

Conflict Update # 31

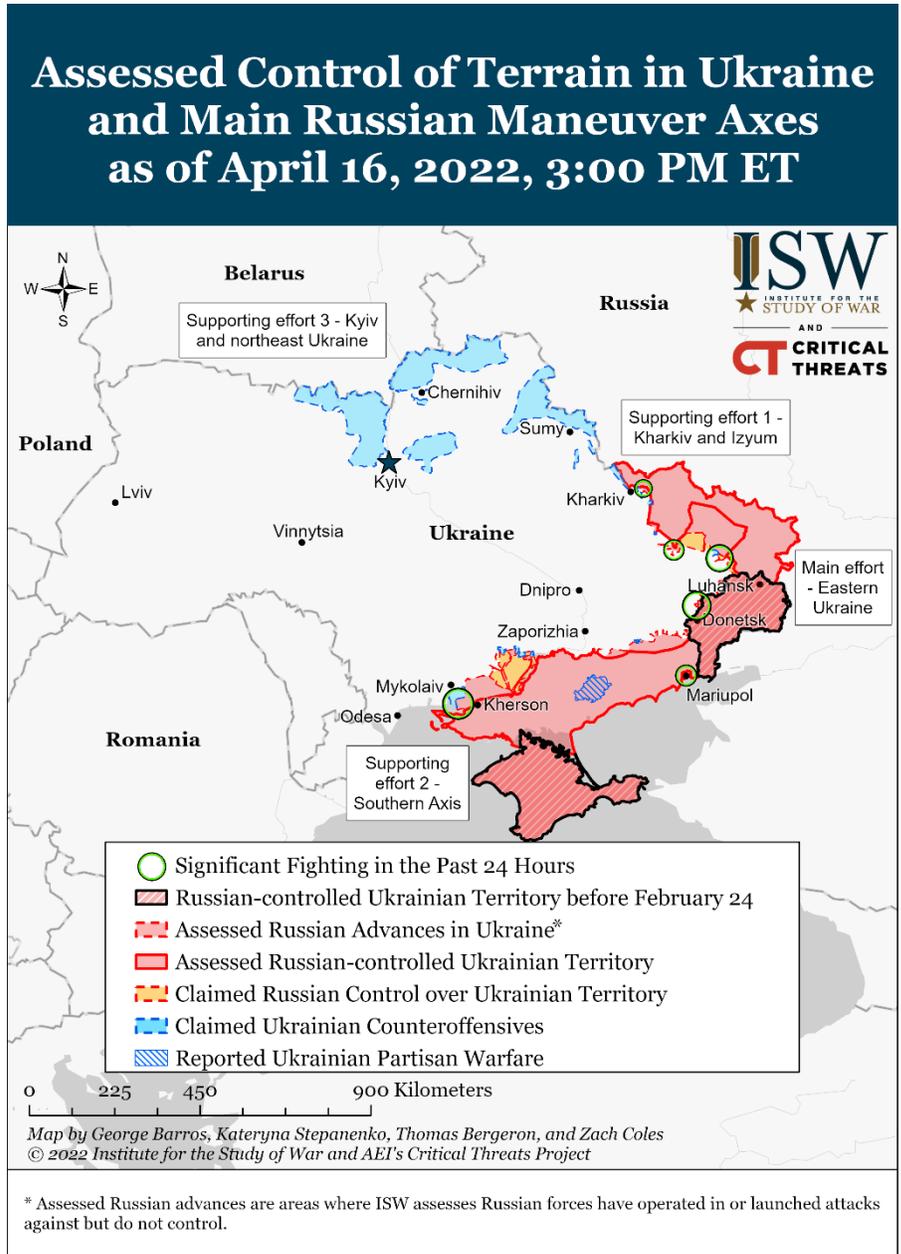
April 16th, 2022

Conflict Assessment

Ukraine's sinking of the Moskva was a significant event that has likely triggered intensified Russian air and missile attacks in retaliation, but the decisive operations of this phase of the war will still be conducted on the ground in eastern Ukraine. The commitment of the Black Sea Fleet's naval infantry to the fight around Mariupol some weeks ago meant that Russian naval operations would play a supporting role in the conflict. Increased Russian air and missile attacks are also unlikely to have a decisive impact on the outcome of the war, since there is no reason to assess that Russia has been holding enough air and missile capability in reserve to tip the balance if it is now committed. This report, and likely future reports as well, will thus remain focused on the ground operations, especially those in eastern Ukraine.- The United States and its partners will likely

Russian forces continued to amass troops around Izyum in preparation for continuing offensive operations in eastern Ukraine. The Russians continued small-scale attacks in the vicinities of Izyum, Popasna, and the area around Rubizhne and Severodonetsk—sometimes with artillery, sometimes with mechanized forces. These attacks have not made significant gains so far. It is unclear if they are part of a rolling offensive operation into which Russian reinforcements will be fed as they become available or if they are setting conditions for a larger-scale, better-coordinated offensive that will start soon.

The specific terrain on which battles in eastern Ukraine will be fought may constrain the Russians' ability to take advantage of the number of forces they are amassing for the attack. Eastern Ukraine is famous for being superb terrain for large-scale mechanized maneuver because of the World War II campaigns of the Wehrmacht and the Red Army. It is far from clear, however, that Russian forces will find it much more conducive to rapid decisive mechanized operations than other parts of the theater.



Russian forces will likely continue operating along three primary axes of advance in Donbas: from Izyum south via Slovyansk toward Russian-controlled Donetsk Oblast near Debaltseve; from Rubizhne and Severodonetsk southwest toward the Izyum-Debaltseve highway; and from Popasna west toward that highway. They may open an additional axis of advance from near Donetsk City to the north toward Kramatorsk as well, according to the Ukrainian General Staff.

Ukrainian officials report that Russia has concentrated as many as 22 battalion tactical groups (BTGs) in the vicinity of Izyum, but the Russians will struggle to take advantage of that force concentration if they cannot open up parallel axes of advance—something they have notably struggled to do in other parts of the theater.

Subordinate main effort—Mariupol (Russian objective: Capture Mariupol and reduce the Ukrainian defenders) - Russian forces continued their slow advance through Mariupol on April 16. Elements of Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) forces arrived at the central Mariupol beach from the north. Fighting continued in central Mariupol itself. Russian forces entered the base of the Ukrainian National Guard's 12th Operations Brigade and DNR forces seized a police station in central Mariupol relatively close to the beach. Ukrainian forces continued to defend in pockets but especially in the Azovstal plant, which Russian and proxy forces continued attacking heavily. **The Russians' use of Tu-22M Backfire bombers to attack to Azovstal** plant may suggest that they intend to end the battle soon by devastating the remaining defenders with firepower.

Subordinate main effort—Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts (Russian objective: Capture the entirety of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, the claimed territory of Russia's proxies in Donbas) - Russian troops continued shelling Severodonetsk, Rubizhne, and Popasna, and Russian troops made small tactical attacks around Popasna on April 15. The shelling has destroyed much of the cities' infrastructure. Russian forces made no significant territorial gains in these areas in the past 24 hours, however.

Armament

7,000 - The United States has supplied Ukraine with approximately 7,000 Javelins, anti-tank missiles that have become the iconic weapon of the war. However, this is about one-third of the United States' stock, and it will take around three to four years to replace the missiles that have been delivered so far.

Russian protests – Russia's formal letter of protest to the US regarding the latter's arming and training of Ukrainian troops and forces is a solid sign of the concern from Russia that these actions by the US are having effect.

Although not verified as yet, rumors continue to circle that American Harpoon missiles sank the Russian flagship Mokba. The Russians more than likely find it strange and telling that the US has been training Ukrainian soldiers who have just returned from the US with supplies, including missiles.

Sanctions

China's Contorted Response to Russia Sanctions - The sanctions imposed on Russia will devastate its economy, but the severity partially depends on the People's Republic of China (PRC) and how much economic aid it is prepared to extend. In the short term, surging commodity prices will boost Moscow's hard currency reserves and mitigate the enormous cost of waging full-scale war against Ukraine. As a result, Western sanctions have not yet pushed Russia into the economic abyss. Meanwhile, China has voiced sharp opposition to Western sanctions on Russia, but Beijing has also provided clear indicators that it will comply with measures imposed by the West, or at least, where sanctions are concerned, with the letter of the law. For example, China's major commercial banks have announced they will stop issuing letters of credit to Russian counterparts, and Chinese manufacturers are no longer providing parts and components to the Russian aircraft industry. The swift adherence to Western sanctions, even if underreported in the Chinese media, parallels a rather different push by Beijing, which is to create a wedge between the "letter of the law"

and the “spirit of the law” on international sanctions. Almost immediately after war started, China announced that it would lift limits on Russian wheat imports, as part of the agreements reached between President Putin and Xi on February 4, in Beijing. Additionally, the PRC ambassador in Moscow has exhorted Chinese entrepreneurs to contribute to the best of their ability to sustaining the Russian economy.

China is currently building stocks of wheat and sees an opportunity to bolster its reserves – essential for the wider Chinese social platform – as much as it can.

Impacts

Lessons in Ukraine Raise Doubts about PLA Modernization

China’s military modernization and doctrinal reform have been largely informed by US campaigns that People’s Liberation Army (PLA) observers have carefully parsed, including the Iraq, Afghanistan, and Kosovo wars. From these observations, the PLA has embarked on a herculean effort to restructure, reform, retrain, and properly arm its forces. In its own words, joint training is the “bridge” or “ship” for ferrying the PLA to becoming a high-quality force. For the past two decades, the PLA has been a ship being rebuilt while also underway.

Now, in the shadow of a Russian invasion of Ukraine that has seen a large and similarly reformed Soviet-style military largely fail to attain its primary objectives, the PLA must face the possibility that its own reforms are riddled with hidden weaknesses and fundamental faults. The quality of PLA joint capabilities has a direct bearing on the Chinese Communist Party’s political objectives toward Taiwan, much like Russia’s military reforms since 2008 have been part of the Kremlin’s strategic calculus toward Ukraine. Whether the People’s Republic of China (PRC) stumbles into a debacle of its own making may depend on the lessons drawn from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. (Jamestown Foundation).

Widening of war front

Competition for Access and Influence Heighten Geopolitical Rivalries in the Horn of Africa - The competition between regional and global powers for access to—and influence in—the Horn of Africa is intensifying. The Horn is Asia’s and the Gulf’s door to Africa’s vast natural resources. While great powers’ growing interest in the Horn may lead to greater development in the region, the battle between rival states also threatens to further destabilize the region. The ongoing war in Ukraine has amplified extant inflationary trends in global commodity markets, and Gulf States, which have already invested in vast tracts of farmland in various African nations, are keener than ever to secure alternative sources for food. The same concerns apply to China, which notably opened its first foreign military base in Djibouti in 2017. After two decades of investment and clever use of debt, China’s influence now spans the entire continent. It is the Horn of Africa, however, to which the Chinese and, increasingly, regional powers attach particular importance.

We have previously reported on the issue of China seeking a wider “blue strategy” and its ports on Colombo, Sri Lanka and Djibouti in the Horn of Africa speak to these desires, as does the Solomon Islands project north of Australia.

Whether China possesses sufficient hulls of substance to maintain multiple ocean fleets and presences remains to be seen. Presently the US is the sole global power to control all the oceans of the world. The British Empire at its peak didn’t do so. (Jamestown Foundation).

ISKP’s Continued Interest in India -

In March 2022, Islamic State in Khorasan Province’s (ISKP) flagship publication, Voice of Khurasan, highlighted the story of Najeeb al-Hindi, the group’s latest recruit from the southern Indian state of Kerala. The decision to feature an Indian in this publication reveals ISKP’s continued interest in attracting Indians into its ranks, the continued flow of fighters

into Afghanistan from India, and the increasing importance given to Indians with regards to their roles within the group. If the trend continues, there will be a possibility of seeing more Indians becoming active operatives of ISKP, which would then have implications within and beyond India and Afghanistan. Most Indian ISKP recruits hail from southern India, with Tamil Nadu and Kerala being the hotspots, as opposed to conflict-ridden areas such as Jammu and Kashmir in the north. Once in Afghanistan, Indian ISKP recruits have been given active combatant roles in major attacks and have been chosen as suicide bombers, including, for example, Najeeb al-Hindi.

Whilst the Russian invasion of Ukraine continues to dominate global news, we shouldn't lose sight of regional conflicts that may either be exploited by Russia or see an opportunity to "make hay while the sun shines."

China's Declining Influence in Nepal: Implications for the U.S. and India - During Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's visit to Kathmandu on March 25–27, China and Nepal signed nine agreements covering an array of fields, including a technical assistance for a cross-border railway feasibility study, economic and technical cooperation, and COVID-19 vaccine assistance to Nepal. However, none of the agreements concerned Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects. In the run-up to Wang's visit, Nepali media cited government sources that the visit's "major purpose" was "to push for the implementation of the BRI and sign at least two projects during the visit if possible." China's political influence and economic presence in Nepal have witnessed remarkable growth in recent years; however, failure to finalize any BRI projects represents an unexpected setback to Chinese interests in the Himalayan country. And notably, it comes less than a month after the Nepali parliament ratified the controversial Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) compact, a \$500-million US grant for the development of power transmission and road construction projects, which makes the situation particularly mortifying for Beijing. (Jamestown Foundation).