saturday in a sunny pine forest on the outskirts of town, close to a Russian checkpoint. Beneath orange-barked trees, Ukrainian forensic experts were carrying out a gruesome process of exhumation and truth-telling.

A Russian battalion had parked its tanks next to a cemetery, cutting down branches and building underground shelters with neat log roofs. Iziium’s war dead – 443 people since February – joined them in nearby sandy plots. They included 17 Ukrainian soldiers. They were dug up on Friday from a scooped-out hollow for a tank, used as a mass grave.

Ukraine’s armed forces discovered the grisly site when they swept into Iziium a week ago, as part of a stunning counter-offensive that saw them recapture almost the entire north-eastern Kharkiv region. On Friday, the first 40 bodies were removed. Some had their hands bound together; on the decayed arm of a woman was a bracelet in Ukrainian blue-and-yellow colors. On Saturday, experts in white boiler suits continued digging. Graves were marked with wooden crosses. Watched by police, they scraped, pulled out bodies and laid them carefully in a glade. The first was a soldier, identifiable from his camouflage trousers and boots. Then two civilians – one possibly female – and another soldier. All were zipped up in white bags.

**Where are people fleeing to?** - According to the UN, there have been more than 12.6 million border crossings out of Ukraine since the Russian invasion began. Many people have sought refuge in neighboring countries.



The latest data show 6,114,787 border crossings into Poland, 1,169,027 to Romania, 2,593,209 to Russia, 1,381,738 to Hungary, 778,335 to Slovakia, 606,707 to Moldova, and 16,705 into Belarus.

Most of the arrivals have been women and children. Men aged between 18 and 60 have been asked to remain in Ukraine to fight.

## GeoPolitics

**China warns of another crisis 'detonating' as Xi, Putin strengthen ties** - An editorial in a Chinese-state newspaper warned of an emergent world crisis between Eastern and Western nations following a high-profile meeting between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin earlier this week.

The column, published in the Global Times early on Friday, depicts the meeting of the two world powers as the next step in the nations' efforts to form a hedge against the West—in particular, the countries aligned with the United Nations and NATO—as the coalition's members continue to inject money and weapons into Ukraine.

Though NATO has repeatedly denied any desire to escalate tensions between its members and Russia, Putin has long cited concerns with its presence in Eastern Europe as a pretext for the country's invasion of Ukraine. The conflict, the newspaper wrote, was "the consequence of the failure of the Western military and political bloc in handling equal relations with a regional power properly," and demonstrated the need for a counterbalance on the world stage in order to stabilize relations between the East and West.

**China mutes top official's support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine** - Remarks by one of Beijing's most senior political figures in support of the Kremlin's war aims in Ukraine have been omitted from all official coverage in China, a sign that the officially endorsed message to Russia perhaps wasn't meant for Chinese ears.

China's official Xinhua News Agency, state broadcaster CCTV and the Chinese Communist Party's flagship publication People's Daily all reported No. 3 official Li Zhanshu's recent visit to Russia, which began with a face-to-face meeting with President Vladimir Putin on September 7 in Vladivostok in the far east.

In the two days that followed, Li, who chairs the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, China's legislature, was in Moscow for meetings with senior members of Russia's State Duma, its lowest house of parliament.

Russia's most powerful ally, the People's Republic of China, is expressing doubts: At this week's summit, Putin felt obliged to acknowledge President Xi Jinping's worries over the war.

**Ramaphosa vows cooperation with Biden but firm on Russia ties** - President Cyril Ramaphosa on Friday agreed to cooperate closely with US President Joe Biden on health, security and climate but warned against punishing African nations for maintaining ties with Russia.

The Biden administration has put a new focus on Africa after being taken aback by the reluctance of some nations to condemn Russia over its invasion of Ukraine, which has triggered sweeping Western sanctions.

President Cyril Ramaphosa enjoyed unusually warm treatment from Biden, who walked him back to his motorcade at the White House, weeks after Secretary of State Antony Blinken traveled to South Africa and promised that the United States will listen more to Africans.

"We really need to make sure we fully understand one another," Biden said as he welcomed Ramaphosa in the Oval Office. "Our partnership is essential."

Ramaphosa said he sought to work together on security, including in South Africa's troubled neighbor Mozambique, as well as on climate change, a key priority for the Biden administration.

Starting his visit over breakfast with VP Harris, Ramaphosa voiced gratitude to the United States for its "considerable support" on the Covid pandemic as the Biden administration donates 1.1 billion vaccine doses around the world.

"The visit really is about strengthening the relationship between South Africa and the United States," Ramaphosa said, adding that Washington had a "key role" to play on security across Africa.

But Ramaphosa warned Biden over a piece of legislation that has passed through the US House of Representatives which would require a strategy to counter Moscow's role in Africa.

Ramaphosa said he explained that Africans should not be "punished" for their historic non-aligned position among major powers.

"I think it will harm Africa and marginalize the continent," Ramaphosa told reporters after his meetings.

"We should not be told by anyone who we can associate with."

The legislation, called the Countering Malign Russian Activities in Africa Act, has yet to clear the Senate and US policymakers stress that it does not in itself lay out any repercussions for African countries.

## Putin

**Kremlin denies Putin was target of assassination attempt after limo hit with bang** - The Kremlin has denied that someone tried to assassinate Vladimir Putin after allegations that his limousine was hit by something that caused a 'loud bang'.

The claims were made on messaging service Telegram and alleged that Putin's vehicle had been travelling as part of a convoy when the attack happened.

The alleged account of the incident claims the convoy was suddenly blocked by an ambulance, leading the cars to take a detour around it which is when the supposed assassination attempt occurred.

It was claimed that the attack produced a 'loud bang' and 'heavy smoke' from the left front wheel of his limo, though the Kremlin has quashed talk of a potential attempt to kill Putin.

Allegations about the assassination attempt said the driver of Putin's limo was able to maintain control of the vehicle and drive him home unharmed.

**Putin warns Ukraine: the war can get more serious** - Putin yesterday brushed off a lightning Ukrainian counteroffensive with a smile but warned that Russia would respond more forcefully if its troops were put under further pressure.

Speaking after a summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in the Uzbek city of Samarkand, Putin cast the invasion as a necessary step to prevent what he said was a Western plot to break Russia apart.

Moscow, he said, was in no hurry in Ukraine. And its goals remained unchanged.

"The Kyiv authorities announced that they have launched and are conducting an active counteroffensive operation. Well, let's see how it develops, how it ends up," Putin said with a grin.

**For Russia's Putin, military and diplomatic pressures mount** - Pressure on Putin mounted on the battlefield and in the halls of global power as Ukrainian troops pushed their counteroffensive Saturday to advance farther into Ukraine's partly recaptured northeast.

Western officials and analysts said Russian forces were apparently setting up a new defensive line in Ukraine's northeast after the counteroffensive punched through the previous one, allowing Kyiv's soldiers to recapture large swaths of land in the northeastern Kharkiv region that borders Russia.

Putin, at a high-level summit in Uzbekistan this week, vowed to press his attack on Ukraine despite the recent military setbacks but also faced concerns by India and China over the drawn-out conflict.

"I know that today's era is not of war," Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi told the Russian leader in televised comments as they met Friday in Uzbekistan. "We discussed this with you on the phone several times, that democracy and dialogue touch the entire world."

At the same summit a day earlier, Putin acknowledged China's unspecified "questions and concerns" about the war in Ukraine while thanking President Xi Jinping for Beijing's "balanced position" on the conflict.

The hurried retreat of Russian troops this month from parts of a northeast region they occupied early in the war, together with the rare public reservations expressed by key allies, underscored the challenges that Putin faces on all fronts. Both China and India have maintained strong ties with Russia and had sought to remain neutral on Ukraine.

Xi, in a statement, expressed support for Russia's "core interests" but also wanted to work together to "inject stability" into world affairs. Modi said he wanted to discuss "how we can move forward on the path of peace," adding that the biggest concerns facing the world are the problems of food security, fuel security and fertilizers.

"We must find some way out and you too must contribute to that," Modi stressed in a rare public rebuke.

The comments cast a shadow over a summit that Putin had hoped would burnish his diplomatic status and show he was not so internationally isolated.

On the battlefield, Britain's Defense Ministry said the new front line likely was between the Oskil River and Svatove, 150 kilometers (90 miles) southeast of Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city.

**Putin faces toughest challenge yet as Russian leader** - Signs of frustration with Putin's war in Ukraine are mounting, posing the most serious challenge yet in retaining his firm grip on the Kremlin.

The stunning counteroffensive by Ukrainian forces has forced Russian troops to flee occupied areas, leading to questions about Russia's strategy on state television airwaves normally under Putin's thumb.

The odds of Putin losing power are higher than ever, though still "not a very large number," said Timothy Frye, a Columbia University political science professor who wrote "Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin's Russia."

"Putin risked the most important achievement of his 20 years in power by going to war in Ukraine. And that was a sense of a return to stability," Frye said. "And the expectation was the war would be over in a week — this would be seen as an easy victory and that stability would not be put in jeopardy. And now, it clearly has."

Putin, who has refused to label the conflict in Ukraine as a war even after tens of thousands have died, has few attractive choices going forward. That raises the possibility that his "special military operation" in Ukraine will drag on.

"Putin, for all his macho persona, he's not good at making tough decisions," said Mark Galeotti, a London-based lecturer on Russian security and author of the forthcoming book "Putin's War." "When he doesn't see a good answer, he tends to get paralyzed. And at the moment he doesn't really have any good options."

Putin has avoided instituting a draft to shore up Russian forces, for fear it would hurt him domestically. Suing for peace, Galeotti said, would likewise be politically disastrous.

"So he's probably just going to muddle along and basically hope that either Ukraine self-destructs or the West loses interest in supporting it," he said.

That's been Russia's hope and Ukraine's dread before, but it seems more unlikely than ever at the moment.

But predictions of Putin's downfall are premature. Western forecasts of his imminent ouster have come and gone throughout his time in office — and that while the Ukraine war posed unprecedented risks, he was deploying unprecedented measures to maintain control and silence dissent.

Yet the most significant threat to Putin is losing support of the elites — in the security services, the private sector and regional power brokers — said Chris Miller, an associate professor at Tufts University who specializes in Russian history. At the moment, Putin is seeking to balance between hawks who want to see him double down in Ukraine, and doves, who would like to see movement toward a peace settlement.

“He sees a middle path and I think we should expect elites to give him the benefit of the doubt to pursue for the coming months,” Miller said. “The war is not going nearly as well as they might have hoped. But it’s manageable for the next couple of months, and other than those who want escalation there aren’t many other great ideas coming out of the Russian policymaking process about what to do differently that would produce better outcomes from the perspective of the Russian government’s goals in Ukraine.”

**Even Putin allies are starting to speak out about the war** - While it’s too early to say whether the Ukrainian counteroffensive represents a turning point in the war, it does appear that it’s made some of Putin’s supporters skeptical of whether his “special operation” is actually winnable. Some have advocated for a more aggressive Russian response, even pushing for general mobilization and the use of weapons bought from North Korea. As Ilyushina says, the typically “unanimous choir of pro-Kremlin and state propagandist voices” was in disarray.

Washington Post Russia reporter Mary Ilyushina says

*It is pretty embarrassing because his main brand, and the one that he’s been building for the past 20 years, is that he knows what he’s doing. He always gets the job done.*

*In this case, we see even people who are extremely pro-Kremlin, extremely pro- this invasion, saying that they don’t like the way Russia has gone about this. We’ve heard from people like the leader of the Russian Communist Party saying that Russia is not really fighting anymore in a “special operation,” and this is an actual war.*

*And the very use of the word “war” to describe this mission has been essentially banned by Russia. People get fined or even jailed for talking about the war out in the open. They have to call it a “special military operation.”*

*So we’ve definitely seen a lot of criticism coming from the very pro-Putin, very hawkish camp. That is a very new development that we’ll have to see whether that will push the Kremlin to change anything in the way they go about this invasion.*

*Last weekend, just when the news broke that Russia lost a lot of this land and it retreated, the usually quite unanimous choir of pro-Kremlin and state propagandist voices was really in disarray. Some people chose to completely ignore the news because they didn’t know how to handle it. Some outlets, like the Kremlin’s official newspaper, just did not report on this at all. Some very prominent TV shows started to say that, look, Russia is not just fighting against Ukraine, it’s fighting against the entire NATO alliance. That’s why they’re having such a hard time doing that. They want Putin and the Kremlin to be even more aggressive, retaliate against Ukraine, hit civilian targets, and just do more. They believe that the way Russia is waging this war now is not enough. They want general mobilization. They want the whole country to be set on this war path and they want to go all out. So there’s really conflicting messaging going on in the camp that is usually pro-Putin and follows the party line.*

*Some of the liberal and opposition forces have been also trying to seize on the moment. There’s been a pretty remarkable effort from local lawmakers to collect signatures from regional officials to call for Putin’s resignation and accuse him of treason. They are already facing administrative offenses and fines, and the police have launched an investigation. [Those opposition forces] say that their goal — which they believe they achieved — is to tell antiwar Russians who are still in the country that they’re not alone. They know that Putin is not going to read this request and say, “Look, yes, exactly. You’re right, I should stop doing this.” But they want to get the word out that there is still some resistance. And even though there are big risks in presenting this resistance in the public, they’re still willing to do that.*

**What Russia's failure in Ukraine means for Putin and the world** - Miscalculations and a result that leaves Russia in no way better than it was in 2021 before the conflict. Hard won economic gains achieved by Putin during the last two decades have been compromised by the conflict.

No discussion has even been done on the transition away from fossil fuels that have been accelerated by the conflict. This is particularly relevant for Russia where the question of redundant fossil fuel assets during the rapid transition to renewable energy is a problem that needs to be tackled. The Ukraine diversion in this way affects the Russian economy and acts as a distraction from important economic goals.

Global public opinion is also affected in ways that do not look favorable for Russia the longer the war goes on, particularly the effect on food insecurity in poor countries, and energy security in Europe for poor households, the senseless destruction of infrastructure in Ukraine and millions of women and children displaced, all creating a sense of overwhelming moral failure.

Mr. Modi of India is reported by FR24 to have told Mr. Putin at a meeting on September 15 that "this is no time for war." This is shown on today's pages in Lyrarc. How could it be a time for war when the pandemic has taken lives of over 1 million people in the US, over 2 million in Europe, millions in Asia, Latin America and Africa, and the world is only now coming out of it.

The competition is not between countries for major power status but between countries on achieving better lives for its people, stronger economies, and better job, health, infrastructure and services to ordinary people, tackling problems on a common basis such as climate change. In most situations even the advanced countries of North America and Europe are facing the same problems faced by middle income countries such as China, Russia, and developing countries such as India - how to combine market economy with State participation in the economy and government ensuring fairness to all, better distribution of incomes and wealth, ensuring that there is a level playing field for all and opportunities for all.

**Putin's home front is getting dicey** – Putin's Defense Ministry's claim that the rout in the northeast was a "pre-planned regrouping" went over like a lead balloon. Even Putin's media lapdog Dmitry Kiselyov admitted on state-run TV that "this has been the toughest week so far" of the war, while online criticism is soaring.

Putin's lost all chance for decisive victory any time soon. Even keeping the war going in hopes the West stops supporting his enemy has grown problematic: His own hold on power is increasingly at risk.

## Containment

**China's lack of support for Putin's war 'remarkable' says ex-Ambassador** - The first meeting between Xi and Putin since Moscow invaded Ukraine has prompted speculation that Beijing has concerns over the war.

Xi greeted Putin as "my dear old friend" and the Russian president praised "the friendship between China and Russia" at Thursday's meeting in Uzbekistan but some noted that the encounter signaled Beijing is offering less than full support for Moscow.

Video, which as of Friday has been viewed more than 1.3 million times, shows Putin telling Xi on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization that Russia "understands your questions and concerns" about Ukraine.

The clip was shared by the former U.S. ambassador to Moscow, Michael McFaul, who wrote: "This is remarkable. Xi is not supporting Putin. No weapons, no ammo, no chips, no real words of solidarity. Just a willingness to buy Russian energy at very discounted prices."

China appears to be heeding a warning from the U.S. that if it violated sanctions, its computer chip maker, Semiconductor Manufacturing International Corporation, or other companies, would lose access to the American expertise they need.

**Ukraine could receive NASAMS air defense systems within 60 days: Pentagon** - The Pentagon announced in a press briefing yesterday that two National Advance Surface-to-Air Missile Systems (NASAMS) deliveries are expected to arrive in Ukraine within the next two months.

NASAMS are surface-to-air missile systems capable of detecting and hitting targets at distances of up to 180 kilometers (111.8 miles). The systems were first authorized by the Department of Defense (DOD) on July 1 as part of the \$770 million Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative (USAI).

"These defensive systems will further contribute to protecting Ukrainians from enemy air threats, to include aircraft, unmanned aerial vehicles and missiles," Pentagon Press Secretary Air Force Brigadier General Pat Ryder said at the briefing.



**Greece sends 40 tanks to Ukraine, gets German hardware in return** - Greece will send 40 of its Soviet-built BMP-1 IFVs to Ukraine after it reached a deal with Germany on Friday according to which it will receive from Berlin the same number of the more modern 40 Marder IFVs.

The agreement between Greek National Defence Minister Nikos Panagiotopoulos and his German counterpart Christine Lambrecht follows the decision of Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz to support Ukraine's defense against Russia's continued aggression.

Greece which has joined its NATO allies in supporting Ukraine against the Russian invasion has already sent military equipment to Kyiv.

Until May it has provided the following equipment:

- 122 BMP-1s and their ammunition;
- 15,000 73-mm rockets;
- 2100 122-mm rockets;
- 20,000 AK-47 Kalashnikov assault rifles;
- 3,200,000 7.62-mm cartridges;
- 60 FIM-92 Stinger MANPADS;
- 17,000 155-mm artillery missiles;
- 1,100 RPG-18 anti-tank missiles.

### **Greece's support for Ukraine has irked Russia**

Greece's support for Ukraine has caused the strong reaction of Russia which in July declared Greece an "unfriendly" country.

The Russian decree provides restrictions and even a potential complete ban for "unfriendly" countries in hiring employees for embassies, consulates, and representative government agencies from Russian locals.

In June, Russia expelled eight Greek diplomats over the latter's "confrontational course" towards Moscow.

## GeoMilitary

**Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan agree on cease-fire on shared border** - Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan traded blame for fighting on the border Friday that killed at least 24 people, wounded dozens and prompted a mass evacuation.

Border guard chiefs of the two countries met around midnight and agreed to create a joint monitoring group work to help end hostilities. It wasn't immediately clear whether the meeting had any effect on the fighting.