

Conflict Update # 136

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Conflict Assessment

Russia 'Running out of steam,' 'Growing desperate' in Ukraine war: experts - Officials in the United Kingdom said yesterday that Russia is "running out of steam" and "growing desperate," arguing that the "illegal invasion" of the country has "backfired on the Kremlin."

In a text-based video posted on Twitter, the U.K's Ministry of Defence stated that tens of thousands of Russian troops have been killed or wounded since the invasion began in late February, and that Russia is "resorting to hiring convicts and recruiting from Russia's poorest areas" in order to find more soldiers.

The ministry adds that "several thousand of Russia's front line armoured vehicles have been destroyed," and that the nation has been "forced into a greater reliance on old Soviet-era equipment, such as personnel carriers offering limited protection, and tanks last produced in 1973."

"Its campaign is grinding, incredibly inefficient and leaves huge destruction in its wake," the ministry continued, adding that the Kremlin is increasingly using "older, less-precise missiles for strikes, killing and injuring innocent people."

"These outdated tactics are a sign of Russia's desperation amid its equipment shortages and tactical deficiencies," the ministry said. "Putin's war is built on lies. Russia will not win this conflict."

Ukraine's Kherson push 'gathering momentum'

Britain's military intelligence says Ukraine's counter-offensive in the occupied southern Kherson region near the Crimea peninsula is "gathering momentum."

Russian forces "should leave Kherson while it is still possible. There may not be a third warning,"

Ukrainian presidential advisor Mykhaylo Podolyak says on Twitter.

Earlier this week, Ukrainian forces used new long-range weapons to damage a key bridge into the city of Kherson, one of the first to fall to Russian forces in the early days of the war.

Britain's defence ministry says that Kherson city is now "virtually cut off from the other occupied territories."

Russian losses - According to a press release from Ukrainian General Staff, at least 40,070 Russian soldiers have so far been killed during the war in Ukraine. In addition, it is claimed that about 1,000 Russian soldiers were captured.

Ukraine says it killed 170 Russian troops in the past 24 hours.

Ukraine's military also said its forces had destroyed two Russian arms dumps in the Kherson area.

This brings to around 56 Russian arms depots that Ukraine has successfully targeted with their newly-acquired HIMARS and other 155mm medium-range artillery.

They will soon be availed of enhanced propellants and more advanced weapons systems that enjoy a range of up to 200 miles. This will enable Ukrainian forces to attack Russian deployments even further behind enemy front lines.

It will also enable them to strike against Russia's Black Sea fleet, which is currently moored around 80 miles back from Snake Island.

HIMARS knocks out strategic rail bridge

near Kherson - Strikes earlier this week took out the Antonovskiy Bridge, which carries the E97 Highway over the river just a few miles downstream of the railway crossing. The two bridges near Kherson, as well as the dam at Nova Kakhovka upriver, are vital supply links to Russian forces across the river.

Unfortunately for the Russians, they are known, fixed targets in HIMARS range. As such, the life expectancy on those targets, like Russian ammo dumps, isn't great. High-resolution satellite imagery from Planet Labs shows damage to the bridge on the river's south bank from July 28.



With the highway bridge out, Russians are ferrying vehicles and equipment across the road bridge with a predictable bottleneck result for anyone trying to cross. At the railway bridge, radar satellite imagery shows what appears to be a pontoon bridge in use, while previous imagery may have caught one stowed in a nearby river side channel.

Russia pulls some Wagner forces from Africa for Ukraine - "Russia is very stretched ... as they're doing what they're doing in Ukraine so I don't think they have a lot of bandwidth to launch new adventures in Africa," said AFRICOM commander Stephen Townsend.

Some troops from the Russian mercenary force known as the Wagner Group have been called to fight in Ukraine where the private fighters are taking on new frontline roles, according to American and British military officials.

"We've seen Wagner draw down a little bit on the African continent in the call to send fighters to Ukraine," Gen. Stephen Townsend, commander of US African Command, told the Defense Writers Group Thursday.

Townsend said most of the Wagner Group's drawdown as come from Libya, where the US says Kremlin-backed Wagner fighters have been a destabilizing force for years. Notably, the troops haven't come from new Wagner operations in Mali, Townsend added, where the group began operating earlier this year.

Townsend's comments came hours before the British military said the Wagner fighters in Ukraine appeared to have taken on new frontline roles in the Russian offensive in the east, a change that most likely came because the official Russian military "has a major shortage of combat infantry."

Russian soldiers "blow up" barrel of its super gun - Russian soldiers "blew up" the barrel of one of their upgraded 2S7M Malka 203mm self-propelled gun during the large-scale offensive in Donbas, Ukraine.

Russia is already facing ammunition shortages due to the high intensity of the fighting in eastern Ukraine and the wear and tear of their guns, most of which were manufactured back in the last century.

Retired Lt. Gen. Mark Hertling said that Russian artillery systems blowing up due to the fact that Russians are wearing out their artillery pieces—and not repairing them.

The 2S7M Malka is an upgraded version of a Soviet self-propelled 203mm heavy artillery, known popularly as the "Soviet atomic cannon". It is the largest tracked self-propelled gun in the Russian inventory.

Grain

Ukraine issued ruling to seize Syrian vessel docked in Lebanon - The Ukrainian embassy in Beirut said on Friday that a judge in Ukraine has issued a ruling to seize a Syrian vessel docked in Lebanon and the cargo on board after an investigation.

In a statement to Reuters, the embassy added that in the case of confiscation of the cargo of the ship, Ukraine is ready to negotiate with Lebanon regarding the terms of its transfer to Lebanon.

Ukraine's Farmers Begin a Harvest Like No Other - "Farmers brave mines and grapple with damaged equipment, but their resilience masks problems that will likely last long after the war ends."

Ukraine's farmers are setting about harvesting their 2022 crop as quickly as possible in order to export via the remaining Black Sea ports.

Future harvests may well need to be exported through a number of channels, including land and rail through EU countries.

Sanctions

Gazprom stops Latvia's gas in latest Russian cut to EU - Russian energy giant Gazprom says it has suspended gas supplies to Latvia - the latest EU country to experience such action amid tensions over Ukraine.

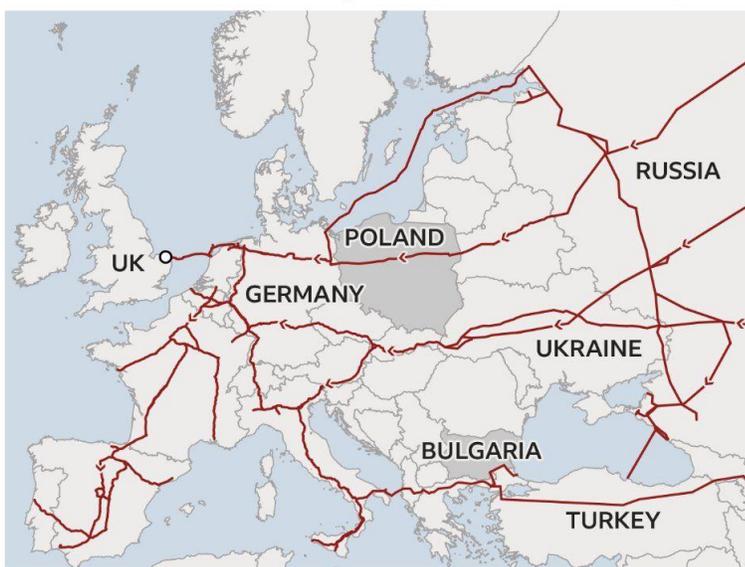
Gazprom accused Latvia of violating conditions of purchase but gave no details of that alleged violation.

Latvia relies on neighboring Russia for natural gas imports, but its government says it does not expect Gazprom's move to have a major impact.

Since Russia's February invasion of Ukraine and the tightening of Western sanctions, Gazprom has suspended gas deliveries to Bulgaria, Finland, Poland, Denmark and the Netherlands over non-payment in rubles. Russia has also halted gas sales to Shell Energy Europe in Germany.

The EU is now striving to boost gas imports from elsewhere, including liquefied natural gas (LNG) from Norway, Qatar and the US.

The most important gas pipelines in Europe



Source: European Network of Transmission System Operators for Gas



Ruble is stumbling as yuan trading volumes soar to record - The war in Ukraine has accelerated Russia's pivot east and sent local demand for China's yuan surging, helping tame a four-month ruble rally that's piled pressure on companies and the budget.

Daily trading volumes in the yuan-ruble pair are on track to almost double this week compared with last, hitting an all-time daily high of 7.82 billion yuan (\$1.16 billion) on Wednesday, according to Moscow Exchange data. Volumes for the yuan-ruble currency pair are now higher than for the euro-ruble pair, the figures show. The ruble is the worst performer against the dollar among emerging markets this month.

Sweeping sanctions since the invasion of Ukraine have cut Russia off from global markets, making dollar and euro investments toxic for local investors. The government has suggested buying the currencies of so-called friendly nations to cool the ruble's surge this year, but there's no indication that the latest jump in yuan trading was due to coordinated interventions.

"Not only Russia's government, but also private and institutional investors, participants in foreign economic activity are interested in avoiding external infrastructure risks," said George Vaschenko, the head of Russian stock-market operations at Freedom Finance LLC. "They are actively shifting to currencies other than the dollar and the euro."

Impacts

With Ukraine on the mind, France and Germany buying, upgrading artillery - The conflict in Ukraine is prodding militaries in Europe to supplement and modernize their ground forces, evidenced most recently by France's order for artillery to backfill systems given to Ukraine and Germany's plan to modernize a rocket artillery system.

Nexter, the French land armaments company, is to manufacture 18 Caesar Mk1 truck-mounted howitzers and deliver them all to the French Army by summer 2024, a company spokesperson told Breaking Defense today. The howitzers will replace the 18 France had originally "loaned" to Ukraine — a loan which has turned into a gift. In order to get these new Caesars so quickly, the Ministry of the Armed Forces has ordered the Mk1 version mounted on 6x6 trucks.



The spokesperson said that the production line for the Caesar Mk1 had been reactivated in recent weeks to allow for delivery of the 155mm gun systems in less than 24 months. The company had ceased production of the Caesar Mk1, as it is being replaced by the MkII, which will start equipping the French army's artillery regiments beginning in 2026 and the Belgian army's in 2027. Lithuania has also signed a letter of intent to procure 18 Caesar MkIIs.

Although the Mk1 could be upgraded to MkII, the spokesperson said that "the current intention is that these new Mk1s will not be retrofitted." He added the howitzers would be delivered in batches over periods of three months.

Poland's massive tank, artillery and jet deal with S. Korea comes in shadow of Ukraine war - In a move that both bolsters its military modernization efforts and creates a stronger geopolitical tie to the Pacific, Poland this week announced a series of major defense acquisition programs from South Korea.

The agreements — covering the purchase of 1,000 K2 tanks (pictured right), 672 K9 self-propelled howitzers (pictured below), and 48 FA-50 light combat aircraft — will completely transform Poland's military as it seeks to bulk up in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, while also beefing up Poland's domestic industry.





The exact cost of the agreements were not made public, but South Korean media has pegged the spend at around \$14.5 billion in total. If accurate, that would be roughly the same amount of money as Poland's entire defense spending plan for the year released in Feb. 2022. Even spread across multiple years, as this buy would be, the Korean purchases clearly represent a major investment for Warsaw — especially after a series of procurement announcements made in May.

The purchase is driven not just by fears of Russia, but also as an acknowledgement that Poland plans to

continue to transfer older weapon systems to Ukraine and will need to backfill the resulting gaps.

Belarusians kicked out of Ukraine en masse - As Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko sided with Russia in its attempt to curtail Ukrainian independence, those fleeing Lukashenko's oppressive regime found themselves unwanted in Ukraine as well.

Since February, Belarusians in Ukraine have been facing a set of financial and bureaucratic restrictions forcing them out of the country.

The Belarusian diaspora in Ukraine has grown significantly over the past two years, as the inflow of political migrants escaping the brutal crackdown and ongoing repressions that unfolded in Belarus after the fraudulent 2020 presidential election increases.

Back then, the Ukrainian government had issued a decree allowing Belarusians a 180-day visa-free stay, double that granted to other foreigners.

In 2021 alone, Ukraine issued 4,300 residence permits to Belarusians, many of whom fled Belarus to avoid persecution. In November 2021, the decree was extended to 2022.

Now, despite officially keeping all legislation unchanged, many Belarusians who have chosen Ukraine as their new home are silently kicked out of the country.

After Ukraine's State Migration Service resumed operations in May following a nearly three-month shutdown due to the war, Belarusians who were set to prolong their legal status in Ukraine were both officially and unofficially denied the right to stay in the country.

This applied even to Belarusian activists recognized for their role in assisting Ukraine during the war.

'The Russians have started coming': Finland considers tourist visa ban - The Finnish government is coming under increasing public and political pressure to close the EU's eastern border with Russia and put a stop to an apparent sanctions loophole.

Russia relaxed its COVID-related border restrictions mid-July, meaning for the first time since before the pandemic, Russians with Schengen visas can now legally cross the border by bus or car, even though they're banned from travelling to the EU in planes and trains.

"The Russians have started coming," said Juho Pesonen, Professor of Tourism Business at the University of Eastern Finland. "Shopping tourism has always been one of the main reasons why Russian tourists come to Finland, even if it's just for a day," he told Euronews.

The absolute numbers now are not huge: So far in July there's been around 176,000 border crossings. That's much lower than before the pandemic when there were close to 950,000 crossings in July 2019, with tens of thousands of Russians coming each day.

Putin

Putin's next Ukraine problem is clear: He still hasn't captured Donbas - Donbas Battle Continues on, but with Less Intensity than Before – While Russian troops continue to make attempts at offensives deeper into Ukraine, the already-slow pace of Moscow's advance has decelerated even further throughout July. Nonetheless, the battle rages on, and both sides continue to take casualties.

Where is the Fighting Now in Donbas?

Following the Russian capture of the cities of Sievierodonetsk and Lysychansk on June 25 and July 3 respectively, Russia's invasion force have flattened out a salient of Ukrainian forces which extended to the two Donbas cities and have crept deeper into the region. Today, some of the most high-intensity fighting in Donbas is concentrated near the cities of Siversk and Bakhmut, which Russia would likely need to take before moving eastward to the cities of Kramatorsk and Sloviansk, which Russian and Russian-backed separatist forces briefly controlled during Russia's initial 2014 incursion into Ukraine.

The two cities are some of the most significant cities in Donbas still under Kyiv's control in Donetsk Oblast, the control of which is a key element of Russia's overall goals. Despite claims by separatist leaders that Siversk had been taken, the city appears to remain in Ukrainian hands, although Russian forces continue to make pushes in its environs. According to the Institute for the Study of War's July 28 campaign assessment, Russian forces may lean into their recent gains near Bakhmut in the near future, potentially at the expense of other initiatives.

Donbas: Why Has Russia's Assault Slowed?

While Russia is still making localized advances, their pace appears to have slowed from periods of June where overwhelming Russian superiority in artillery fires helped to facilitate the advances which took Sievierodonetsk and Lysychansk. Deliveries of advanced Western artillery systems such as the American HIMARS, French Caesars, or German Panzerhaubitze 2000s appear have helped level the playing field in artillery numbers somewhat, with some Ukrainian commanders claiming that they now enjoy functional parity with Russia's artillery in Donbas.

Drops in the frequency of Russian artillery strikes appear to be a visible sign of this. As of July 25, Ukraine has claimed to have struck 56 Russian ammunition depots in Moscow's rear, which would undoubtedly affect the pace at which Russia can supply its artillery war in Donbas, although both sides continue to aggressively employ available artillery.

In addition to slowdowns brought on by the erosion of Russia's artillery advantage, any Russian advances in Donbas will naturally be slow, as Ukrainian troops stationed there have had ample time to dig in, especially in the case of the front line around Donetsk, where Ukrainian troops have been facing down separatist and Russian regular troops for years.

The latest evidence that the artillery war is still raging in Donbas was an artillery strike on a prison in Russian-controlled territory near Donetsk on July 29. While Russia claimed that the strike was conducted by Ukrainian HIMARS, Ukrainian leaders insisted that the attack was instead conducted by Russia as a means to discredit Kyiv. Neither account of the attack which killed 40 prisoners of war and injured 75 has been independently verified as of July 29.

While Russia's offensive has slowed in its tempo, it is too early to judge if this will portend a longer slowdown, or if the pace will pick back up in the near future. Nonetheless, it does not appear that any major operational breakthroughs are imminent on the Russian side.

Latest desperate move by Putin shows recklessness - When someone is angry or looking for revenge – they do reckless things, make mistakes and come unstuck.

Across Russia, volunteer battalions are being formed to deploy to the war in Ukraine, joining the so-called "special military operation" declared by Putin in February.

From Murmansk in the Arctic Circle to Perm in the Urals and Primorsky Krai in the Russian Far East, the call has gone out, appealing to both the patriotism and the wallets of Russians.

Relevant military experience is not always required.

In all, analysts assess that more than 30,000 volunteers might be mobilized to supplement Russian ranks depleted by five months of combat -- between one-quarter and one-third of the force deployed to win the eastern Donbas region, where the majority of volunteers would likely be sent.

Last week, Richard Moore, chief of MI6, UK's secret intelligence service, told CNN's Jim Sciutto the "Russians will increasingly find it difficult to supply manpower, material over the next few weeks."

Putin has long resisted the idea of a general mobilization in Russia, and this spring's call-up was similar to that in 2021. These battalions are one way to augment Russia's military manpower without such a drastic step. They also appear to be focused on poorer and more isolated regions, using the lure of quick cash.

Kateryna Stepanenko, Russia researcher at the Institute for the Study of War in Washington, says: "Some battalions will partake exclusively in combat support and combat support operations (such as logistics or signal battalions), while others will reinforce pre-existing military units or form combat battalions."

But she adds: "The short-term training is unlikely to turn volunteers with no prior experience into effective soldiers in any unit."

Stepanenko says the process is being driven from Moscow. "The Kremlin reportedly ordered all 85 Russian federal subjects (regions of the Russian Federation plus occupied Crimea and Sevastopol) to recruit volunteer battalions to avoid declaring partial or full mobilization in Russia."

But the regions are expected to help fund the recruitment, which she says "places a heavy strain on regional budgets." Krasnoyarsk in Siberia, for example, had to set aside about \$2 million for the project, Stepanenko said.

The qualifications required for joining up vary from place to place. One online flier in Kazan in Tatarstan said: "We invite men under the age of 49 years who have previously served in the military and offer a contract for 4 months in your military specialization."

'A crowd with rifles'

Just how these battalions -- most are smaller than a regular battalion -- will be integrated into the Russian operation isn't clear yet. The Tatar and Bashkir units will be made into motorized rifle battalions.

The volunteer battalion raised in Primorsky Krai will consist only of local residents and will go in support of the 155th Guards Marine Brigade, according to regional authorities.



There are signs that Russian manpower shortages in Ukraine are beginning to bite. Ukraine's Center for Countering Disinformation says it found job vacancies for more than 20,000 Russian contract servicemen at regional employment centers. There have been persistent reports that some battalion tactical groups have had to be reconstituted.

But as one analyst puts it, a battalion is more than "a crowd with rifles."

Stepanenko of the Institute for the Study of War said, "these poorly-trained recruits will likely be used as cannon fodder given previous Russian treatment of conscripts and proxy units."

It's hard to imagine how these disparate groups with no knowledge of the battlespace and rusty or non-existent military skills will influence the conflict. The task of infantry among Russian forces has been largely to take over places already obliterated by indirect fire.

Putin has another problem: The Russia navy is in trouble - Strategically, Russia's naval situation has changed considerably over the past several months. The Baltic is for all intents and purposes closed to Russia upon the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO.

In no conceivable conflict could Russian warships (even submarines) use the Baltic without running the risk of imminent destruction. The accession of Finland complicates Russian access in the north, giving NATO better eyes on the major Russian naval bases in the Arctic, including the ballistic missile fleet. Russia has the most flexibility in the Pacific, but Japanese re-armament and the increasingly fraught relationship between Tokyo and Moscow make significant action difficult to contemplate.

Indeed, even the Black Sea is now perilous for Russia. If Ukraine survives this war as a political entity it will undoubtedly possess anti-ship weapons that will make operations dangerous. Turkey, notwithstanding its often difficult relationship with the rest of NATO, now holds the key to naval power in the Black Sea.

The Russian surface fleet is in trouble, starting with the industrial base. Russia has reportedly canceled procurement of additional Project 22610 patrol vessels over concerns about performance. The average construction period of the Admiral Gorshkov frigates is currently running at more than a decade, with only three of the ships having been delivered since the first keel was laid down in 2006. Theoretically Russia could purchase warships from abroad (China is the most likely and, really, the only prospective exporter), but this would require currency and also an admission of domestic industrial shortcomings.

The existing fleet has big problems. One looming question involves Russia's aircraft carrier, the Admiral Kuznetsov. The Kuznetsov has served as the object of fun over the past fifteen years as much or more than serving as an active combat vessel, having suffered multiple mechanical mishaps including several fires and the collapse of a crane. She has not left port since 2017, meaning that Russia's cadre of naval aviators has almost certainly ceased to exist as an effective force. At 32 years she is hardly the oldest carrier in the world, but it's hard to envision a long post-refit lifespan.

The two other large surface units in the fleet are the two surviving battlecruisers of the Kirov class, Pyotr Velikiy and Admiral Nakhimov. The latter has been in refit for the last two decades, while the former has as of yet played no significant role in the war. The two ships have considerable "show the flag" value and Pyotr Velikiy has often been used in such a role. However, much like the late, unlamented Moskva and her sisters, they have minimal ground attack capability and would both make excellent targets. Both the Kirovs and the Slavys are exceedingly old in any case and cannot be regarded as plausible foundations for the future of Russian naval power.

Russia's amphibious flotilla has proven singularly useless during the war, except to the degree that it temporarily pinned Ukrainian forces in Odessa. The inability of the flotilla to conduct an assault on Odessa or to keep Snake Island supplied has demonstrated a significant shortfall in Russian capabilities.

The presence of the large, flat decked amphibious warship such as the French Mistral might have had an impact in the early days of the conflict, although Ukraine's acquisition of substantial numbers of anti-ship missiles would put such a vessel in considerable danger now. Russia has laid down two amphibious assault ships of similar size to the Mistral, but it is not obvious that the government will be able to pay for the vessels or that Russian industry can actually construct them.

On the upside, the submarine fleet remains the core of Russian naval power. Russia's military shipbuilding industry withered after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but submarine construction recovered rapidly. Russian conventional and nuclear submarines remain competitive with foreign boats. In the war against Ukraine, submarines have helped enforce the blockade while also launching strategic missile attacks on targets around the country. But while submarines can offer a lot in terms of capability, they cannot replace all of the functions of an operational surface fleet. (Robert Farley).

US envoy: Putin intends to erase Ukraine from world map - The U.S. ambassador to the United Nations said Friday there should no longer be any doubt that Russia intends to dismantle Ukraine "and dissolve it from the world map entirely."

Linda Thomas-Greenfield told the U.N. Security Council that the United States is seeing growing signs that Russia is laying the groundwork to attempt to annex all of the eastern Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Luhansk and the southern Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions, including by installing "illegitimate proxy officials in Russian-held areas, with the goal of holding sham referenda or decree to join Russia."

Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov "has even stated that this is Russia's war aim," she said.

Lavrov told an Arab summit in Cairo on Sunday that Moscow's overarching goal in Ukraine is to free its people from its "unacceptable regime."

Nature of Putin's game and main asset laid to waste -

There's always an excuse for some of the bluffing and bravado recently from Putin's Russia in terms of having the nerve to say they were winning the barbaric invasion of Ukraine when in fact this is far from the truth.

Traditionally the tank is Russia's greatest asset. It has been neutralized by Ukraine, however. The stench of the blitzkrieg surprise nature of self-defense from Ukrainians being much more than expected by Putin.

The resolute heroism of Ukrainians is something that fight fans around the world have been taken back by this year.



Russian military doctrine has always been to build and maintain large numbers of tanks, according to James Lewis, an analyst at the Strategic and International Studies Institute in Washington.

The country's tank fleet — which is estimated to be 2,800 strong with another 10,000 in storage — consists mostly of modernized Soviet tanks manned by crews of three.

A total of 6% of Russia's deaths in Ukraine have been among men from tank regiments, according to a casualty tally based on publicly available information that is kept by independent media outlet Mediazona.

An astounding number of Russian tanks have been utterly destroyed since Putin's invasion began in February. It is estimated that they have lost approximately 60% to 70% of all armored vehicles deployed to Ukraine since the start of the conflict.

Russian tactics have been to (i) bombard an area, softening it for advancing troops, (ii) send in the tanks and grind the opposition to allow (iii) troops to enter the area and then (iv) bring in the political groups to introduce Russian indoctrination and administration.

Ukraine has effectively neutralized Russia's traditional and main invasion thrust – the tank and armored column.

Putin and the Kremlin banked on Russian tanks entering and occupying Ukrainian cities and strategic strongholds. This has proven catastrophically incorrect. Instead, Ukrainian tactics have decimated their armored corp battalions, killing thousands of tank crew and exposing foot soldiers to incoming fire and danger.

The devastation of Russian armored ranks has been so total that it is creating a critical re-think on present war strategies and tactics.

The question is “What is the next domino to crumble?” – is it the aircraft carrier?, the main battle naval vessels? Any manned vehicle?

Armed forces and think tanks around the world are watching and planning their next moves.

Putin regime at 'Beginning of the end': Russia expert - Putin's regime is at "the beginning of the end" amid his faltering invasion of Ukraine, predicts Russia expert Iver Neumann.

Putin launched the invasion of Ukraine in late February, citing his desire to liberate the separatist Donbas region, but has so far struggled to achieve his major objectives after being met with a stronger-than-expected response from the Ukrainian military. Fighting remains concentrated in eastern Ukraine.

The invasion was met with international backlash amid reports of alleged war crimes and a lack of justification. Most Western nations slapped Russia with sanctions, including on oil, a key Russian export, in the weeks that followed the invasion's launch. The sanctions have been seen as a blow to the Russian economy and Putin's leadership, though many Russians continue to back their president.

But Neumann, a Norwegian political scientist who studies Russian politics, predicted the fallout could contribute to "the beginning of the end" of Putin's leadership in an interview Radio Free Europe published on Saturday.

He pointed to myriad contributing factors that could negatively impact Russia's economy, including sanctions, companies fleeing in the aftermath of the invasion and the reduction in other countries' willingness to accept Russian exports.

"So, since Putin's tenure sort of began 22 years ago, very little, if anything, has really happened to the economy. And I find it stunning that a trained Marxist like Putin simply doesn't grasp that material factors are of the essence," he said, according to Radio Free Europe.

Still, it's difficult to predict exactly when the regime may collapse or what could follow, warned Neumann.

Belarus

Does Belarus' military have the capacity to attack Ukraine? - Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine began simultaneously from four main directions, one of them involving Belarusian territory.

Soon after, Belarusian troops were expected to join the war directly. However, four months into Russia's war, Belarus' autocrat Alexander Lukashenko continues to hold out on sending his soldiers to war.

It appears the decision is not easy for the Belarusian dictator. Allegiance to Russian President Vladimir Putin and reliance on Russian cash are the main factors keeping Lukashenko afloat.

Lukashenko continues to bolster propaganda to find grounds for Belarus to have a motive to join the war. Additionally, the country continues to conduct massive military drills, keeping Ukrainian troops on high alert close to its northern border and far from the ongoing fight in the country's east.

Yet the idea of sending Belarusian troops to fight in Ukraine is highly unpopular domestically and could cost Lukashenko the support of his army or risk a spike in civil unrest.

While military analysts and observers agree that Belarus is threatening Ukraine and is trying to keep its neighbors on high alert, the capacity of Belarusian action is quite limited.

Mediocre army with outdated tech

Belarus inherited its army from the troops stationed in the country under Soviet rule, where it was a significant rear to the Soviet armies stationed in Poland and East Germany.

Their military has 50,000 soldiers and officers, with an additional 15,000 listed as military personnel. The military reserve capable of being called up in case of mobilization is 290,000 people, according to the 2021 Military Balance report.

Old Soviet machinery is abundant, despite gradually losing its combat value. But staffing would require either recruiting new personnel or dispatching units from the existing commands. Either way, the command next to the Ukrainian border would be freshly organized, not coordinated, and would contain old machinery at hand.

According to reports from 2020, Belarus might have 1,200 tanks with 800 of them in reserve. The number is likely to be inflated. Most of the tanks are Soviet T-72Bs.

Yet, Belarus also officially has six new Polonez 300 millimeter rocket artillery systems that were produced domestically. The Belarus-made artillery systems are capable of launching high-precision missiles with a maximum firing range of 200 kilometers.

Their aviation currently operates a couple dozen Soviet MiG-29 fighter jets and Su-25 attack aircraft. The only new aircraft are four Su-30SM fighters and 12 Yak-130 combat training aircraft, and Belarusian air defense consists primarily of Russian long-range S-300 PS anti-aircraft systems designed in the 80s that have proven unsuccessful against U.S.-made HIMARS multiple rocket launchers.

On June 26, Putin pledged to deliver Iskander nuclear-capable short-range ballistic missile systems to Belarus in the coming months, as well as Sukhoi Su-25 aircraft able to carry nuclear weapons.

However, Belarus doesn't have nuclear arms and the facilities to properly store them. Lukashenko's nuclear blackmail isn't likely to result in transferring nuclear weapons to Belarus.

Despite efforts of propaganda, the idea of Belarusian troops joining the war remains unpopular in Belarus.

Opinion polls by Chatham House show that only 3-6% of Belarusians support the deployment of Belarusian troops to Ukraine. Over 50% of the population is afraid that Belarus is going to be dragged into the war, according to a poll by Belarusian Change Tracker.

Political analyst Artyom Shraibman suggests that in the unlikely event of Belarus' participation, the high rate of desertions and refusals to fight are expected, along with the protests that might erupt in the country.

Containment

US Air Force deploys F-22 Raptors to Poland amid Russia's war on Ukraine - The U.S. Air Force is deploying a half-dozen F-22 Raptor stealth fighter jets to Poland in response to Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine.

Six F-22s assigned to the 90th Fighter Squadron, 3rd Wing, Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska already arrived at Royal Air Force Lakenheath, England, on July 26, en route to Poland as part of the latest effort to protect NATO allies against Russian land grabs following the invasion of Ukraine.

From Britain, Raptor fifth-generation fighters will be heading to the 32nd Tactical Air Base in Łask, Poland.

The Raptor is a critical component of the Global Strike Task Force and is designed to project air dominance rapidly at great distances to defeat emerging threats.

“The F-22s will support the NATO Air Shielding mission in the European theater,” the Air Force said in a release.

Adding the Air Force’s F-22s, the service’s most advanced fighter aircraft which can reach supersonic speeds and carry a variety of guided missiles and bombs, sends a serious sign to Russia that NATO is keeping a close eye on its borders.

“It cannot be matched by any known or projected fighter aircraft, making it a highly strategic platform to support NATO Air Shielding,” the press release from U.S. Air Forces in Europe and Air Forces Africa said.

Ukraine receives first batch of German Gepard air defense systems - Ukraine’s defense minister Oleksiy Reznikov has confirmed the country took delivery of three German short-range air defense systems.

“Today, the first three Gepards officially arrived. These are anti-aircraft systems, to which tens of thousands of rounds of ammunition have been transferred to us. We are waiting for the first 15 Gepards. Three have arrived in Ukraine today. They are already at the disposal of the Armed Forces of Ukraine,” said Oleksiy Reznikov on Monday.



In mid-July, the German government announced that it planned to send at least 30 Gepard air-defense “tanks” to help that country repel Russian attacks.

According to KMW, the armored, all-weather Gepard self-propelled anti-aircraft gun has set standards since its introduction and has been continuously modernized in the fields of combat range, hit probability, reaction time, protection, reliability and ergonomics.

The Gepard is designed to defend against modern combat aircraft, attack helicopters, remote-controlled missiles and rockets. It can also dependably combat drones. The ballistic projectiles cannot be destroyed by electronic defense measures and the clouds of shrapnel they generate will reliably destroy the target.

Ukraine upgrades captured Russian armored vehicles - Ukrainian engineers not only restore and repair captured Russian combat vehicles but modernize them.

According to a report from Vilniy Voenkor, Ukrainian engineers have upgraded the BTR-82A armored personnel carrier, which had been captured in March by Ukrainian troops on the northern outskirts of Kyiv.

“This is the main armored personnel carrier of the Russian army, in service since 2013. Like all Russian BTR-82, it has significant shortcomings. Our engineers had to work on it,” the report states.

According to Oryx’s open-source-intelligence analysts who scrutinize photos and videos on social media, more than 100 BTR-82A(M) were captured and 22 abandoned since Russia’s invasion began on February 24.

In addition, Russian K-53949 Typhoon-K armored vehicles also are undergoing repairs and modernization. Thanks to the help of volunteers, one of the burned-out newest armored vehicles, which the Russian army was so proud of, is being restored.

The K-53949 is a Russian mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicle (MRAP). It is also known as Taifunionok.

Typhoon-K is based on the common chassis utilized by the Kamaz family of all-wheel drive medium and heavy-duty vehicles. The vehicle also shares most of the components and assemblies with the other platforms in the family.

Macedonia donates tanks to Ukraine - Macedonia is donating Soviet-era tanks to Ukraine, the Macedonian Defense Ministry has confirmed, adding that they plan to modernize the country's military to meet NATO standards.

The Ministry said that the Government has decided that a certain quantity of these tank capacities will be donated to Ukraine in line with its needs.

The Ministry did not specify the number of tanks that they will donate, but it said that they belong to the so-called third generation, and given the development of technology, are non-competitive and incompatible.

The Ministry informed that in the coming period resources will also be spent on destroying the tanks, which, according to them, is an inexpedient activity for our Army.

UK troops in Finland exercise amid Russia threats - About 150 British troops have joined Finnish and US forces for a "high-readiness exercise" in Finland. The four-day exercise involved 750 troops from the three nations, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) said.

It comes just weeks after Nato signed an accession protocol with Finland to join the military alliance, beginning the process for membership. Finland and Sweden, which have held neutral status for years, applied to join Nato after Russia invaded Ukraine.

The Kremlin has strongly opposed Finland and Sweden joining Nato and has issued threats over their plans to do so. Finland shares a 830-mile (1,340km) border with Russia.

British troops based in Estonia were flown to Finland in Royal Air Force Chinook helicopters as part of the exercise, according to the MoD.

The British personnel had been in Estonia as part of the British Arm's Project Unified Stance, which sees troops take on a series of exercises across Europe in coordination with Nato and allies.

Wing Commander Stephen Boyle, the UK defence attaché in Helsinki, said: "Our soldiers, sailors and aviators have received a warm welcome in Finland over the last few months.

"Exercise Vigilant Fox is the latest activity in an ongoing series of events across the domains.

"As Finland moves towards full Nato Membership, we will continue to seek opportunities like this to show solidarity with Finland, learn from each other and improve our ability to operate together."

China

Xi is expected to face major economic challenges when he enters an unprecedented third term - President Xi Jinping will need to confront China's several major economic challenges after he secures a widely expected unprecedented third term in office, according to veteran investor David Roche.

Roche said Xi will very likely “sail through” his confirmation as China’s top party chief in the upcoming National Congress meeting, which sets the stage for him to secure another five-year term as the country’s leader.

There won’t be any “real resistance to him at senior levels of the communist party,” he added at the Congress party meeting due to be held later this year.

China economy grew a weak 0.4% in the second quarter compared to a year ago, which brought growth for the first half of the year to 2.5% — making it difficult to reach the official full-year target of around 5.5%, according to analysts.

On Tuesday, the International Monetary Fund slashed its growth forecast for China. The fund expects the world’s second-largest economy to grow 3.3% in 2022 — its lowest clip in four decades, barring the initial fallout from the Covid-19 crisis in 2020.

Geopolitics

Turkey lashes out at Germany over Greece, Cyprus - Turkey lashed out at Germany over Greece and Cyprus during a joint Press conference by the Turkish and German Foreign Ministers in Istanbul on Friday.

German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock was on a visit to Istanbul, Turkey, after having visited Athens, Greece.

Following talks with Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias, Baerbock had stated that no one has the right to dispute the Greek sovereignty of the Aegean islands near the Turkish coastline – a remark which appeared to have angered Turkey.

“We want Germany to maintain its balanced stance in the issue of the east Mediterranean and the Aegean,” Mevlut Cavusoglu said, adding that Berlin “should not be a tool for provocation and propaganda, especially by Greece and Greek Cypriot side.”

“In the past, Germany has played an honest mediating role in this process, with a balanced attitude. But in recent times, we have seen that this balance has unfortunately been lost. We have to listen to both sides,” he concluded.

Earlier on Friday, German Foreign minister Baerbock told reporters in Athens that “Lesbos, Chios, Rhodes and many, many other islands ... are Greek territory, and no one has the right to dispute this.”

During their talks, her Greek counterpart Nikos Dendias had expressed Athens’ concerns about the exports of German armaments to Turkey, especially the 214-type submarines, stressing that these submarines risk changing the balance of power in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Graham, Blumenthal call to designate Russia state sponsor of terrorism: ‘Putin is sitting on top of a state terrorist apparatus.’

Senators Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) and Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.) on Thursday called for the Biden administration to designate Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism, renewing calls for the president to get even tougher on Moscow.

The senators spoke at a press conference in Washington one day after the Senate unanimously passed a resolution urging Secretary of State Antony Blinken to designate Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism (SST).

Graham said the designation would make it harder for countries and people to do business with Russia, enact more sanctions on Russian entities and waive sovereign immunity to open up lawsuits against Moscow in U.S. courts.

“Sanctions have been effective, but we need to do more,” Graham said. “This designation would be a nightmare for Russia, it would be an encouraging event for the people of Ukraine, and more importantly it would be a statement to the world that the United States, in a bipartisan fashion when it comes to Russia, is not forgiving and not forgetting.

“[Russian President Vladimir] Putin is sitting on top of a state terrorist apparatus, and it is now time to speak truth to power,” Graham added.

Russia’s devastating war in Ukraine has prompted an international outcry against Putin, who is continuing to press the fight more than five months after the invasion began.