

Conflict Update # 371

March 1st, 2023

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Conflict Assessment

Russian losses – 149,890 (650) soldiers killed, 3,395 (+7) enemy tanks, 6,638 (+8) armored combat vehicles, 2,393 (+10) artillery systems, 479 (+1) MLRS systems, 244 (+0) air defense systems, 300 (+0) warplanes, 288 (+0) helicopters, 2,055 (+4) UAVs of the operational-tactical level, 873 (+0) cruise missiles, 18 (+0) warships/cutters, 5,257 (+5) trucks and tankers, 4 Iskander Missile Launchers (+0), 239 fuel bowsers (+0) and 230 (+0) units of equipment.

Key Takeaways

Positions of Ukrainian and Russian forces in eastern Ukraine as of March 1.



Has

Ukraine started a drone war on Russia? - ‘Does the defence ministry have a plan to protect our cities?’ a pro-Kremlin figure wrote on Telegram, a sign of growing unease.

“UFOs” have rained on Russia in recent days – some dangerously close to the capital Moscow and Putin’s hometown.

Russian officials and media, using that term – “unidentified foreign objects” – seem unnerved and are accusing Ukraine of drone attacks.

Ukraine on Wednesday denied targeting Russia, suggesting attempts at domestic assaults – which Moscow did not accept. With a dash of black humor, presidential adviser Mykhailo Podolyak tweeted that a sense of “panic and collapse” was growing in Russia, “manifested by increasing domestic attacks of unidentified flying objects on infrastructure sites.”

Throughout the war, Ukrainian leaders and top brass have routinely refused any responsibility for attacks on Russian soil – and often resort to ridiculing disorganized Russian servicemen.

A Ukrainian military expert said that even though Kyiv can and should attack Russia’s territory, it does not want to divulge details of its operations there.

“We are allowed to deliver strikes on the aggressor nation in principle, but we stick to the rule that if and when it happens, [the strikes] should target military sites firstly,” Lieutenant General Ihor Romanenko, former deputy chief of Ukraine’s general staff of armed forces, told Al Jazeera.

“But because of many circumstances, at this stage, we won’t declare what and how we are doing on enemy territory,” he said.

Analysts have said Kyiv is preparing to launch more attacks with its growing fleet of domestically produced unmanned aircraft – and top pro-Kremlin figures are worried.

Ukraine’s drone whisperers: What the weapons are telling us - Drones have played an outsized role in the conflict in Ukraine – surveilling territory, dropping bombs, and crashing into buildings.

Russia launched some 600 drones in the last three months of 2022, according to estimates from the Ukrainian consultancy Molfar.

When the drones fall, or are shot down, to weapons investigators like Damien Conflict Armament Research, a group that piece together how weapons ended up on the downed Russian UAV. Ukrainian forces retrieve them and hand them off to Spleeters, the deputy director of operations at works with both governments and companies to battlefield. Pictured here is CAR working on a

While Iran has denied supplying Russia with irrefutable evidence to the contrary. It also highlights vulnerabilities in the supply chain that, regardless of sanctions, adversaries can exploit.

“Its whole chain of custody, all the hands it went through, how it arrived there and how it was used and all that,”



he said, explaining what can be gleaned. “And I think through that, you can then tell a story about the conflict you are looking at, about the war you’re looking at.”

The Click Here podcast sat down with Spleeters to discuss how investigators go about dissecting instruments of war and what clues their many parts provide.

What is happening? On February 26, two blasts rocked an airfield in pro-Putin Belarus damaging one of the most precious Russian weapons – one of only nine A-50 planes that can identify the locations of Ukrainian air defence units. Belarusian “guerrilla fighters” claimed responsibility. (**Update** – We reported it was one of three such aircraft, whereas later reporting from sources lists it as one of nine, and not three – Correction).

On Monday night this week, at least four drones fell short of reaching a power station in the western Russian city of Belgorod that sits less than 40km (25 miles) from the border.

And yesterday, an “unidentified flying object” was spotted over St Petersburg, where Putin was born.

Air space over Russia’s second-largest city that lies almost 1,500km (930 miles) north of Ukraine was briefly closed, and fighter jets took off as part of a rehearsal – drills to “train for interception and identification of a conditional target,” a defence official reportedly said.

Comment – Keep the “Messages of presence going,” it terrorizes people in targeted areas – the precise purpose of the targeting in the first place. Judy Collins should be substituting “Send in the Clowns” with “Send in the Drones.”

Drone Attacks on Russia Underline Its Vulnerability - A spate of drone attacks that Russian authorities blamed on Ukraine has targeted areas in southern and western Russia, reflecting the Ukrainian military’s growing reach as the war dragged into a second year.

A spate of drone strikes Russian authorities blamed on Ukraine targeted areas in southern and western Russia, reflecting the Ukrainian military's growing reach.

While the attacks apparently did not inflict any significant damage, their number and scope posed a new challenge to Russia as the war dragged into a second year. One assault came as close as 100 kilometers (60 miles) from Moscow.

Some observers said the strikes could be a rehearsal for a broader Ukrainian attack on facilities deep inside Russia.

Russian authorities have long accused Ukraine of launching regular drone attacks on power plants, oil refineries and other targets in western regions of Russia near the border.

Russian authorities also have reported repeated Ukrainian drone attacks on Crimea, most of which targeted the port of Sevastopol that hosts the main Russian naval base on the Black Sea peninsula that Moscow illegally annexed in 2014.

In December, the Russian military reported several Ukrainian drone attacks on long-range bomber bases deep inside Russia. The Russian Defense Ministry said the drones were shot down, but it acknowledged that their debris damaged some aircraft and killed several servicemen. (**Comment** – that is the Russian statement. Social media showed pictures of extensively damaged aircraft – forcing Russia to move their strategic airbase from the center to its far-eastern seaboard for safety.

After each of those strikes, Ukrainian officials stopped short of openly claiming responsibility but emphasized the country's right to strike any target in response to the Russian aggression.

In some cases, Ukrainian authorities took responsibility for the attacks deep behind the front line. That's what happened when Ukraine's top military officer took credit for ordering the August strikes on air bases in Crimea weeks after they occurred.

Sustained Bakhmut attacks - Russian forces carried out sustained attacks on the eastern Ukrainian city of Bakhmut in their quest for a breakthrough in the year-long war, although one U.S. official predicted few short-term territorial gains for Russia.

The Kremlin is throwing literally thousands of soldiers into the firing line, forcing them to advance, with any soldier returning facing a Chechnyan execution squad operating right behind them.

Where Russian commanders have been marginally successful in Bakhmut is in flushing out Ukrainian locations by sending in hundreds of troops at a time, forcing Ukrainian defenders to kill them – exposing their position – after which more elite troops then attack these dugouts and hideaways.

But the penalty is absolutely stupendous, losing them thousands of troops – more than 1,300 in the two days alone.

Russian troops release video as they say they will not fight - Russian troops fighting in Ukraine have said they are being sent "to the slaughter" in a recorded message for Putin.

Mobilized soldiers from the Siberian region of Irkutsk said they had been sent into battle "without any support," including weaponry, ammunition and intelligence, according to independent Russian investigative outlet, The Insider.

The Irkutsk soldiers, reported to have initially served as territorial defense troops before moving to a brigade in the highly contested Donetsk region, said they were sent into battle "without preparation," according to The Insider.

They were ordered to storm the Donetsk city of Avdiivka in "assault units." Avdiivka has been the focus of Russian offensive operations in recent weeks, and UGS reported on Sunday that the country's armed forces had repelled attacks on the city over the past 24 hours.

The mobilized soldiers, under orders from separatist commanders from the Donetsk region, were "sent to storm the Avdiivka fortified area without any support, artillery, communications, sappers, or reconnaissance," one unnamed fighter told the Russian outlet.

They were sent "to the slaughter," he added.

The soldier described an attitude of Russian soldiers being expendable in the minds of anonymous commanders, with sustaining injuries being the only option of getting home alive.

"The command directly says that we are all consumables and the only chance to return home is to get injured," the soldier is quoted as saying in the video.

"We don't know the names and ranks of the commanders, since they don't tell us them."

Russian T-72 drives into minefield littered with abandoned tanks – A video posted by the Armed Forces of Ukraine depicts a Russian T-72B tank destroyed by a landmine as it plodded through a minefield strewn with other damaged and abandoned tanks in Vuhledar, a town on the front lines in Ukraine's Donetsk Oblast.

In the video, Ukrainian forces referred to this spot as the Vuhledar "black hole" and credited the tank's destruction to Ukraine's 72nd brigade, while the second part of the video shows another Russian tank struck by an anti-tank weapon.

One soldier takes out five Russian tanks – I was watching geofootage of a single Ukrainian soldier armed with a Javelin missile launcher, attacking a column of approaching Russian tanks, taking out five of them, one after another.

Snipers then killed those soldiers running away from the now burning and exploding tanks.

Another video posted by the SBU showed UAVs drop munitions on five Russian T-72 tanks and a 2S3 Akatsiya howitzer.

One day later, UGS reported Russia lost a total of 16 tanks, 24 armored vehicles and three drones in a 24-hour period.

The Javelin, or FGM-148 as it is officially known, weighs about 49lbs. and was first used in 1996 to allow soldiers to operate and fire warheads over 1.5 miles. The warhead is guided by an infrared seeker that can travel at a rate of 1,000 feet every seven seconds. The weapon can sit upon a soldier's shoulder or be mounted and fired from the ground.

By last May, the U.S. had already supplied Ukraine with about 7,000 Javelins, or approximately one-third of its stockpile, AP reported. The U.S. Army awarded Lockheed Martin and Raytheon a joint \$311 million contract in September to increase production.

Blowing out walls – Watching yet other geofootage, this time covering an attack against a Russian urban stronghold in Vuhledar, the Ukrainians set up a large bore 20mm rifle and blew out the walls of a building behind and inside of which Russian soldiers were crouching. The firepower was absolutely devastating for the Russian soldiers. This type of weapon can penetrate tank defenses as well as blow out walls.

“Pygmy tricks” for catching baboons and guineafowls – and Russian soldiers - Pygmies, an African tribe indigenous to Southern Africa, have tricks they use to catch baboons and guineafowls. Both elusive targets, with the former a dangerous opponent, Pygmy hunters deploy just as elusive a bunch of tricks in order to lure them into a **“killing zone,”** in order to contain and kill them.

Catching the baboon – Hunters cut a hole just smaller than a baboon's clenched fist in the top of a pumpkin, empty the pumpkin, removing seeds and contents, then place nice tasty morsels inside that attract the baboon. The animal sees an opportunity, approaches the pumpkin – entering the **“killing zone”** – smelling an opportunity, there's something inside the pumpkin it wants and believes it can get. The baboon then inserts its hand into the pumpkin by squeezing it into the hollowed out vegetable shell, grabbing a bunch of seeds or nuts inside – but when trying to extract its hand, now a clenched fist, it cannot because it's too large to pull out through the hole at the top of the pumpkin.

But it will not release the seeds or nuts, instead trying to escape with the pumpkin now dragging it back and keeping it in the **“killing zone”** – allowing the Pygmy hunter to approach and kill it.

Just as Ukrainian soldiers lure Russian troops and units into **“killing zones”** by making strikes appear attainable, and then attacking and killing them. They (the Russians) are not permitted to extract themselves by their commanders, so plow ahead and get killed.

Catching the Guinea fowl – The fowls are extremely quick and elusive, so the hunter has to adjust in order to trap and kill them. He cannot catch them by running after them, they are just too fast.

So he soaks seeds in alcohol until they are fully impregnated with booze, he then sprinkles the seeds across the ground – and waits. Guineafowl, known to enjoy a late afternoon tippie every now and again, can't resist what they see as easy pickings. So they eat the seeds, and the more they eat, the drunker they get – all the while in the **“killing zone.”** They cannot escape as they drunkenly fall all over the place when running away, staying in the **“killing zone.”**

Out of his hiding comes the Pygmy, and kills them.

This is the same tactic Ukrainian troops use to lure Russian soldiers into **“killing zones.”** They set them up by attracting them into a area that is contained – the **“killing zone,”** - then kill them. Enemy troops are desperate for success and fall for the trap all too often, allowing a high kill rate by Ukrainian defenders.

Russian troops keep rolling into the same kill zone outside Vuhledar - Russian Troops Keep Rolling Into The Same Kill Zone Outside Vuhledar There's a road intersection, a few hundred yards outside the town of Mykilske in

eastern Ukraine's Donbas region, that has become a bizarre death trap for Russian troops. The Ukrainian army has mined the intersection.

The Russian military has a tendency to reinforce failure," analysts Mykhaylo Zabrodskyi, Jack Watling, Oleksandr Danylyuk and Nick Reynolds explained in a study for the Royal United Services Institute in London. They blamed Russian commanders for being stubborn and inflexible. But junior officers closer to the front lines might also be at fault.

Russian nuclear threats are empty, part of 'information operation:' ISW - Russia's threats to use nuclear weapons in the Ukraine war are part of an "information operation" and "extraordinarily unlikely" to come to fruition, according to the Institute for the Study of War (ISW).

A report published by the U.S.-based think tank yesterday cited testimony from U.S. Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Colin Kahl, who said he did not think Russia using nuclear weapons was "likely" during a House Armed Services Committee hearing earlier in the day.

ISW said Kahl's testimony was in line with its own "continued assessment that Russia is extraordinarily unlikely to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine."

"ISW has assessed that Russian invocations of nuclear threats and nuclear doctrine are part of an information operation meant to discourage Ukraine and the West but do not represent any material Russian intent to employ nuclear weapons," the ISW report stated.

Russian authorities flee Ukraine amid fears of counteroffensive - UGS reported Kremlin-installed authorities in Kherson Oblast were fleeing the region in order to escape a Ukrainian counteroffensive.

In an update on Facebook, the General Staff wrote that "[d]ue to fears of de-occupation of Ukrainian territories," Moscow's officials in the Russian-occupied cities of Oleshka and Skadovsk in Kherson were departing for Crimea.

Kherson was one of four Ukrainian territories that Russian President Vladimir Putin illegitimately annexed in September after most of the province had fallen to his forces in the early months of the invasion. In November, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's military retook control of the city of Kherson in what was characterized as a major defeat for Russia, though settlements throughout the region remain occupied by Putin's troops.

Ultimate “Fall Back” position?

Today - In the map below are depicted areas Russia and Ukraine currently occupy. The bold black outline represents the 4 oblasts Russia has stated it requires in order to enter any peace negotiations, red and red-shaded colored areas what they presently occupy.

Kyiv not conceding all 4 oblasts to Moscow will see the Kremlin – in their words and statements – continue the invasion. This is to present Putin and Russian Command with a winning position in the event of entering peace talks. Without this they are vulnerable to internal dissent and potentially a palace coup.

This position however presents a stumbling block for Zelenskyy, Kyiv and NATO.

Russia has made little progress in the eastern zone, albeit constantly proclaiming victory in crucial areas, in the process losing thousands of soldiers and hundreds of pieces of hard-to-replace equipment.

Ukraine, as mentioned and evidenced in Updates earlier this week, is receiving huge amounts of ordnance, equipment, drones and latest technological weaponry, and has been containing itself in defensive mode since the onset of winter.

Although reports continue of marginal Russian gains in some Donbas conflict areas, these remain marginal.

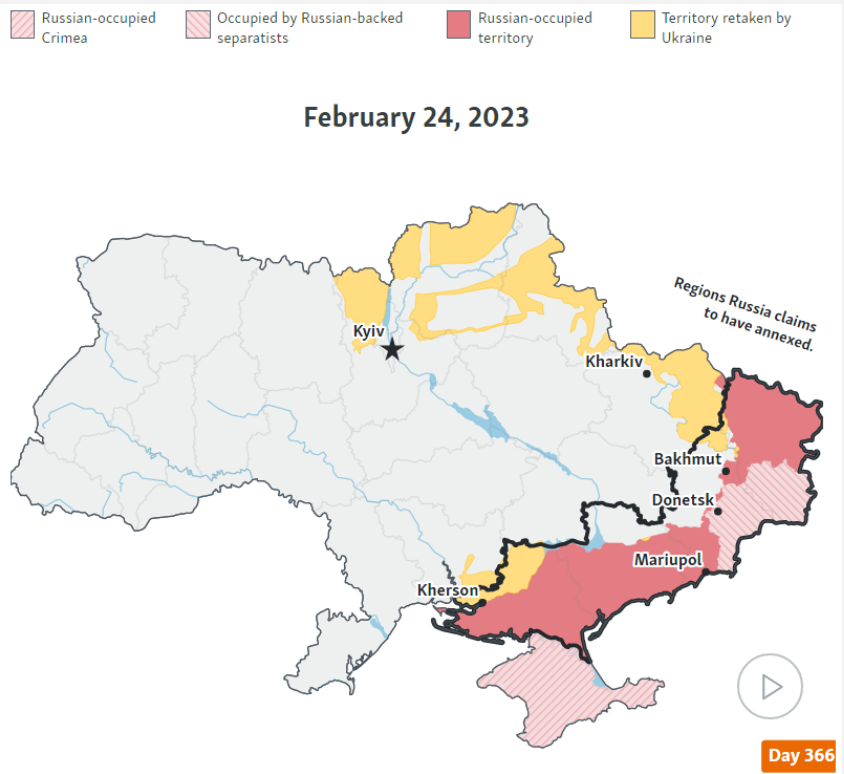
Kyiv Command has made no secret of their plans for a Spring offensive, suggesting Crimea as a prime target.

They have been pulverizing arms and fuel depots, troop assembly points and rail/road junctions and transfer points.

Now there is increasing evidence they are attacking fuel storage points further back from those already targeted and in the majority of strikes, within Russia itself.

So everything appears to be gearing for this Ukrainian assault – raiding enemy supply points, knocking out bridges and rail junctions, and attacking that element crucial to forward field mobility – fuel.

But nothing ever goes exactly to plan. Is there a “Fallback” plan in place?



NATO/Ukraine Fall Back position? With vast amounts of NATO equipment, battalions, aircraft, naval and military strength arraigned along and around Ukraine’s external western and northern borders, continuing, is this buildup should Russia, Belarus successful assault?

Including forbidden full-on nuclear

One where they Russian border on a “revised” EU

Looking at the map, is NATO viewing the line the “**final red line**” they will not allow Russia

Essentially this would entail NATO forces should events turn or appear dire, securing leaving the eastern part to Russia.

Although totally untenable from a current Ukrainian and western perspective, is this to be the alternative to an all-out nuclear conflict, would it be the new frontier?



and with further bolstering and strengthening a preparation of a NATO “Fall Back” position and China unleash a wider and potentially

and/or tactical or weapons?

threaten a new and presence right eastern boundary?

west of the River Dniro as to cross?

physically entering Ukraine Ukrainian areas west of the river,

Comments, Updates, Developments and Reports

Burned-out Russian tanks seized by Ukrainian forces last year have gone on display in the capitals of the Baltics states, where Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians are turning out to view them and snap photos in sympathy with the Ukrainians defending their homeland.

China, Belarus presidents call for establishing peace in Ukraine - Xi Jinping and Alexander Lukashenko call for the 'soonest possible' peace deal for Ukraine.

Chinese President Xi Jinping and his Belarussian counterpart Alexander Lukashenko have called for a ceasefire and negotiations to bring about a political settlement to the Ukraine conflict at talks in Beijing.

The two leaders issued a joint statement on Wednesday in which they expressed "deep concern about the development of the armed conflict in the European region and extreme interest in the soonest possible establishment of peace in Ukraine", according to the Belarussian state news agency Belta.

Comment – Or is their "deep concern" related to a looming sense of doom? Lukashenko desperately doesn't want to enter the war that Putin is obviously pushing him to do, and Xi just as desperately doesn't want to see sanctions for providing Moscow with lethal aid, as Putin is pushing for. A "peace deal" will suit both leaders quite nicely at this time.

A further observation is that both are witnessing not only a Russian demise through completely inept field performances, but also the largest buildup of military force on the European continent since 1944. This should be unnerving for both them - and the Kremlin.

Ukraine war important point of discussion at G20 meet, says India - The Russia-Ukraine conflict will form an important part of discussions at a Group of 20 (G20) foreign ministers meeting, but host India is confident that economic challenges created by the war will get equal attention, India's foreign secretary has said.

"Yes, given the nature and the developing situation in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, it will be an important point of discussion," Vinay Kwatra, India's top diplomat, told reporters on Wednesday, as foreign ministers arrived in New Delhi for the meeting.

"Questions relating to food, energy and fertiliser security, the impact that the conflict has on these economic challenges that we face", among others, would also receive "due focus", Kwatra said.

The meeting will be attended by 40 delegations including Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang.

After a welcome dinner later on Wednesday, discussions will be held on Thursday.

G20 includes the wealthy G7 nations as well as Russia, China, India, Brazil, Australia and Saudi Arabia, among other nations, representing about 85 percent of the world's economy and two-thirds of its population.

India – which has not condemned the war – wants its G20 presidency this year to focus on issues like alleviating poverty and climate finance, officials said.

Last week, a meeting of G20 finance ministers in Bengaluru failed to agree on a common statement after Russia and China sought to water down language on the Ukraine war.

Hosting the G20 puts India in a tricky position, because while it shares Western concerns about China it is also a major buyer of Russian arms and has ramped up oil imports.

Sanctions

Russian war unravels consumer economy in ways pandemic never did - For all of President Vladimir Putin's upbeat talk of expecting "some growth" across the board this year, retail sales remain in a contraction that's already more drawn out than its declines during the global pandemic.

The downturn represents what Bloomberg Economics says is a “permanent drop” in living standards, similar to the impoverishment and a record stretch of shrinking retail sales in the years after the 2014 annexation of Crimea. The consumer sector accounts for about half the economy.

It’s a stark contrast to the resilience of an economy that endured a year of sanctions with a much shallower recession than first expected.

Though panic shopping supported consumption in the weeks following the invasion a year ago, it’s since flat-lined deep below zero and stayed there to start this year, with household spending projected to drop every quarter in 2023, according to forecasts compiled by Bloomberg.

Data on Wednesday showed retail sales in January shrank for a 10th straight month, a stretch longer than their crash at the height of the pandemic in 2020. Still, their annual drop of 6.6% was much smaller than forecast by economists.

Real wages were close to unchanged in December but declined 1% for the year as a whole.

“Retail is one of the sectors of the economy that was hurt the most last year,” said Olga Belenkaya, an economist at Finam. Savings in banks at home and abroad surged by 5.7 trillion rubles (\$76 billion) last year, she said, comparable to the record during the pandemic and almost double the total in 2021.

What Bloomberg Economics Says...

“Living standards for Russian consumers peaked in 2014 and never recovered. Last year’s sanctions reduced turnover in retail trade by 10.5%, setting it back by more than a decade. The outlook for the consumer is more of the same as the government is expected to gradually move back to restricting imports in order to support local industry.”

—Alexander Isakov, Russia economist.

Putin & Russia

Putin can’t win: new western insights show Russia won’t claim victory in Ukraine - A bold assessment from the Pentagon along with analysis that undermines conventional thinking about the Russian army presents a devastating bottom line for the would-be czar.

One of the military’s top officials on Tuesday offered the boldest assessment yet of the Kremlin’s dismal chances to succeed in its invasion of Ukraine ahead of a planned spring offensive that Putin believes will break the stalemate.

“Ukraine is not going to lose. There will be no loss of Ukraine,” Colin Kahl, the Defense Department’s undersecretary for policy and effectively the No. 3 civilian, told Congress on yesterday. “Vladimir Putin hoped that would happen. It hasn’t happened. It’s not going to happen.”

Administration officials have previously asserted that, a year after the invasion, Putin has “already lost in Ukraine,” as President Joe Biden said earlier this month. But those assessments are based around the relative strengthening of Ukraine’s resistance and of the blocs that support it, chiefly NATO. And military officials have emphasized that, regardless of the outcome in Ukraine, Russia’s invasion has left it, as Kahl said Tuesday, “a shattered military power” requiring years of retrofitting to recover from the devastating effects of its invasion.

But the latest assessment from Kahl to a House Armed Services Committee inquiry into accountability for billions in U.S. assistance to Ukraine represented an evolution in those assessments. Not only has Russia created lasting damage for itself, but it no longer has the ability to succeed in any of the goals Putin has set for himself in Ukraine, he explained.

“Ukraine continues to maintain most of its territory. They’re fighting tenaciously. The Russians do not have the capacity, in my view, to take over Ukraine,” Kahl said in response to questioning from Michigan Rep Lisa McClain.

The new assessment comes at a consequential time for Ukraine, perhaps the most so since Russia first invaded last year. Allies, chiefly the U.S., are scrambling to maintain support for the war from their domestic audiences while also considering game-changing new weapons shipments to improve Ukraine’s odds without provoking Russia into a broader conflict.

Biden has faced particular scrutiny in recent days for his decision not to provide F-16s to Ukraine despite urgent pleas from Kyiv. Kahl on Tuesday pushed back on the notion that U.S. reticence centered on fears of angering Moscow, as Biden’s critics have claimed. Rather, the undersecretary noted the vast sums – as much as \$11 billion – that would be required to refit or construct enough fighter jets to make a difference to Ukraine combined with the months it would take to do so and the logistical behemoth required to prepare the Ukrainians to learn how to employ them and then maintain them. Kahl noted those funds are needed now for more pressing weapons systems that the Ukrainians have already fielded.

Yet beyond these challenges for the West, other factors are chipping away at the perception that Russia still has the ability to eke out some sort of victory from its disastrous campaign.

Putin’s ambitions for his invasion appear to be centered around the key assumption that eventually Western support for the former Soviet nation will wane and fade. And, until then, that he has enough young Russian men at his disposal to send to the guns.

It’s a notion former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice reiterated on Sunday in keeping with a broad consensus from Western powers that has governed the speed with which they’ve provided military and financial aid to Ukraine.

“We have to get away from the phrase time is on the Ukrainians' side. I would be careful about that. Vladimir Putin seems to believe the time is not on the Ukrainians' side,” said Rice, now director of Stanford University's Hoover Institution. She was speaking in response to concerns about sluggishness from the Biden administration at providing to Kyiv new forms of weaponry, chiefly the F-16s.

“He believes, if he throws in the Russian way of war, mass at the problem, poor boys from Dagestan who are just kind of cannon fodder, if he engages in terrorist activities against the Ukrainian population, he'll wear the Ukrainians down, he'll wear us down, he'll wear the Europeans down,” Rice told CBS’ “Face the Nation.” “I don't think that's right, but we have to do everything that we can to convince him that it is indeed wrong.”

Several estimates place the Russian troop dead at more than 200,000, wiping out many of the elite or even experienced troops that any army would consider an essential component to maintaining a meaningful offensive campaign. The New York Times on Tuesday documented how that deficit is already playing out on the battlefield as Ukrainian troops come up against less-prepared and less-effective forces.

“By how they move,” one soldier told the Times of the newly conscripted troops that appear to compose most of the front-line aggressors, “I see they are not professional.”

Rice on Sunday spoke moments after CIA Director Bill Burns appeared on the same program in which he described Putin’s “sense of cockiness and hubris” in “his own belief today that he can make time work for him, that he believes he can grind down the Ukrainians, that he can wear down our European allies, that political fatigue will eventually set in.”

But Burns offered a stark warning to accompany that kind of thinking: “In my experience, Putin's view of Americans – of us – has been that we have attention deficit disorder and we'll move on to some other issue eventually. And so Putin, in many ways, I think, believes today that he cannot win for a while, but he can't afford to lose.”

“Putin is certainly not a sentimentalist about the loss of Russian life or the huge losses that he's taken in terms of Russian armaments during the course of the war,” Burns added. “I think what's going to be critical is to puncture that hubris on Putin's part and regain momentum on the battlefield.”

Evidence is mounting suggesting that moment is closer than the Kremlin seems to think. And analysts are now challenging notions that Russians today hold as a point of national pride that their sheer numbers can compensate for shortfalls in military capability, as was the case during the siege of Stalingrad during World War II. (**Comment** – and during the first months of the war when Stalin was caught short, throwing hundreds of thousands of forcefully drafted peasant soldiers, men, women, the aged and the young, into combat – purely in slowing the German offensive to provide the Kremlin time within which to move Russian factories and command posts further east).

“The specter of limitless Russian manpower is a myth,” ISW concludes in an analysis note this week.

“Putin has already been forced to make difficult and suboptimal choices to offset the terrible losses his war has inflicted on the Russian military, and he will face similarly difficult choices in 2023 if he persists in his determination to use military force to impose his will on Ukraine and the West,” according to the institute. “Russia can mobilize more manpower, and Putin will likely do so rather than give up. But the costs to Putin and Russia of the measures he will likely need to take at this point will begin to mount rapidly.”

The institute further breaks down some assumptions Western officials appear to have made in the last year, particularly after Putin ordered a wildly unpopular mobilization that pressed 300,000 young men into military service – an order the Kremlin claimed in recent months to have completed.

The Russian leader has attempted to recreate irregular military formations akin to the ultranationalist militias in the contested region of eastern Ukraine known as the Donbas – the so-called “people’s militia” in both the Donetsk and Luhansk provinces – as well as the prolific and deeply flawed Wagner Group private mercenary army.

However, Putin’s attempts to create a volunteer force that could compete with conventional military formations have so far failed, the institute concludes, and the Russian president eventually abandoned those plans in the fall.

Even the units on which Putin has relied outside of the deeply corrupt Ministry of Defense are now showing weaknesses. Wagner has attempted to bolster its ranks since the invasion began by pressing convicts into service and its financier, Yevgeny Prigozhin, increasingly appears out of favor with the Kremlin.

And Latvian-based independent Russian news organization Meduza reported early Monday that elements of the Donetsk militia have begun complaining to Putin about their fighting conditions, saying they feel as though they’re being used as cannon fodder during assaults, that their wounded don’t receive the same quality of battlefield care and they don’t have the training or support they require.

“Command told us directly that we are expendable,” one of the militiamen reportedly claimed in a video appeal to Putin, “and that the only chance we have of returning home is getting injured.”

Article by Paul D. Shinkman in USNews

Putin admits to “losses in our ranks” during speech - Putin admitted to “losses in our ranks” while thanking members of the Federal Security Service (FSB) for fighting extremism inside the country, as well as working in claimed Russian-occupied territories.

“Unfortunately, there are losses in our ranks,” he said at the start of an FSB meeting. “The leadership of the FSB must do everything to provide additional support to the families of our fallen comrades.”

What is the Russian army doing in Transnistria? - Transnistria houses Russia's largest WWII arms depot in Kobasna, where Russian soldiers serve as a display of might while they guard the site.

As the Russia-Ukraine conflict completed its first year on February 24, tensions have been rapidly escalating in the Transnistria region of Moldova, which was once a classic example of a frozen conflict that benefited the Kremlin. Pro-Russian separatists are located in the region, and the government of Tiraspol, the largest city in the area, has long insisted that Transnistria is Russian and will eventually receive official recognition as such.

The region came under the spotlight after Russia claimed that Ukraine was preparing an "armed provocation" against Transnistria.

The Russian MoD said earlier today that "units of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, including with the involvement of the 'Azov' nationalist formation" will open a new front by attacking this tiny breakaway region in Moldova.

The Russian ministry went on saying the Ukrainian forces would masquerade as the Russian troops wearing Russian army fatigues and then enter Transnistria.

Moldova, however, denied that Ukraine posed any "direct threat" to Transnistria.

Russian presence in the region

In 1991, Moldova declared independence from the Soviet Union. Shortly after, Transnistria, situated on the east bank of the Dniester River, unilaterally declared independence with the backing of Russia. The declaration triggered armed conflicts between in the region, ending in a ceasefire on July 22 1992.

Transnistria has a Russian-speaking population in the majority. It has its own political structure, parliament, army, police, and postal system, despite being a landlocked region within Moldova.

No UN member country has recognized it yet.

Putin's 'battleship': meet Russia's deadly Kirov-class battlecruiser – For the first time since the Cold War, Russia's Northern Fleet has set sail armed to the teeth with tactical nuclear weaponry.

According to a Norwegian intelligence report published last week, the deployment of submarines and surface vessels poses a "significant threat" to NATO members.

Since Moscow's conventional military strength has largely deteriorated throughout its ongoing invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin could be using its supply of tactical nuclear weapons to intimidate the U.S. and other adversaries.

The flagship of Russia's Northern Fleet is a Kirov-class battleship cruiser dubbed The Pyotr Velikiy.



Not only is this vessel the largest and but it is also Russia's sole remaining

heaviest surface combatant warship in operation across the globe, active battlecruiser.

Designated in the Soviet Union as a ships are second in size only to large

"heavy nuclear-powered guided-missile cruiser," the Kirov class aircraft carriers.

These massive vessels were Baltic Shipyard in Saint

built to counter U.S. aircraft carriers in the mid-1970s by the Petersburg.

While four cruisers dissolution of the

were originally constructed, only two survived the USSR and the financial woes of the Russian Navy.

Today, only service.

Pyotr Velikiy remains in active



Admiral Nakhimov, the third vessel to be commissioned by the Russian Navy, has been permanently docked in Sevmas for a decade undergoing perpetual repairs.

While the vessel could return to the seas this year, its imminent reentrance to service seems very unlikely considering the Navy's history of "very slow" boat repairs. While the vessel's purpose has evolved since its original conception, anti-submarine warfare continues to play a role in its makeup.

Although the Kirov-class battlecruisers pack a huge punch, delayed re-fits and pricey maintenance costs prevent the ships from living up to their potential.

The suspect movement of Russia's Northern Fleet is likely tied to the Kremlin's propaganda efforts and not indicative of a potential offensive strike.

Comment – Allow me to introduce Pyotr Velikiy to General Belgrano and Admiral von Bismarck.

The Chinese have a new tactic – small fishing vessels equipped with rail guns that fire projectiles at mach5. They believe it a great investment – a US\$1m deposit against a US\$1b return – losing a fishing boat after taking out an American aircraft carrier.

US: 'Crimea remains part of Ukraine,' retaking Russian-held areas top concern - The United States declared that the Crimean Peninsula remains a part of Ukraine but said the more immediate concern is for Kyiv's forces to retake lands that Moscow has seized in its yearlong war. The comments came on the ninth anniversary of Russia illegally annexing the territory.

"The United States does not and never will recognize Russia's purported annexation of the peninsula. Crimea is Ukraine," the State Department said in a statement.

At the same time, Jake Sullivan, Biden's national security adviser, told NBC it is up to Ukraine to decide what constitutes victory or an acceptable diplomatic outcome, even though no peace negotiations are occurring.

"That's up to Ukraine to define," Sullivan said. "It has been critical to us ... that there be nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine. And so, it's not for the United States to define victory for Ukraine. It's for the United States to support Ukraine on the battlefield, so that they can achieve the victory that they define."

Ukrainian President Zelenskyy said last year, "Crimea is Ukrainian. And we will never give it up. This Russian war against Ukraine and the entire free Europe began with Crimea and must end with Crimea, with its liberation." But Sullivan noted that Zelenskyy in the past week "has said we are going to have to ultimately get to a diplomatic phase of this conflict."

"The critical thing right now is that they need to take back the territory in the South and the East that they are currently focused on, and we need to give them the tools to be able to do that," Sullivan concluded.