

Conflict Update Day 380

March 10th, 2023

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Conflict Assessment

Russian losses – 156,990 (+870) soldiers killed, 3,448 (+7) enemy tanks, 6,742 (+6) armored combat vehicles, 2,475 (+10) artillery systems, 491 (3) MLRS systems, 256 (+2) air defense systems, 304 (+1) warplanes, 289 (+0) helicopters, 2,107 (+9) UAVs of the operational-tactical level, 907 (+34) cruise missiles, 18 (+0) warships/cutters, 5,337 (+6) trucks and tankers, 4 Iskander Missile Launchers (+0), 239 fuel bowsers (+0) and 240 (+3) units of equipment.

Key Takeaways



Ukraine's military says it hit 13 Russian temporary bases over past day - The Ukrainian military conducted 13 strikes against Russian temporary bases over the past 24 hours, the General Staff of Ukraine's Armed Forces reported in its evening update on March 9.

Ukrainian troops also hit a Russian control post, two logistics centers, three ammunition warehouses, an electronic warfare system, and an anti-aircraft missile complex, according to the General Staff.

Russia preparing 'large-scale provocation' on Ukrainian-Belarusian border - Russia is planning a "large-scale provocation" on Belarus' border with Ukraine "in the near future," potentially involving destruction of infrastructure facilities and victims among civilians, Ukrainian Defense Ministry's Main Intelligence Directorate reported yesterday.

"Several groups of Russians" will arrive in Belarus to conduct provocation, aiming to form a negative public opinion about Ukraine among Belarusians and ensure Minsk's full participation in Russia's war against the country.

Ukraine's military intelligence wrote that the prominent Kremlin propagandist Vladimir Solovyov would also come to Belarus to cover the possible provocation.

According to Moscow's plan, Russian state-controlled media would broadcast live from the event site on March 11.

The intelligence directorate emphasized that "Ukraine does not conduct any combat operations on the territory of Belarus."

How Can Western Tanks Help Ukraine Drive Out Russian Forces? - Leopard 2 and Abrams tanks pledged by the West will give Ukraine a substantial boost in its fight against Russia, but numbers are a key factor and time is of the essence as the war grinds on and both sides prepare for possible offensives in the coming months, experts said.

Ukrainian troops defend Bakhmut's northern flank from Russian attacks - Ukrainian troops are fighting to hold back Russian forces from advancing on Bakhmut from positions near Soledar, an industrial town located a few kilometers to the north of the besieged city. Tank and mortar units are shelling enemy positions and laying down cover for Ukrainian infantry in frontline trenches.

Russian forces launched 102 attacks in and around Bakhmut in an attempt to encircle the city as fierce fighting was under way in other parts of the Donetsk region, focusing on the towns of Lyman, Avdiyivka, and Shakhtarsk, according to the General Staff of the Armed Forces earlier today.

Russia unleashed a barrage hitting residential areas two nights ago including a number of hypersonic missiles. The question should be asked as to why the Kremlin used some of their hugely expensive projectiles that are valued, but limited in stock.

As Putin said yesterday, it was because Moscow was retaliating for the increasing number of drone and other attacks on homeland Russian soil they attribute to Kyiv.

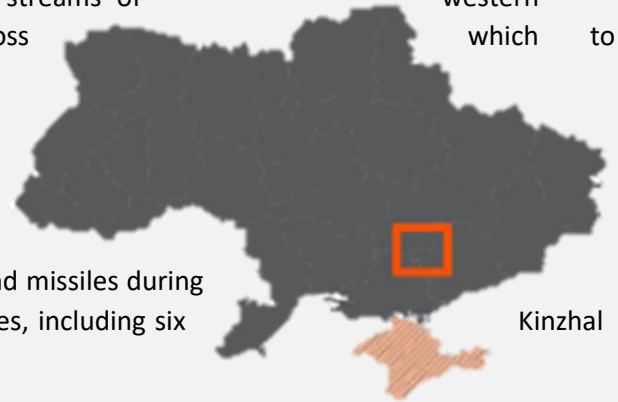
Yes, they have done so before - in retaliation.

But it also points to diminishing stocks of conventional missiles and rockets. Some of the other missiles fired into Ukraine were anti-aircraft varieties, armed with relatively small warheads, given they are designed for bringing down aircraft, which do not need a large quantity of explosive.

These are as limited in stock as any other missile, so it again points to desperation by the Kremlin. But the third reason in my opinion is the changing weather pattern, with warm conditions generating rain and muddy terrain, followed by a hardening of the ground, allowing for armored column warfare.

Putin and the Kremlin need to do whatever they can ahead of the ground firming, no doubt realizing the precarious offensive situation they are soon to be confronted with, with streams of armored weapons arriving in Ukraine – waiting for firm terrain across western which to advance.

The Zaporizhzhia plant (location pictured to the right) was now reconnected to Ukraine’s energy grid, grid operator Ukrenergo said.



Ukraine said its air defences had shot down many drones and missiles during the pre-dawn attack. Ukraine’s air force says Russia fired 81 missiles, including six hypersonic missiles – Russian for “dagger” – as well as eight drones.

Russia says the attacks were “retaliation” for what it called a “terrorist” attack by Ukraine in Russia’s Bryansk region last week.

Ukrainian President Zelenskyy condemned the attacks and said Moscow “won’t avoid responsibility.”

Ukraine’s military says its forces have pushed back intense Russian attacks on the eastern mining town of Bakhmut, despite Russia’s Wagner mercenary group claiming it has taken full control of the town’s eastern part.

Russia going on the defensive? – it is being reported Moscow is going on the defensive, given an evaluation of its dangerous battlefield position with Ukraine receiving huge amounts of modern, long-range and armored weaponry, coupled with a Ukraine-friendly weather scenario unfolding shortly.

We have previously and frequently reported on this as we watched the Kremlin erecting and installing characteristically defensive structures between the Donbas and Mariupol, and between Kherson Oblast and Crimea. Defensive in that they are typical fortified and protective barriers with cascading fallback positions, secured by anti-personnel and anti-tank minefields in and between each fortification.

This also speaks to the wider appreciation in that, with Russian forces failing to gain strategic footholds in the Donbas over the winter period and with Ukraine vastly more prepared than a year ago, Putin and the Kremlin are hunkering down for a drawn-out conflict, one in which they hope western countries will tire of supporting Ukraine and extricate themselves or support some sort of Russian or Chinese-inspired peace initiative.

One which favors the Kremlin and Putin, and with it vital reinforcement of the long-term mutual Russian and Chinese geopolitical ambition of a new bi-polar global world order, led by themselves and Beijing.

But from an obvious interpretive and illustrative viewpoint, all things being equal- ceteris paribus - Russia really doesn’t have all that many options - aside from nuclear, which is off the table from what we can glean.

Wagner chief says all Russian troops in Ukraine need more ammunition – Wagner chief Yevgeny Prigozhin, says that not only his troops but all of the Russian forces involved in the fierce months-long fight to take the eastern Ukrainian city of Bakhmut are suffering from shortages of ammunition.

Russia unlikely to make significant gains launching new counteroffensive in Vuhledar. Russia may attempt to launch another counteroffensive in Vuhledar but is unlikely to make significant gains due to issues with military personnel and ammunition supply, according to the Institute for the Study of War (ISW).

Awesome power looming – Using winter to arm, re-arm, rotate and position itself, while severely bleeding Russian forces across its southeastern Donbas conflict zone in drawn-out battles such as in Bakhmut and Vuhledar, Kyiv has prepared itself for a Spring offensive. This time with modern leading-edge weaponry and support.

Now with armored vehicles capable of knocking out Russian tanks from afar, they also enjoy newly-received vehicles with “eyes” seeing some 6 miles ahead and pinpointing enemy artillery, positions, and movement, relaying precise battlefield intelligence to satellite command for exact geolocational coordination and subsequent assault – all within minutes of initial observation.

Added to this is an extremely astute and versatile Ukrainian “local” drone force with every unit, offensive and defensive, having a drone operator flying ahead to scout and pinpoint enemy locations and strengths.

Reinforcing these are high-speed Ukrainian electric motorcycle “gangs,” roaming ahead and taking out tanks and armored carriers in “scoot and shoot” tactics, escaping before defending Kremlin units even realize what has happened.

Coupled with this are large numbers of freshly-incoming APCs, – **Armored Personnel Carriers** - essential in advancing troops quickly across enemy terrain. Last year when successfully counter-attacking in Kharkiv, Ukrainian successes were primarily attributable to a weak Russian defense undermined by gross overestimation of their invasion and containment capabilities. Kyiv then used tanks to ensure lightning-speed territorial gains.

But to properly and conventionally advance in taking back territory, they need APCs, as soldiers cannot keep up otherwise, and soldiers are absolutely required in order to secure and consolidate captured land.

Backing all these, and more, is battery after battery of advanced long-range, guided artillery and rocket platforms capable of a success strike ratio of 80% and higher, compared to the Russian success strike rate of roughly one in 15. This alone counters the vast numerical superiority in numbers the Kremlin enjoys in both manpower and equipment.

Ukraine has managed to adequately contain its airspace since February 24th last year, limiting enemy aircraft to attacking from within Russian territory. Now armed with even more advanced anti-aircraft and anti-missile defensive positions, and soon to see additional Su29 aircraft arrive, fitted with the latest US air-to-air missile technology, this promises to provide vastly improved overhead protection from Kremlin air attack.

Then there is the ability to strike Russian supply lines with impunity. Three primary lines reinforce all Russian positions in occupied Ukraine – Mariupol, Svatove and Crimea. With its new long-range weaponry, all of these are now within range of Ukrainian assault, as has been happening with increasing frequency over the last weeks of the winter period.

So effective has this been, that it has severely hampered Russian supplies of basic ammunition stocks to front line troops and tank and rocket stocks to the Wanger Group in the Donbas.

Small wonder then that the Kremlin is using valuable and scarce hypersonic missiles to attack Ukrainian civilian targets. What else do they have aside from nuclear technology? And here they have been warned about deploying such weaponry – by both the West and by China.

The war is now in an existential stage;

- Existential from a **Ukrainian** perspective as this is their country and their very national existence they are fighting to defend and protect
- Existential from a **Russian** point as Putin has positioned his survival on succeeding in capturing Ukraine, and more than likely other ex-Soviet states thereafter. He may even fear a disintegration of the Russian Federation should Moscow lose, and
- Existential from an **EU and NATO** perspective as any collapse of the Ukrainian state will see a Russian and Chinese presence right on their European doorstep, surely followed by further Kremlin aggression.

Containment

Norway announces delivery of more NASAMS air defense systems to Ukraine - Norway will provide Ukraine with two firing units of the Norwegian Advanced Surface-to-air Missile System (NASAMS) to Ukraine over spring, according to a brief posted on the Norwegian government website on March 10.

The delivery of the joint Norwegian-U.S.-designed system will double the two firing units provided by Washington over the autumn of last year.

Israel - During a meeting with the United States Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, Israeli counterpart Yoav Gallant said Israel was doing its “best” to help Ukraine.

Saudi Arabia was among the countries that helped facilitate prisoner-of-war swaps with Ukraine, Lavrov told reporters during a press conference with his Saudi counterpart.

UK, France to jointly train Ukrainian marines. The U.K. and France agreed to train Ukrainian marines, "helping to give Ukraine a decisive advantage on the battlefield and for Ukraine to win this war," UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said on March 10, as quoted by Sky News.

Slovak Defense Minister Jaroslav Nad said he had spoken to his Polish counterpart and was told that Warsaw would agree to a joint process to hand over MiG-29 jets to Ukraine.

Rheinmetall is offering Ukraine to be the first military to get its brand-new tank - While Ukraine waits on the older Abrams and Leopard tanks that the US and Europe have promised to deliver, it may have the opportunity to buy a cutting-edge German tank.



Acquiring the next-generation Panther KF51 (pictured here) gives Ukraine the chance to leapfrog the older tanks that Western donors are sending — as well as the mostly Cold War-era tanks that Ukraine already uses — but taking on an unproven vehicle could further tax Ukraine's military as it struggles to incorporate older Western tank models into its armed forces.

Rheinmetall, the prominent German arms firm that developed the KF51, seems confident the idea could work. Its CEO, Armin Papperger, told the German business newspaper Handelsblatt that the Panther could be delivered to

Ukraine "in 15 to 18 months."

"We are talking to Kyiv about exporting the Panther," Papperger said. Interestingly, Papperger said that Ukraine had also expressed interest in Rheinmetall's next-generation Lynx infantry fighting vehicle.

Rheinmetall is reportedly negotiating with Ukraine to build a tank factory there, though it's not clear whether it would produce the Panther or the older Leopard 2 tank.

The KF51 Panther is a new tank with some old features. Its hull is based on the Leopard 2, which debuted in 1979. But the turret contains Rheinmetall's next-generation Future Gun System, a 130 mm smoothbore cannon that replaces the standard 120mm found on Western tanks such as the M1 Abrams, Leopard 2, and the Challenger 2.

Sanctions & Embargoes

Ukrainian grain exports - The Kremlin says there are still “a lot of questions” remaining over the Black Sea grain deal and that there are no plans for a meeting with United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, meanwhile, said extending the deal was becoming “complicated.”

UK key in freezing billions in Russian assets - The Russian Elites, Proxies and Oligarchs Taskforce (REPO) has worked to block or freeze over £48 billion in Russian assets with the help of the UK, which alone froze over €20 billion.

UK Security Minister Tom Tugendhat met with the REPO Task Force on Thursday, including Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the US and the EU Commission, set up to exert unprecedented pressure on sanctioned Russians.

“The UK continues to play a leading role in holding Russia to account for its unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine,” said Tugendhat after the meeting.

The EU has been working towards using Russian assets to fund reconstruction efforts in Ukraine, with Commissioner Valdis Dombrovskis confirming progress had been made during the EU executive’s visit to Kyiv in February.

The UK is helping with political guidance, but the assistance coordination is led by a steering committee of the US, Ukraine, and the EU Commission.

The UK is also active in talks on reconstruction assistance to Ukraine.

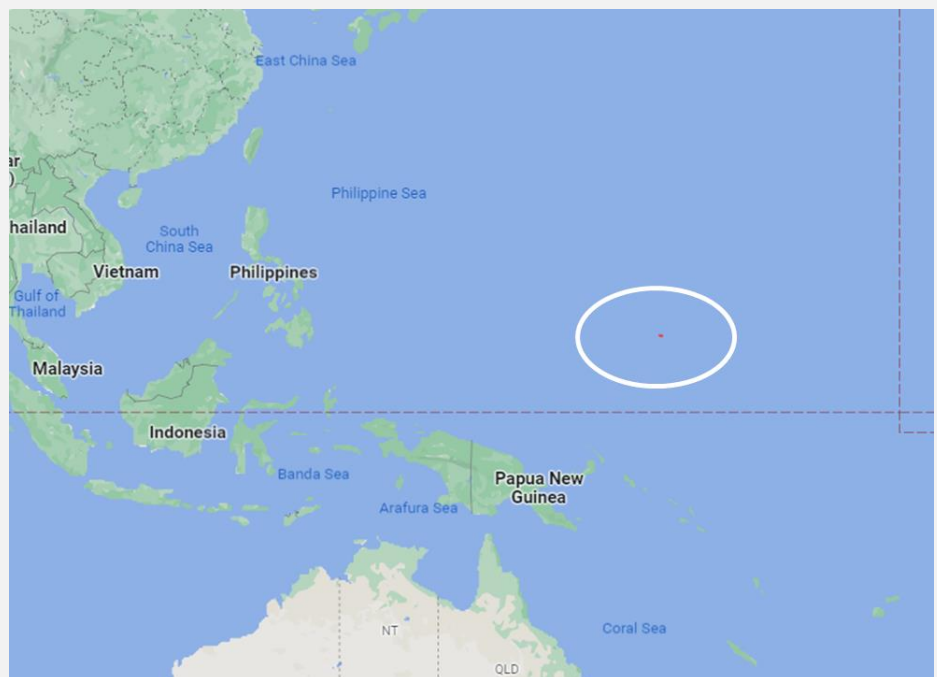
Comments, Updates, Developments and Reports

Micronesia leader accuses China of bribery, threats in Taiwan bid - David Panuelo says Beijing conducting ‘political warfare’ against his island nation as part of a campaign to take Taiwan.

The outgoing leader of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), one of the world’s tiniest countries, has accused China of bribing officials and making “direct threats against my personal safety” as part of a bid to take over self-ruled Taiwan.

China later denied the accusations on Friday.

In a 13-page letter sent to Congress and state governors, President David Panuelo accused Beijing of carrying out a campaign of “political warfare” that included overt activities and covert actions, including “bribery, psychological warfare, and blackmail”.



Micronesia is a number of minute islands – 400-odd – lying in the south western Pacific and ideally located from a strategic geopolitical and Chinese defensive perspective.

Gaining influence here will provide China an ideal maritime location outside the US “*First Island Chain*” offensive policy of securing sea lanes from South Korea to the Malacca Strait.

It also straddles commercial sea lanes between SE Asia and the US.

The FSM, home to fewer than 115,000 people and located about 2,900km (1,800 miles) northeast of Australia, is independent but receives US financial assistance and defence guarantees under a compact of free association.

“The practical impacts, however, of Chinese control over our communications infrastructure, our ocean territory and the resources within them, and our security space, aside from impacts on our sovereignty, is that it increases the chances of China getting into conflict with Australia, Japan, the United States, and New Zealand, on the day when Beijing decides to invade Taiwan,” Panuelo said in the letter dated March 9, which was leaked to multiple media outlets and seen by Al Jazeera.

Transnistria - Security services in the Moldovan breakaway region of Transnistria said they prevented an alleged assassination attempt against their Russian-backed leader.

Comment – Watch this closely as it is a typical propaganda tactic of Moscow to paint a picture of repression against its “citizens” in the semi-self-controlled province of Moldova.

White House: Russia working to overthrow Moldovan government, but no immediate military threat -

The Biden administration is warning that Russia is sowing the seeds to overthrow the Moldovan government, but added the U.S. does not see an immediate military threat against the small, Eastern European country that sits on the border of Ukraine.

White House national security spokesman John Kirby said on Friday that the U.S. has intelligence that Russian actors, some with ties to Russian intelligence operations, are seeking to stage and use protests in Moldova to “foment a manufactured insurrection against the Moldovan government.”

“Additionally, we expect another set of Russian actors to provide training, and help manufacture demonstrations in Moldova,” Kirby said, but added that the U.S. is confident in the Moldovan government’s ability to counter these threats.

“While the activities of Russian groups attempting to target Moldova are of concern, we should not overestimate their capabilities,” he added.

US to help Moldova fight Russia's destabilization efforts

Friday of seeking to destabilize Moldova and said it would help off such attempts by sharing information and providing other

The United States agrees with Moldovan President Maia there is no imminent military threat from Russia but shares to destabilize her country to install a more pro-Russian House's national security spokesperson, said in a briefing.

"As Moldova continues to integrate with is pursuing options to weaken the Moldovan with the eventual goal of seeing a more administration in the capital," Kirby said.



- The United States accused Russia on the Eastern European country fight assistance, the White House said.

Sandu's (pictured here) view that her concern that Moscow is trying government, John Kirby, the White

Europe, we believe Russia government probably Russian friendly

Belgian parliament officially recognizes Holodomor as genocide against Ukrainians. The Belgian parliament supported a resolution recognizing the Holodomor as a genocide against the Ukrainian people. The

Holodomor, a man-made famine that took place between 1932-33, occurred during Joseph Stalin's reign over the Soviet Union and caused an estimated 3.5 to 5 million Ukrainian deaths.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said he could see no sign of willingness on the part of Russian President Vladimir Putin to negotiate an end to the war.

Georgia's ruling party is turning toward Moscow. Its people are not - When Georgian lawmakers backed a controversial Kremlin-esque bill late Tuesday night, mayhem erupted outside Parliament. As the crowd of protesters grew larger and larger, riot police gathered at their flanks. All hell broke loose.

Riot police fired tear gas canisters into the crowd. They used batons and water cannons. The images were remarkable. In one, a woman waving a European Union flag takes on a fire hose — an apt metaphor for Georgian democracy.

By Thursday morning those protests had proved a success. The ruling party retracted its “foreign influence” bill, which would have required organizations receiving 20% or more of their annual income from abroad to register as “foreign agents” or face heavy fines.

Though after all the duplicitous justifications they gave for passing it in the first place, the move feels cynical at best. A similar law has been used to dismantle independent media and NGOs in Russia since 2012.

But Thursday was a reminder that the Georgian people have the power to reclaim their democracy. (That's even if the ruling party ends up finding other rights to take away from its people in its desperate attempt not to lose in the upcoming 2024 parliamentary elections.)

In the past several years, it appears that the Georgian government has been intentionally subverting its democracy in order to leave the EU and NATO with no choice but to reject it. Which is exactly how Moscow likes it.

Georgian people have fought back at every turn. Whether about their government's refusal to support Ukraine, raids on nightclubs or attacks on journalists covering LGBTQ demonstrations, thousands of Georgians took to the streets.

The circumstances for protests are always different. But the reason is always the same. Georgia's ruling party is turning toward Moscow. Its people are not. The men, women and children who gather before Parliament are essentially sending a message: “We are Europe. If you intend to take away our democracy, you must first come through us.”

Georgians shouldn't have to get beaten in the streets to exercise their democracy. But they will. Georgia's informal ruler, the oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, is miscalculating his people just as Putin underestimated the Ukrainian people.

It may sound trite to compare those protesting a bill in front of the Georgian Parliament to the Ukrainian soldiers fighting in the slush and mud that was once a city called Bakhmut. But these fighters share what they see as a common enemy, and both know what is at stake.

Comment – Putin and the Kremlin fear another **color** revolution – just as in the Orange Revolution that led to Ukraine moving away from Moscow control. But this time Russian persuasive regional geopolitical hegemony has waned.

Russia threatens Europe without Ukrainian victory - Lithuanian FM to 'Post' - Lithuanian FM Landsbergis has a simple message he is relaying to his country's allies, including Israel: don't let Russia's war in Ukraine spill over into the rest of Europe.

A decisive Russian defeat is the only way to restore peace in Ukraine and to safeguard Europe, particularly formerly Eastern Bloc nations, like Lithuania, Landsbergis told The Jerusalem Post during his visit to Israel last week.

“We tend to believe that Russia is a long-term existential threat to the countries in the region, and without a Ukrainian victory, and a decisive victory, that threat will not be eliminated, and it will be there,” Landsbergis said as he sat in a conference room at the Waldorf Astoria and spoke about what has become the defining issue for his government.

Kazakhstan changed in light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine - Kazakhstan emerged after the 24 February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine as an influential player in the region, taking a more assertive stance in its relations with Moscow and the West, writes Thomas Matussek in Euractiv.

In light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the EU has significantly shifted the way it approaches its relations with Central Asia, a region that is re-emerging as one of the key geopolitical and trade hotspots that link Europe with Asia.

Despite the region’s historic strategic importance, in the years leading up to the invasion, the EU and its allies’ approach towards Central Asia lacked clearer goals and the assertiveness necessary to achieve them. In a region traditionally considered Russia’s sphere of influence, the EU’s interests were limited to trade, security cooperation and energy, but only in the context of ensuring stability. This allowed for a consolidated Russian presence in Central Asia, as exemplified by a number of regional agreements, economic and security unions controlled by Russia that took shape as part of Putin’s long-term vision to ensure the region remained underfoot.

However, with Russia’s invasion of Ukraine overnight, the region’s geopolitical landscape has dramatically changed. The region’s countries are beginning to understand the price of the isolation that comes with maintaining too close an orbit with Russia. In fact, it is becoming clearer and clearer that in the new global realignment of countries, the price for sticking with Russia will become economic and political seclusion, something that rapidly growing countries in Central Asia simply cannot afford.

Because of their unique positions, countries like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are swiftly repositioning themselves internationally. Kazakhstan, in particular, has emerged as an influential player in the region, taking a more assertive stance in its relations with both Russia and the West.

For some time, Kazakhstan had maintained a relatively neutral posture in the face of geopolitical tensions in the region, often skilfully balancing its interests between Russia, Europe and China without causing much attention internationally. However, the country’s response to the Ukrainian crisis has been noteworthy, and its slow exit from a tight political tango with Russia has begun attracting interest from politicians and businesses across Europe and the West.

Kazakhstan has publicly condemned Russia’s actions in Ukraine, and its President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev has been vocal in calling for a peaceful resolution to the conflict, refusing to play a role in Putin’s attempts to escape international political isolation. In June 2022, Kazakhstan’s leader even told Putin face-to-face that Astana would not recognise the self-proclaimed Russian-backed Donbas republics, a pivotal moment in relations between the two countries.

Understandably, the West is increasingly supportive of Kazakhstan’s path despite not being willing to confront Russia on a wider scale. The country is clearly signaling to its Western partners the intention to change the terms and nature of its relationship with Russia. Recently, the country closed its trade mission in Moscow, and its citizens even sent aid and ‘Yurts of Invincibility’ as part of a humanitarian gesture to help the people of Ukraine. Afterwards, instead of bowing down, the country publicly defended these actions even after Russia’s demarche and did so with a language previously unheard in the relationship between the two countries.

Comment – Russia is intent on securing the gateways to its homeland, one of which is Ukraine and another Belarus. The Kremlin views these as essential to survival, having seen multiple invasions penetrate central Russia through these gateways over centuries past.

Kazakhstan is also in one of these gateways, so we cannot anticipate a Russian silence in this neighboring state, and/or its neighbors, moving closer to the West. We should instead expect a negative response when appropriate from a Russian perspective. Right now it does not enjoy the hegemony it once did in this strategic region, something that Putin is going to have to recognize as an outcome of his illegal invasion of Ukraine, another of his neighbors.

Putin & Russia

START – Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said Russia and the United States remained in contact over the New START nuclear arms treaty despite Moscow having suspended its participation in the deal, the RIA Novosti news agency reported. Ryabkov said he had no expectations for significant progress from contact between Moscow and Washington.

We do not strike civilian targets – the Kremlin – The Kremlin needs to then precisely describe what happened to Ukrainian civilian homes struck by missiles from Russia as shown below? This is a picture of a building destroyed by Russian artillery fire in Mariupol in February 2022. It is full expected that bodies continue to be concealed in buildings such as these, having lain there since the early days of the Kremlin invasion last year.



Ukraine as Russian Imperial Action: Challenges and Policy Options

The inherently imperial motivations behind Russia’s decision to invade Ukraine and its approach to the war have significant implications for Western support to Ukraine and the prospects for a just peace.

At the one-year anniversary of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia’s motivations for embarking on the conflict are worth reconsidering in light of the current strategic and operational environment in Ukraine. Although Russian propaganda – and those that enable it – falsely and unconvincingly claim Russia’s genocidal war of choice was somehow a rational reaction to NATO enlargement, the Kremlin’s decision to commit to a full-scale invasion does

reflect genuine (if illegitimate) security perceptions that are rooted in Moscow's deeply imperial, and expansionist, strategic culture.

This imperial identity is so central that Russian leadership is content to suffer horrendous losses in Ukraine almost indefinitely, particularly when human losses are primarily 'expendable' ethnic minority and penal populations, in the belief that Russian mass can outlast Ukrainian courage and Western arms. This prism is crucial for understanding the Kremlin's rationale for launching its misbegotten war against Ukraine to begin with, but also to illuminate policy options for a just conclusion to the war and to win a stabler post-war architecture.

Strategic Anxieties

Russia's invasion in early 2022 was not primarily a means to punish perceived Ukrainian belligerence, to solidify its control over Donbas, to manifest Novorossiia, or even to conquer the entirety of Ukrainian territory, per se – though one or more of these may have been secondary or tertiary objectives.

Instead, Russia's invasion was a pre-emptive military action against the potential or even expected growth of Ukrainian power – which could dramatically curtail Russian power in the region – in the medium time horizon (2025–2030) or beyond. As such, in early 2022, Russia – seemingly at the height of its powers, while Ukrainian strength was yet to be fully realised – had 'no choice' but to move immediately to decapitate this budding and increasingly capable rival.

This hypothesis, if true, helps to explain the apparent irrationality of the full-scale invasion and accounts for the Kremlin's continued obstinance in persecuting its war despite extended setbacks and devastating attrition of its forces.

Russia's motivations appear aligned with the so-called Thucydides Trap – theorized tendency for a great power to make war based on worries over a competitor's rise. In this case, the evident emergence of Ukrainian power threatened to upset Russia's long-calibrated and painstakingly tended regional hegemony.

In more practical terms, the combination of Ukraine's basic strategic potential – a large Europeanizing country of 40 million people, rich in natural resources, human capital and industrial strength – and the arc of its recent military and economic development meant that it would soon have the combat power and capabilities not only to threaten – if not entirely regain – its lost territories, but also to project power across the region and stymie Russia's imperial pretensions in Eastern Europe.

Imagine, for example, a Ukraine with an assortment of long-range munitions and cruise missiles that could threaten Russia's most strategic assets in occupied Crimea, the Sea of Azov, Rostov-na-Don, Bryansk, Belarus and even further afield. Even without NATO membership, Ukraine possesses the latent power and potential to be a credible regional power with the ability to constrain Russian power, perhaps even radically.

The Kremlin's operational obstinance is directly linked to its strategic goal of protecting and policing its imperial position at all costs.

However, while Ukraine in 2022 was seen as having this potential, it was a potential yet unrealized and several years at least from basic viability. By contrast, Russia saw itself – and was largely (and incorrectly, as it turns out) regarded internationally – as being in peak military and strategic condition following years of high-budget modernisation and a seeming track record of successful, if more limited, military adventures in Georgia, eastern Ukraine and the Middle East.

These dynamics appeared to present Moscow with an urgent but genuine window of opportunity to address the 'Ukrainian question' for the long term. This was why Russian negotiations and demands before the war appeared so outlandish; no tactical bargaining could address broader Russian strategic concerns. Only a diplomatic nonstarter like a

return to a Cold War-era, Yalta-style paradigm that surrendered Ukraine and much of Eastern Europe to violent Russian revanchist colonialism might have addressed the Kremlin's strategic anxieties.

Extracted from RUSI dated earlier today.

Comments – I believe there are further elements than what is outlined in the RUSI article above. RUSI states

- (i) Moscow is intent on suffering horrendous human losses because of its *protection of its imperial identity* obsession – whereas Russia, in all its political and royal formations, has always thrown hundreds of thousands of its men and women into war irrespective of the cost. They have killed and displaced many more millions of both real and perceived threats to their existence. The “imperial” direction here is that of minor few politicians and autocrats in Moscow, and not of Russia itself in toto.
- (ii) RUSI states that Russia invaded Ukraine because it poses a long-term threat to Moscow hegemony in this and related geopolitical regions. Russia was incensed by the Orange Revolution, following as it did other **color** revolutions, and not because it posed an existential threat to the Russian Federation. Moscow invaded immediately after ex-President Viktor Yanukovich was deposed, eliminating Putin and Russian control over the ex-Soviet state.
- (iii) *Russia's invasion was a pre-emptive military action against the potential or even expected growth of Ukrainian power – which could dramatically curtail Russian power in the region* – Russia has invaded other countries as well as Ukraine. It tried in 2014 as mentioned above, immediately after the Orange Revolution. But why didn't it complete the job in that year? It also concluded an Agreement with the New Ukrainian state in 1991 when the latter surrendered its nuclear arsenal, guaranteeing it independence without fear of any invasion. Ukraine did not present a military threat to Moscow since the collapse of the erstwhile Soviet Union.

With Yanukovich in power as Ukrainian president, the Kremlin and Putin were keenly aware of its military ability, and as keenly aware that it didn't present nay such threat to Moscow. And obviously based upon what the former Ukrainian president advised him, he believed that taking over Ukraine would be a cake-walk.

Russia's concern now may be a fear of a Ukrainian powerhouse but when they first invaded it was not the case.