

Conflict Update # 360

February 18th, 2023

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Conflict Assessment

Russian losses – 142,270 (1,010) soldiers killed, 3,305 (+5) enemy tanks, 6,533 (+13) armored combat vehicles, 2,326 (+4) artillery systems, 469 (+2) MLRS systems, 243 (+2) air defense systems, 298 (+0) warplanes, 287 (+0) helicopters, 2,016 (+3) UAVs of the operational-tactical level, 871 (+0) cruise missiles, 18 (+0) warships/cutters, 5,196 (+9) trucks and tankers, 4 Iskander Missile Launchers (+0), 239 fuel bowsers (+0) and 223 (+2) units of equipment.

Key Takeaways

Russia's daily losses over 1,000 for third time this month – Russia continues to suffer high levels of troop losses in its invasion of Ukraine.

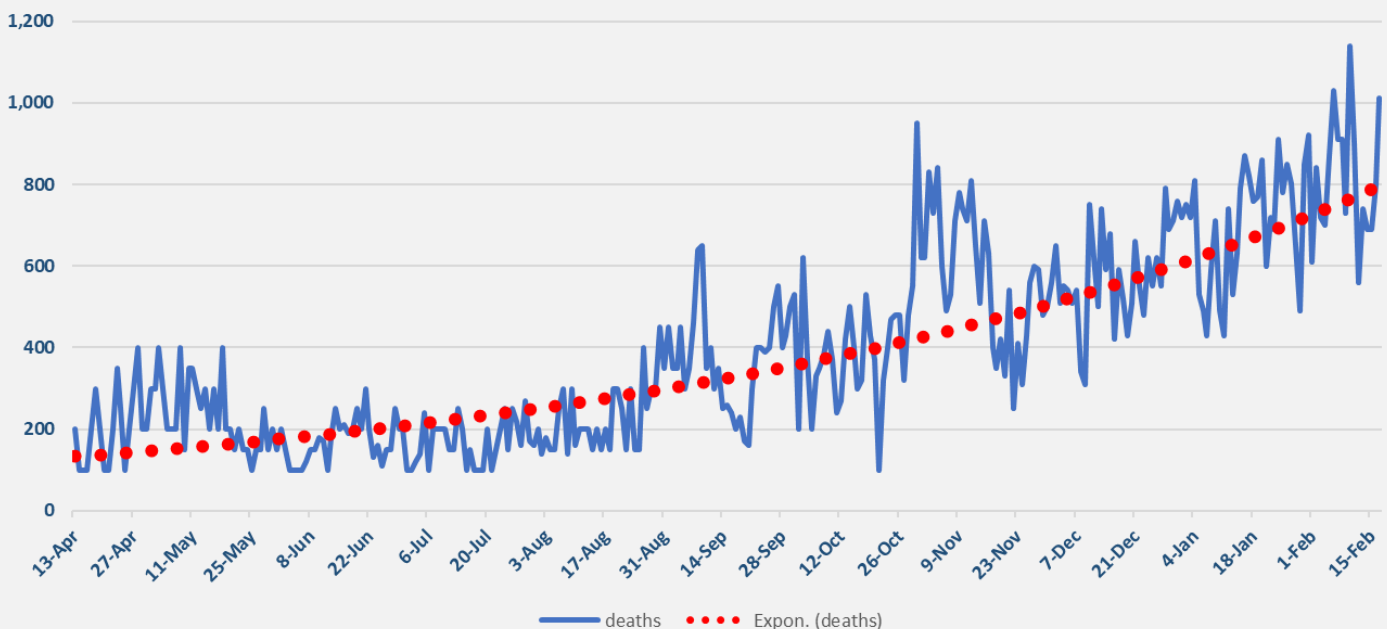
In its latest update on Saturday, the General Staff of Ukraine's Armed Forces said that 1,010 Russian troops had been killed over the previous day, not far off the daily record, according to Kyiv, of 1,140 personnel on February 10.

This was more than the previous highest tally which Kyiv recorded only days earlier, of 1,030. Saturday's estimate brings Ukraine's tally of Russian personnel deaths to 142,270.

The higher numbers come amid a fierce fight for the city of Bakhmut in the Donetsk oblast in which the mercenary Wagner Group is playing a key role.

Russia has now lost 11,680 soldiers killed and an estimated 35,000 injured over the past two weeks.

Russian troop deaths by day



Russian intent? – Russia is possessed of many a talented statesperson, scientist and strategist, and must have some realization that this war is not going to plan – at the very best, and at worst, they will suffer defeat.


Every good strategist always has “back doors” and Plans B, C and so on.



Assuming there is this realization, is it that Putin and the Kremlin, knowing full well that a negotiation looms in the near future, are striving to gain maximum geopolitical and “geoOblast” advantage as possible?



Looking at the map, ① represents Moldova where Putin has geopolitical desires, ② is the Kerch Bridge straddling eastern Crimea and the Russian mainland, ③ is territory south of the existing front line ④ currently occupied by Russian forces, ⑤ represents territory within the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts currently occupied by Ukraine but sought by Putin as a “win, ⑥ are the two land bridges from Kherson Oblast to northern Crimea and ⑦ is the primary water line feeding Crimea from Kherson.

Putin will need at the very least – his very least – to retain Crimea and regain Luhansk and Donetsk Oblasts in full.

Crimea  he has occupied since 2014 and the source of tremendous Russian Main Street celebration when grabbed 8 years ago. Politically he cannot, under any (survival) circumstances, surrender Crimea. It is being reported that he views this as a very strong **red line**.

The Donbas – Luhansk  and Donetsk  Oblasts he promised as his “special military operation” objective, falling back there after defeat north of Kyiv and in Kharkiv last year. Conceding either of these two oblasts will send a very strong signal of a Russian defeat.

Putin and his henchmen should also be as keenly aware that they have passed their culmination point and from here on in, it is downhill militarily. He cannot afford to keep losing c1,000 people a day as appears to be happening at present.

Not publicly stated yet strategically apparent, Russia deeply and strongly needs what Ukraine has to offer in its eastern provinces – food, industrial raw materials and resources, and a river system splitting the country in two. It also has Slav peoples that Russia desperately desires in order to maintain a majority Slav profile in the Russian Federation.

It is my belief that Putin always wanted the land east of the River Dnipro (8 above) as a very minimum. That would leave Russia with a strategic buffer and needed resources and food for future posterity. Unfortunately for him this is not going to happen.

So is he now throwing everything he has at gaining occupation of all of the Luhansk and Donetsk Oblasts – he already has possession of Crimea – and then engage in “peace negotiations,” simultaneously signaling the Russian people that they – and he - have successfully achieved their “special military operations” objective?

What I would call his “fallback” option.

A few challenges arise out of this “fallback” situation. He neither enjoys nor controls;

- Complete hegemony over the Black Sea coastline and with it all maritime ports feeding eastern Ukrainian industrial and agricultural output to the international market. Control hereof would industrially strangle Ukraine’s economy.
- Ukraine’s vast – huge – eastern raw materials, agricultural and industrial output and wealth.
- The Dnipro River basin, a vital strategic asset in geopolitical and geomilitary terms.
- The Zaporizhia nuclear power plant – the largest nuclear generator in the world.
- Any ability to supply Crimea other than over the Kerch Bridge.
- A land-based invasion capability of Moldova.
- An ability to provide for his military divisions in territories in the 3 zone above.

Although a majority of citizens in Luhansk and Donetsk Oblasts have Russian as their mother tongue and home language, only a quarter of them voted in 2007 to join with Russia.

In opinion polls, citizens in these oblasts varied in what they believed should transpire in their provinces, but in the main 82% stated they had no fear of being Ukrainian with the remaining 18% saying yes, they did desire a return to being Russian.

Not a substantial (Russian) case for absorbing these provinces into Russia. Not that this has ever worried or concerned Kremlin policy-makers.

See following article – *“A brief history of Donbas separatism”* - regarding the history of secession in these two oblasts.

In Crimea, ex-home of the Cossacks, Stalin purged these folk in 1944, using the pretense that they supported the Nazi invasion, clearing some 145,000 of them off the peninsula and replacing them with Russians from elsewhere in Russia. Presently 61% of people in the peninsula are Russian.

From a Ukrainian perspective, there is a very firm and stated “zero %” appetite for any land concession to Russia and Putin. In contrast there appears to be a fervent hatred of anything “Russian” or concessions to them under any circumstances. (This is similar to what I found in my frequent travels across Poland in years gone by – pure hatred of anything Russian).

It further appears that Ukraine is carefully and methodically gearing toward a Crimean offensive, taking out the Kerch Bridge (attack attributed to Kyiv by most informed sources), destroying Russian air defense systems located between

Ukrainian-occupied Kherson Oblast and the peninsula, and attacking land rail and road supply lines from Russia to Crimea. But they are not over-extending themselves during these winter months, rather engaging in a Motitus move regarding Crimea.

It also remains to be seen whether Ukraine refuses the flank in Zaporizhia and Kherson Oblasts in favor of heading for Crimea.

Kyiv appears to following a Periclean strategy.

Success in Crimea would leave Russia with only a partially-repaired Kerch Bridge to supply its battalions on the peninsula, one of the most heavily-armed Russian territories.

Ukraine also controls the water supply into Crimea and one of the oldest tactics in besieging an enemy position is to cut off food and water, primarily water.

The unknown trump card, geopolitically, may be that Ukraine's western partners coerce Kyiv into a negotiating strategy, pressing Zelenskyy into ceding the two oblasts and Crimea to Russia in return for all other territories – and inclusion in NATO as a non-negotiable outcome.

All wars end in negotiation of some type or other, and all warring parties end with something they want and some things they couldn't obtain.

Should this be the case, look for the Kremlin to throw everything and the kitchen sink at securing all of Luhansk and Donetsk territories and for Ukraine to assault Crimea.

A brief history of Donbas separatism - Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, but the armed conflict started eight years earlier when pro-Russian separatists in the Donbas tried, with Moscow's support, to secede from the rest of the country.

But the groundwork for the 2014 separatist movement and Donbas "self-determination" had, in fact, been laid decades before that, in the years surrounding the collapse of the Soviet Union.

By the time the self-proclaimed Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) and Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) appeared in news headlines, Russian political forces had already spent years promoting the idea of the "Russian world" in the Donbas and sowing local distrust of Ukraine's other regions.

Putin used Donbas separatists as a pretext for the full-scale invasion, claiming they needed protection from Ukrainian nationalists, an idea that had been carefully prepared and disseminated by the Donbas separatists and the Russian authorities.

Several large historical processes formed this "problem child" as a socio-cultural entity. Historically known as "the wild field," this sparsely populated steppe territory was colonized by Cossacks in the 16th–17th centuries. About a century later, in 1721–1722, rich oil deposits were discovered in the region, kicking off the first Donbas industrial boom. Foreign capital played a significant role: in 1869, the city now called Donetsk was founded by Welsh industrialist John Hughes, whose surname was transliterated as Yuz, the origin of the settlement's original name of Yuzovka.

After the 1917 revolution, Donbas became a center of Soviet industrialization. An industrial powerhouse arose in the middle of the steppe, with the cities of Donetsk and Luhansk surrounded by workers' settlements and smaller towns.

The breakup of the USSR and the establishment of an independent Ukraine posed a serious challenge for the Donbas. Local industry was already in decline when the Soviet Union dissolved, and the 1990s sent the region into deep crisis. Many mines and factories closed down, leaving a population suddenly without work. The Donbas landscape of the

1990s was characterized by entire blocks of ghostly apartment buildings, abandoned by residents. When production stopped in the Donbas, life stopped.

The economic crisis became a crisis of values. People who were accustomed to ordering their entire lives to the rhythms of heavy industry experienced deep frustration, which in turn fueled nostalgia for the Soviet past. Similar processes have become characteristic of post-industrial regions all over the world, but they were felt particularly acutely in the Donbas, in large part because of the unique positions of language and culture in the region. For decades, industry in the Donbas brought in workers from many countries and all parts of the Soviet Union. The result was a very culturally and ethnically diverse population, but one which spoke mainly Russian, the Soviet Union's lingua franca.

According to the last Soviet census, conducted in 1989, 64 percent of Luhansk residents and 67.7 percent of Donetsk residents considered Russian their native language. However, in ethnic terms, Ukrainians still made up a slim majority of the population: in Luhansk Ukrainians comprised 51.9 percent of the population, while in Donetsk they made up 50.7 percent (Russians were 44.4 percent and 43.6 percent, respectively).

This was fertile soil for ideas and slogans about the Donbas's "special path," and many such ideas took root in a local population disoriented by the upheavals of the late-Soviet and early post-Soviet periods. The ideology around the "special path" arose during Perestroika, when movements declaring that the Donbas stood apart from Ukraine arose alongside Ukrainian national and democratic organizations.

The first of the Donbas-focused organizations, the International Movement of the Donbas, was formed in 1990. It advocated for the region seceding from Ukraine if Kyiv decided to secede from the Soviet Union.

During the same period of the late 1980s and early 1990s, a similar organization formed in Luhansk. It was called the People's Movement of Luhansk, and its chief ideologue was a teacher named Valery Cheker. He said, "Our movement stands for autonomy within Ukraine, if the republic signs the union treaty. If not, then we may be talking about transferring to the jurisdiction of the RSFSR [the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic]."

Luhansk writer and political scientist Sergey Cherbanenko thought a conservative faction of the local nomenklatura, the USSR's bureaucratic managers, which opposed democratic reforms, was behind the People's Movement of Luhansk. He essentially predicted, in late 1990, the events of 2014, warning that separatists would come to power after sowing disorder and create an "independent" Luhansk. After that, he predicted, Kyiv would attempt to regain control over the territory by force, but if it failed, an impoverished and aggressive dictatorship would emerge in the region.

Those catastrophic scenarios didn't come to pass back then. And in 1991, the **majority of the population of the Donbas supported Ukrainian independence — 84 percent of Donetsk and Luhansk residents voted for it.**

Hiroaki Kuromiya writes, in *Freedom and Terror in the Donbas*, that "Their profound sense of alienation from Moscow, as well as the feeling that Moscow simply exploited the Donbas, inclined workers to think they would be better off in an independent Ukraine — that an independent Ukraine would not exploit the Donbas as much as Moscow had done."

The situation in the Donbas differs from Crimea, where local separatists owe political power to the ethnic predominance of Russians. And in the 1990s, Donbas separatist movements were a marginal phenomenon.

The Donbas was in generally poor condition in the 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and during the era of privatization. Local elites managed to grab the best bits of regional industry for themselves, while workers suffered increasingly dangerous and unstable working conditions.

In those years it "started to resemble a colonial country that gives away its natural riches for a pittance and lives in disenfranchisement and poverty," writes Ukrainian historian Stanislav Kulchytsky. "The paradox was that the metropole

in this case was not an actual state, but a group (or, more accurately, a class) of people, who patronized a large-scale shadow economy and used it for its own interests,” he specifies, describing local elites.

Who were these people? The Donbas elite — the Donetskiye — was (and is to this day) made up of high-ranking people from the Soviet bureaucracy, former Soviet industrial managers known as “red directors,” and the most successful crime bosses. The first two groups established an authoritarian leadership style in the region. The third group imparted penchants for unscrupulous methods for achieving their goals and the use of physical force.

At the hands of all three groups, the Donbas in the 1990s became one of the most dangerous parts of Ukraine — local businessmen and politicians were frequently assassinated or killed in showdowns.

This turbulent decade saw Rinat Akhmetov, who privatized Azovstal, one of the region’s most powerful industrial concerns, rise to the top of the Donetsk clan’s business structures. Viktor Yanukovich, who at the time was governor of Donetsk, and who would go on to become president of Ukraine, headed the region’s political structure.

Comment – Yanukovich became Prime Minister and President of Ukraine but was deposed in 2014, from where he escaped to Moscow where he currently resides. Very close to Putin, he was to be the replacement president once Zelenskyy was eliminated in February 2022. Yanukovich hired Paul Manafort to guide his campaign for Ukrainian presidency. Manafort first officially started working with Yanukovich and his pro-Russian Party of Regions in 2006, acting as a political consultant and helping to burnish the party’s tarnished image for parliamentary elections that year. He then left Ukrainian politics and worked for US ex-President Trump in his presidential campaign – for zero fee.

As for Luhansk, a group of “Komsomol members” — so called because former youth members of the Communist Party made up its core — came to power. The “Komsomol” leader was the local governor, Oleksandr Yefremov, who had headed the Komsomol city committee of Luhansk in the mid-1980s (when the city was still called Voroshilovgrad).

The Donetskiye captured the region’s industrial power and became a serious political force. After considerable efforts to plunder the region’s resources and set up a shadow economy around those resources, the Donetskiye laid all the blame for the ensuing economic crisis at the feet of the authorities in Kyiv, suggesting that Ukraine’s new independence was at the heart of the region’s problems. “The Donbas feeds all of Ukraine, but meanwhile goes hungry,” they said, during the period when the Donbas fed, chiefly, the Donetskiye themselves.

The Donetskiye used the local population’s dissatisfaction to amass power at higher levels. A large strike among miners that broke out in 1993 brought one of them, mine director Yukhym Zvyahilsky, to power as acting Prime Minister of Ukraine. Within a year, Zvyahilsky had fled the country under threats to his life and corruption charges.

The mining strikes also prompted renewed discussion of Donbas independence. Vadym Chuprun, chairman of the Donetsk Regional Council, and the “red directors” who supported him, took advantage of the general chaos to demand that Kyiv grant special economic status to four regions: **Donetsk, Luhansk, Dnipropetrovsk, and Zaporizhzhia**. To give the demand some teeth, they threatened to block the country’s main trucking routes and stop coal shipments.

In 1994, the Donetsk and Luhansk Regional Councils created a referendum, which asked residents four questions: whether Ukraine should adopt a federal structure; whether the Russian language should be given official status; whether Russian and Ukrainian should be used equally in professional, educational, and scientific settings in the Donbas and Luhansk regions; and whether Ukraine should be more closely integrated with the post-Soviet Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). 80 to 90 percent of voters answered “yes” to each question. Andrey Purgin, a veteran of the Donbas separatist movement and chairman of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic in the mid-aughts, called 1994 “the year Donetsk separatism was born.”

Russia has exploited these separatist sentiments and associations to its own benefit, and largely without consideration of the safety and future security and prosperity of its citizens. Stalinism at its very best.

Russia's 'pathetic' new Ukraine offensive: Top US diplomat gives a scathing assessment of Putin's latest military push as Biden prepares to travel to Poland for invasion's anniversary - A top U.S. diplomat called Russia's declared new offensive in Ukraine 'very pathetic,' ahead of President Joe Biden's trip to the region next week.

Amb. Victoria Nuland, under-secretary for political affairs at the State Department, gave a scathing assessment of Putin's military push to reporters Thursday and questioned how long the Russian people would accept mass casualties.

'Today, we see that Putin gravely underestimated both the resolve, capability, and bravery of the people of Ukraine to defend their country, their democracy, and their freedom,' Nuland said. 'He also gravely underestimated the resolve of the free world to stand with Ukraine, our allies and partners, for as long as it takes.'

Zelenskyy predicts Russian loss and warns Belarus against attack - Zelenskyy opened the annual Munich Security Conference yesterday, calling on his Western partners to keep supporting his country against Russia in a battle he compared to the biblical story of David and Goliath.

"The Russian Goliath has already begun to lose," he said, sitting in his trademark olive green sweatshirt behind a desk in Kyiv. "There's no alternative to our victory."

Zelenskyy thanked the US and EU for the military support while also urging them to do more, saying Ukraine's "sling" needed to be stronger. (In the biblical account, young Israelite shepherd David took down the Philistine giant Goliath with a sling and a small stone.) Zelenskyy warned that Putin was trying to drag out the conflict, betting that the world would lose interest in the war.

"We need speed," Zelenskyy said. "Speed is crucial."

Zelenskyy also dismissed recent saber-rattling by Belarusian President Lukashenko, who said Thursday that his country was prepared to join Russia's war against Ukraine, if attacked.

"The probability that Belarus is going get involved in the war is low," he said. "The people in Belarus are not willing to fight against Ukraine. It won't be easy to convince them."

He predicted that if Belarusian troops did become involved, they would suffer considerable losses.

Russia surrounds Bakhmut as Ukraine sends in troops - Ukraine faced its toughest week so far this year on the eastern front, where its defenders lost more ground to Russian forces but committed enormous resources to holding Bakhmut, a coal-mining town that has acquired emblematic importance to both sides.

Russian troops have been launching probing attacks on a wide front in Donetsk, half of which they now occupy. But their main effort has been to take Bakhmut, whose eastern outskirts they hold.

Ukrainian eastern forces spokesman Serhiy Cherevaty said the two sides had clashed 17 times within Bakhmut on February 14, and reported hundreds of casualties on the Russian side, 205 killed and 217 wounded – a glimpse into the intensity of the fighting.

Despite the obvious political importance, both sides were placing on Bakhmut, Ukraine publicly downplayed the battle.

"The main goal of Russian troops remains to achieve at least some tactical success in eastern Ukraine," Ukrainian military intelligence representative Andriy Chernyak told the Kyiv Post. But Russia lacked the manpower to mount anything resembling the February 24 invasion last year, he said.

Comment – I was watching events around Bakhmut late last evening, and Russian forces have made incremental advances to the north of the city, taking Bakhmut'ske and other smaller towns, but Ukrainian forces continue to occupy elevated terrain, allowing them to assault enemy forces from a high, a distinct tactical advantage in close combat.

Fighting has been house-to-house for months now with defending troops pushing Russian elements back 1.5 kilometers (1 mile) south of the town over the past three days.

Despite repeated Kremlin statements to the contrary, Bakhmut remains in Ukrainian hands.

An air war? - Zelenskyy ended a tour of London, Paris and Brussels on February 9, requesting fourth-generation F-16 fighter jets. The US has said it will not provide them, although some of Ukraine's other allies have indicated they might.

Speaking to those allies gathered in Brussels earlier this week, US defence secretary, Lloyd Austin, said there was a real danger that Russia would now bank on its superiority in the air, but that Ukraine's response should be air defences.

"We do know Russia has substantial aircraft ... and a lot of capability left," said Austin. "We want to make sure they have the ability to protect themselves in the event Russia decides to introduce its air force into the fight."

"The Russian land forces are pretty depleted so it's the best indication that they will turn this into an air fight," two defence officials told the Financial Times. "If the Ukrainians are going to survive they need to have as many air defence capabilities and as much ammunition ... as possible."

Containment

Democrats, Republicans join up to urge Biden to send F-16s to Ukraine - House lawmakers argue fighter jets "could prove decisive for control of Ukrainian airspace this year."

A bipartisan group of lawmakers is pressing President Joe Biden directly to send F-16 warplanes to Ukraine as the fight against Russia's invasion enters its second year.

Five House members argued modern jets — which Kyiv has sought, but the administration has so far not agreed to — "could prove decisive for control of Ukrainian airspace this year" in a Thursday letter to Biden obtained by POLITICO.

Comment – Providing jet fighters is not as easy as said or intended. Aside from training pilots, so too is there an even more strident requirement for maintenance backup and capability, coupled with spares and upgrades.

With the best of intentions, deployment of jet fighters, helicopters or similar weaponry will take more than a year, why the West is plumbing the works with antiaircraft missile batteries and manpad devices, all highly mobile and the primary reason why Russia does not at this or any other stage of their illegal invasion enjoy air superiority.

Having jet aircraft does provide offensive and defensive capacity, whereas antiaircraft weaponry is primarily defensive in nature.

Ukraine, as resilient and innovative as they are, have also and largely used the latter in offensive maneuvers to date. They advance, consolidate, regroup, rotate and then advance again. In these moves they bring with them their manpad platforms, used clinically in assisting to contain enemy aircraft and helicopter wings.

Russia has lost 287 helicopters and 298 fighter jets thus far in the invasion. Most of these shoot downs have been with manpads, seemingly as effective as jet fighters.

Ukraine also launches and manages many of its jet fighters from public roads, landing and refueling en route but continually moving location so as to avoid detection. This is a primary reason why they have managed to retain a large contingent of aircraft.

American and NATO aircraft will need to be as adaptable in order to survive. They will need to show they can also be as operationally flexible and nimble as Ukraine has proven in ex-Soviet period jets. The moment Ukraine keeps aircraft in airfield station formation, is the moment they invite Russian missile attack.

One of Ukraine's uppermost reasons for defeating so many Russian battalions and formations is their nimbleness. They are continually moving around, staging in small nondescript buildings and formations, shooting and scooting, and avoiding detection. Some of the very best guerilla warfare seen to date. Matches the Boers in 1899 in South Africa.

Having said the above, it really is advantageous to Ukraine for western suppliers and government to expedite delivery of aircraft so as to enable an expanded variety of weapons and particularly to project attacks further forward.

My personal favorite will be the A10 Warthog, known for its anti-tank ability. Ask Iraq.

Poland ready to support Ukraine with MiG jets if broader coalition formed, says PM - Poland is ready to support Ukraine with its MiG jets, but only if a broader coalition is formed with the United States as a leader, Polish Prime Minister Morawiecki said on Saturday.

"Today we can talk about transferring our MiG (jets) as part of a wider coalition and we are ready for that...Poland can only be a part of a much larger coalition here, a coalition with the United States as a leader," he said.

UK will help other countries willing to send aircraft to Ukraine, Sunak says - Britain offered to help other countries which were willing to send aircraft to Ukraine now, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said on Saturday, as he urged allies to maintain their support in the war against Russia.

Sunak has joined former British leaders Boris Johnson and Liz Truss in providing strong support to Ukraine, including through the delivery of weapons and training of troops.

It has so far refused to send fighter jets but Sunak said on Saturday that Britain could help in other ways.

EU calls for 'serious consideration' on supplying Ukraine with fighter jets - EU member states are being urged to seriously consider sending modern fighter jets to Ukraine, as the war-torn country continues to call on ally nations to commit to donating the advanced weaponry.

Since the war began nearly a year ago, Ukraine has been armed by democratic nations in its fight against Russia, and Kyiv has incrementally increased its ask as the conflict prolongs.

Zelensky of Ukraine and his defense officials have turned their demands to F-16 fighter jets after securing commitments for tanks from the United States, Germany and others earlier this year.

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However, the effort may soon achieve results as on Thursday, the EU Parliament passed a resolution to mark the one-year anniversary of the war on Feb. 24, which reaffirms their support for providing military assistance to Ukraine and calls for "serious consideration" from member states to supply it with Western fighter jets and helicopters, along with appropriate missile systems.

Time to give Ukraine 'Nato-standard capabilities', Sunak tells West - The West must give Ukrainian armed forces "advanced, Nato-standard capabilities" to banish Russian troops from its land, the Prime Minister said.

To coincide with the war leader's momentous trip, the UK Government announced that Britain would extend its training mission – which has already seen 10,000 Ukrainian troops come to the UK – to cover fighter jet pilots, ensuring Ukraine can defend its skies using "Nato tactics" in the future.

The training of pilots is expected to commence in the spring, according to Downing Street officials.

"We must give them the advanced, Nato-standard capabilities that they need for the future.

“And we must demonstrate that we’ll remain by their side, willing and able to help them defend their country again and again.

“What is at stake in this war is even greater than the security and sovereignty of one nation.

“It’s about the security and sovereignty of every nation.

“Because Russia’s invasion, its abhorrent war crimes and irresponsible nuclear rhetoric are symptomatic of a broader threat to everything we believe in.”

Increased EU sanctions package announced - On Thursday the EU Parliament passed a resolution to mark the one-year anniversary of the war on Feb. 24, which reaffirms their support for providing military assistance to Ukraine and calls for "serious consideration" from member states to supply it with Western fighter jets and helicopters, along with appropriate missile systems.

Dual-use and advanced technology goods, including new electronics components that can be used in weapons systems, will also be targeted with export bans, which will be extended, for the first time, to third country entities, specifically seven Iranian entities.

"With this, we have banned all tech products found on the battlefield," von der Leyen said Wednesday. "And we will make sure they don't find other ways to get there."

A list of accused Russian propagandists as well as additional military and political commanders is also being proposed for blacklisting.

The Thursday resolution also urges member states to make the sanctions already in place more effective, while calling for a legal regime that states confiscated assets from Russian oligarchs and those sanctioned can be used to reconstruct Ukraine.

That legal regime will also seek to have Russia compensate the victims of its war while ensuring that "once the war ends, Russia must be obliged to pay reparations imposed on it to ensure that it makes a substantial contribution" to Ukraine's reconstruction.

Ukraine debacle leaves Russia facing future as China’s vassal - One year into the most devastating war in Europe since World War II, China is ruthlessly focused on taking maximum advantage of a weakened Russia and an isolated Vladimir Putin. For Beijing, Russia’s massive, unexpected reverses on the battlefield since invading Ukraine in February 2022 offer an opportunity to dominate the Kremlin and turbo-boost its own grand strategy of becoming the world’s dominant power by 2049.

Putin and Xi Jinping have met over 40 times since the latter came to power in 2012, relentlessly ratcheting up bilateral ties to challenge a US-dominated “unipolar” world. Their armies routinely conduct major military exercises. They share intelligence and regularly coordinate their policies and messages against the US, NATO and the international rules-based order they seek to overthrow.

Among the many lessons to be gleaned so far from Russia’s murderous war on Ukraine is that today’s purported Sino-Russian alliance — just like the Soviet Union’s with Communist China in the last century — has clearly definable limits and, in many spheres, elements of outright competition.

And unlike during the Cold War, it’s China that is setting the boundaries this time. It is clear that Mr. Xi wants to win big at the expense of his “ally.” Russia began reorienting its economy to China after the West imposed sanctions in response to the illegal annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine in 2014. China is now poised to supplant the European Union as Russia’s primary economic partner.

China is importing Russian hydrocarbons at reduced prices and capturing Russia's market for strategic commodities for both high technology and manufactured goods. In 2022, China's oil, gas, liquefied natural gas, and coal imports from a cash-desperate Russia topped \$60 billion, up \$41 billion from 2021.

The result is a massive trade imbalance and a Russian economy that is increasingly dependent on China, while Beijing, by contrast, enjoys exceptionally diverse commercial relationships around the globe.

With Putin's attention — and his struggling armies — focused on Ukraine, China has seized the opportunity to encroach on Russia's traditional sphere of influence in Central Asia. In September 2022, Mr. Xi made a rare visit to Tashkent, Uzbekistan's capital, to attend the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit. China is aggressively developing a strategic economic and strategic partnership with that country.

Desperate to preserve his regime, Putin has made a Faustian bargain with his country's long-term strategic competitor.

As long as he remains in power, Russia will be economically and strategically subservient to China, the junior partner to an increasingly powerful Beijing.


Scholz reverses roles on tanks for Ukraine - Just weeks ago, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz was under fire for having failed to approve the delivery of Leopard battle tanks. Now however, it's full speed ahead.

Yesterday he urged allies with stocks to send them now, as efforts to equip Ukraine with the powerful weapons stalled.

"Those who can send such battle tanks should really do so now," Scholz told the Munich Security Conference, adding he would be "intensively campaigning" for allies to move on the issue.

Leopard 2

German-made battle tank



120 mm canon
42 rounds of ammunition

2 machine guns
7.62 mm

Digital fire control system to engage moving targets at 5-km range


Dimensions
Length: 9.97 m
Width: 3.75 m
Height: 3 m

55 tonnes empty
62 in battle conditions

Modernised version in mid-80s	4 crew members	Range of 500 km	Maximum speed: around 70 km/h
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Sources: KMW/Global Security/Army Recognition Group

Image is Leopard 2A4 model



Sunak urges allies to ‘double down’ on military support – British PM Rishi Sunak called on the west to “double down” on its military support to Ukraine. “When Putin started this war, he gambled that our resolve would falter,” he said. “But we proved him wrong then, and we will prove him wrong now.”

Comments, Updates, Developments and Reports

Biden heading to EU - Biden will depart for Warsaw, Poland Monday night, meeting with Polish President Andrzej Duda and leaders of the Bucharest Nine, just ahead of February 24 - the one-year anniversary of the Russian invasion.

The Bucharest Nine includes Poland, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania and Slovakia. Biden is expected to travel to Lithuania for the NATO summit in July.

'President Biden will thank President Duda and, in fact, the Polish people for the \$3.8 billion in military and humanitarian assistance that they provided to Ukraine over the past year,' said National Security Council spokesperson at Friday's White House briefing.

The president is then set to deliver remarks in Warsaw Tuesday night.

The speech will be on 'how the United States has rallied the world to support the people of Ukraine as they defend their freedom and democracy,' Kirby said.

Biden has yet to set foot in Ukraine during the war.

'The trip will be in Warsaw,' Kirby answered when asked if there were any plans for Biden to cross into Ukraine. 'No,' he said to a second question about whether the president would cross into the war-torn country.

First lady Jill Biden went over the border last year on Mother's Day to meet with Ukraine's first lady, Olena Zelenska.

Comment – This Biden visit is hugely important in NATO and western resolve and in reinforcing US support for a global world order being challenged by Russia and China, heading up an expanding bi-polar network.

All European countries, and particularly the smaller ones such as Lithuania, Latvia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Moldova and others are extremely nervous with Russia's illegal invasion of its and their neighbor Ukraine.

They have been twitchy at best for the years since 1991 when the Soviet Union imploded and their independence came about. Always expecting a Russian resurgence and as always anticipating being next on the Kremlin chopping block, they have been looking over their shoulders in search of reassurance and support from Big Brother across the pond.

Now they are getting it in no uncertain terms.

Zelenskiy warned a possible consequence of delaying western weapons to Ukraine could be a Russian invasion of Moldova. He said neighboring Belarus would make a mistake of historic proportions if it joined in the Russian offensive and claimed polls showed 80% of its people did not wish to join.

This is entirely plausible with Russia maintaining 1,500 of its troops in Moldova for ostensible “peacekeeping” purposes. There are two pro-Russian elements within Moldova, the one in Transnistria, east of the Dniester River and bordering Ukraine, of which we have reported in multiple Updates previously and another further south in the Moldovan province of Gagauzia.

Regarding Transnistria, while internationally recognised as part of Moldova, the Russian-backed breakaway territory has been under the control of separatist authorities since 1992, after the collapse of the Soviet Union triggered a conflict between the newly independent Republic of Moldova and separatists who wanted to maintain Soviet ties.

Regarding Gagauzia, in August 1990, Comrat (an autonomous republic established in the village of Comrat, in the Bessarabia Governorate in historical times), declared itself an autonomous republic, but the Moldovan government annulled the declaration as unconstitutional. At that time, Stepan Topal emerged as the leader of the Gagauz national movement. Support for the Soviet Union remained high, with a referendum in March 1991 returning an almost unanimous vote in favor of remaining part of the USSR.

The referendum, however, was boycotted by Moldovans in Gagauzia, as well as in the rest of Moldova. Many Gagauzians supported the Moscow coup attempt in August 1991, and Gagauzia declared itself independent on 19 August 1991, followed in September by Transnistria, thus further straining relations with Chişinău.

However, when the Moldovan parliament voted on Moldova becoming independent in August 1991, six of the twelve Gagauz deputies in Moldovan parliament voted in favor, while the other six did not participate. As a consequence, the Moldovan government toned down its pro-Romanian stance and paid more attention to minority rights.



Russia is keenly aware of these fractious relationships within Moldova and will seek to exploit these by instigating unrest, hoping this spreads to those who still harbor a pro-Kremlin sentiment.

Putin doesn't need to physically assault Moldova in order to ferment unrest or a takeover, just precipitate an uprising, something the Kremlin is a past master at doing.

Read the article above regarding the Kremlin exploitation of the Donbas region – same tactics, same beneficiaries.

US says Russia committed 'crimes against humanity' in Ukraine - US Vice President Kamala Harris says Russian forces have carried out 'widespread and systemic' attacks on civilians.

The United States has determined that Russia has committed "crimes against humanity" during its nearly year-long invasion of Ukraine, US Vice President Kamala Harris has said.

Speaking at the Munich Security Conference, days before the anniversary of Moscow launching its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Harris said Russian forces had conducted "widespread and systemic" attacks on the country's civilian population.

"In the case of Russia's actions in Ukraine we have examined the evidence, we know the legal standards, and there is no doubt: these are crimes against humanity," said Harris, a former prosecutor.

"And I say to all those who have perpetrated these crimes, and to their superiors who are complicit in these crimes, you will be held to account."

The Biden administration formally determined last March that Russian troops had committed war crimes in Ukraine and said it would work with others to prosecute offenders.

A determination of crimes against humanity goes a step further, indicating that attacks against civilians are being carried out in a widespread and systematic manner.

Harris listed a litany of abuses that she said were carried out by Moscow's forces in Ukraine – “gruesome acts of murder, torture, rape and deportation, execution-style killings, beatings and electrocution”.

In her remarks, Harris cited as “barbaric and inhumane” the dozens of victims found in Bucha shortly after Russia's invasion last February; the March 9 bombing of a Mariupol maternity hospital, that killed three people, including a child; and the sexual assault of a four-year-old by a Russian soldier that was identified by the UN in a report.

Organizations supported by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) have documented more than **30,000 war crime incidents** since the invasion, according to the US government. Ukrainian officials said they were investigating the shelling of the city of Bakhmut this week as a possible war crime.

Comment – This step is a serious advancement in allegations against Russia and its officers and people. Coming as it does, it places Russia, Putin and the Kremlin on notice.

Dutch move to create Register of Damages - The Netherlands has agreed in principle to establish an international organisation in The Hague to record information about the damage caused to Ukrainian households, businesses and infrastructure by the war.

The creation of the register – to be named the Register of Damages Caused by Russian Aggression to Ukraine – was recommended in a resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly in November.

A statement from the Ukrainian Ministry of Justice said it should become “the first component of a comprehensive reparations mechanism... designed to ensure that the aggressor state pays Ukraine full reparations for the damage caused, in accordance with international law”.

The announcement followed a visit to Kyiv by the Dutch prime minister, Mark Rutte, on Friday.

Ukraine's Minister of Justice, Denys Maluska, said it was only fitting that the register be based in “the capital of international justice.”

Sunak says the world needed to “rebuild the international order on which our security depends.” - The whole world must hold Russia to account. We must see justice through the [international criminal court] for their sickening war crimes.

He added that “we should consider together how to ensure that Russia pays” towards the reconstruction of Ukraine.

Sunak said the treaties and agreements of the post-cold war era had failed Ukraine, and that a “new framework” was needed to guarantee its security.

Russia has committed violation after violation against countries outside the collective security of Nato, and the international community's response has not been strong enough.

Ukraine will become a member of Nato, but until that happens we need to do more to bolster Ukraine's long-term security.

We must give them the advanced Nato-standard capabilities that they need for the future and we must demonstrate that we'll remain by their side.

He concluded by quoting President Zelenskiy, who last week said during an address in Westminster Hall that Ukraine and its allies were marching “towards the most important victory of our lifetime”, a victory over “the very idea of war.”

Sunak said: “We could have no greater purpose than to prove him right.”

Beijing is 'watching closely' if Russia succeeds in Ukraine, NATO says, flagging rising China challenge - NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said earlier this morning China is closely watching Russia's success in Ukraine, with the war's outcome likely to have major reverberations in Asia-Pacific.

Stoltenberg said NATO does not see China as an "imminent" threat, but noted that the military coalition is stepping up its cooperation with allies within the region.

"Beijing is watching closely what's going on in Ukraine. And if Putin wins there, of course, that will impact their decisions on how to behave in Asia," Stoltenberg told CNBC's Hadley Gamble.

Putin & Russia

Wagner Group escalates Russian military feud with video of dead soldiers - The Wagner Group has escalated its feud with the government of Russian President Vladimir Putin by sharing a video of troops it says were killed in Ukraine due to a lack of support from the military establishment.

The mercenary organization on Friday released a graphic video showing a large number of bodies laid out in a room after a Wagner Group fighter blames "military functionaries" led by the Russian MoD for failing to give his fallen comrades needed weapons.

A caption alongside the video, which was shared to a Wagner-affiliated Telegram account, claims that "hundreds" of Wagner fighters are dying in Ukraine every day due to the Russian military's failure to send "weapons, ammunition and everything necessary on time."

Russian State TV guest clashes with host over costly Ukraine advances – A heated exchange among Kremlin propagandists on Russian television about Moscow's faltering war effort in Ukraine has gone viral.

Aleksey Zhuravlyov, leader of the nationalist party Rodina (Motherland), lamented the disconnect between how the war was being portrayed in Russian media and the reality that the Kremlin's forces were making little apparent progress on the ground.

Ukraine said on Saturday that more than 1,000 Russian troops had been killed in the previous 24 hours (see above), the third time this month that the reported daily death toll has reached four figures amid a fierce battle for Bakhmut in the Donetsk region.

"Why aren't we in Kyiv if everyone is fighting just fine?" Zhuravlyov told the program 60 Minutes. "Maybe I don't understand something, or will we be celebrating another street seizure with the whole country?"

He questioned the value of touting Moscow taking "another trench in the village with seven of our own people. What good is that?"

But the anchor on the Russia 1 channel, Olga Skabeyeva, took aim at criticizing Russia's war effort from the comfort of a TV studio and said that "disparaging" Moscow's progress was "inappropriate" considering "how much blood is being shed for these streets."

Russia's foreign ministry spokesperson, Maria Zakharova, has said the US is inciting Ukraine to strike directly at Russian territory, after comments by the US undersecretary of state, Victoria Nuland, about Crimea.

Nuland had said the US supported Ukraine striking at targets in Crimea, which Russia annexed in 2014 in a move that is only recognised by a handful of mostly rogue states.