

Conflict Update # 319

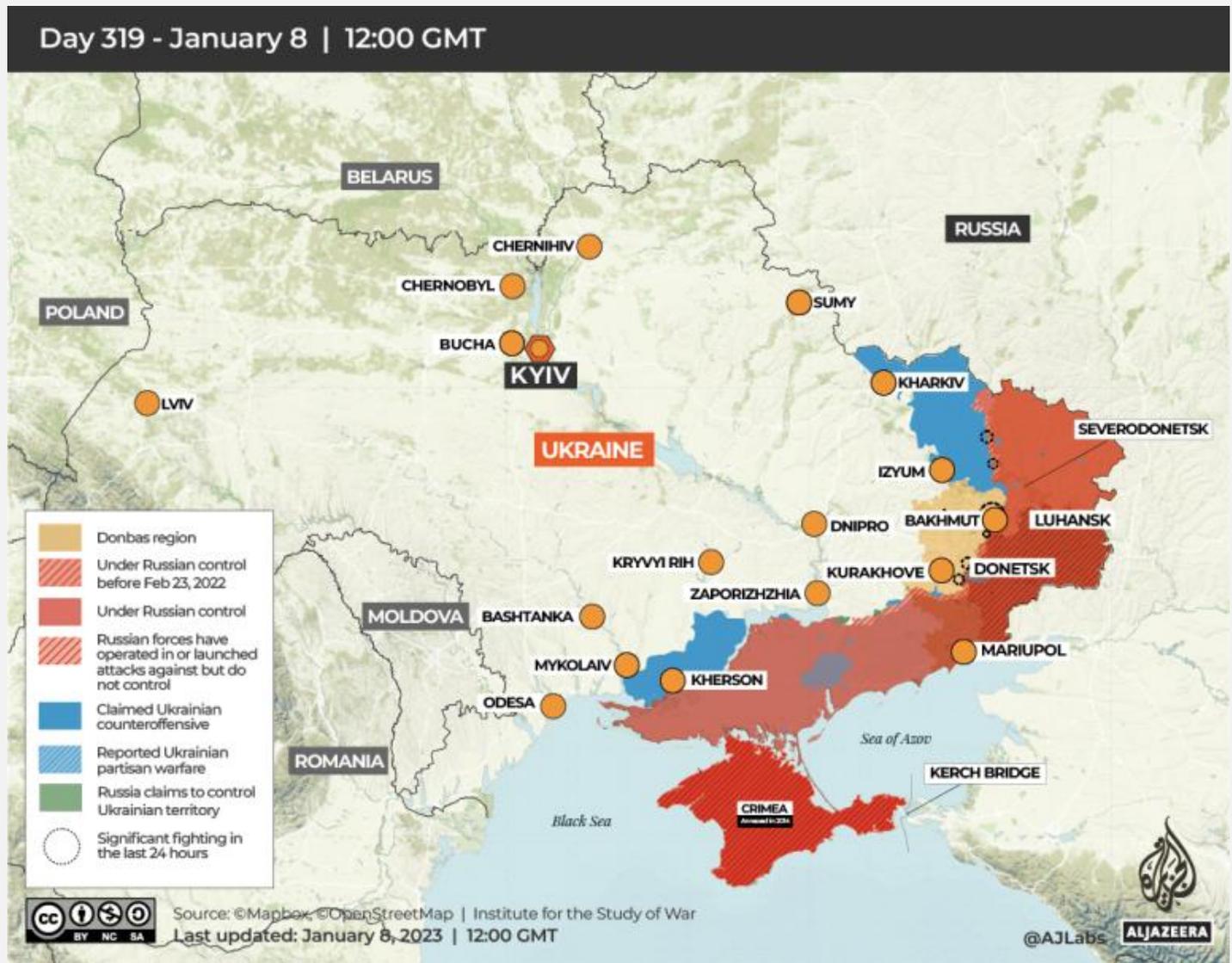
January 8th, 2023

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Conflict Assessment

Russian losses – 1111,70 (430) soldiers killed, 3,069 (+3) enemy tanks, 6,130 (+5) armored combat vehicles, 2,065 (+3) artillery systems, 431 (+0) MLRS systems, 217 (+0) air defense systems, 285 (+0) warplanes, 272 (+0) helicopters, 1,849 (+5) UAVs of the operational-tactical level, 723 (+0) cruise missiles, 16 (+0) warships/cutters, 4,801 (+3) trucks and tankers, 4 Iskander Missile Launchers (+0), 239 fuel bowsers (+0) and 183 (+1) units of equipment.

Key Takeaways



No respite in Ukraine fighting as shaky Russian truce ends - Intense shelling reported around the Ukrainian town of Bakhmut, despite Russia's unilateral ceasefire for Orthodox Christmas.

Ukrainians and Russians have marked Orthodox Christmas under the shadow of war, as reports of fighting come from the eastern Donbas region despite Russian President Vladimir Putin unilaterally ordering his forces to pause attacks.

Ukraine rejected the purported 36-hour ceasefire from Friday to mark Orthodox Christmas, with President Zelenskyy describing it as a ploy by Putin to buy time to reinforce troops that have taken heavy losses this week.

Russia-Ukraine live: Ukraine denies Russian strike killed 600 - Ukraine has denied a claim from Russia's defence ministry that a strike on Kramatorsk in the Donetsk region killed 600 Ukrainian service members.

"This information is as true as the data that they have destroyed all of our HIMARS," Sergiy Cherevaty, spokesman for the Eastern group of the Ukrainian armed forces, told the Suspilne media outlet, referring to high mobility artillery rocket systems supplied by the United States.

Later, speaking to the BBC, Cherevaty called the claim "propaganda".

Two Reuters reporters who visited the dormitories where the soldiers had allegedly been killed said there were no signs of a mass casualty event.

No obvious signs of casualties where Russia says soldiers killed: Reuters reporters - Reuters reporters have said there were no obvious signs of casualties at two dormitories in the city of Kramatorsk, where Russia claimed a "retaliatory strike" had killed 600 Ukrainian soldiers who had been temporarily housed there.

Russia's defence ministry did not specify exactly when the attack took place, but Reuters reporters visited the site – two college dormitories – on Sunday and reported that neither building appeared to have been directly hit by missiles or seriously damaged. They reported there were no obvious signs that soldiers had been living at the locations and no sign of bodies or traces of blood.

One of the buildings had several broken windows, and stood by a courtyard that had a big crater in it, they reported.

Ukrainian authorities did not immediately comment on the strike or on Russia's claim of hundreds of casualties. Kramatorsk's mayor earlier said there had been no casualties amid seven overnight Russian strikes on the city, which is located in the Donetsk region.

Russia says thermal power plants hit by Ukraine rocket attack - Two thermal power plants in part of Ukraine's Donetsk region controlled by Russian forces were damaged in a rocket attack by the Ukrainian army, Moscow-installed officials and Russia's state TASS news agency has reported.

Initial information suggested that the plants in Zuhres and Novyi Svit were hit and some people working there had sustained injuries, the officials said on their Telegram channels.

One person was killed as a result of the attack on the Starobesheve power plant in Novyi Svit, TASS reported.

Comment – Why does Russia make such announcements? – in order to project they are attacking military and non-civilian targets, but their war effort has been severely disrupted by, among other causes, their concentration against civilian targets. Civilians do not fight back but soldiers do. Killing civilians does not achieve a military objective, defeating opposing and enemy soldiers does - if successfully accomplished. But we know they cannot successfully fight man-to-man.

This is the typical Russian model, and present commanders in Ukraine were also active in Syria and Chechnya where they similarly obliterated civilian centers and structures. The path of all cowards.

Russia, Ukraine say soldiers swapped in deal - Russia's defence ministry has said that Ukraine has returned 50 captured Russian soldiers after negotiations, with Ukraine confirming the swap and saying 50 Ukrainian service members had also been freed.

"On January 8, as a result of negotiations, 50 Russian servicemen, who were in mortal danger while in captivity, were returned from the territory controlled by the Kyiv regime," the Russian defence ministry said in a statement.

Russia, Belarus intensify joint military training - Russia and Belarus have stepped up joint military training, drawing on Moscow's experience of fighting in Ukraine with an emphasis on urban warfare, the Belarusian defence ministry's TV channel has reported.

"The regional grouping of [Russian and Belarusian] troops is being trained almost without interruption," the VoenTV channel reported. "The intensity of the exercises is only increasing. The goal is to be ready to fight back against an aggressor on all fronts."

Heightened military cooperation between the two allies comes amid speculation in Ukraine and the West that Moscow may use Belarus as a launching pad for a new attack on Ukraine from the north. **Russia, Belarus to hold joint aviation drills: Belarusian defence ministry** - Russia and Belarus will hold joint aviation drills next week, the Belarusian defence ministry has said.

The drills will be held from January 16 to February 1, the ministry said in a statement.

According to the statement, the Russian air force divisions arrived in Belarus on Sunday. The drills will involve all the airfields and training areas of the Belarusian air force and air defence, the ministry added.



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Comment – Here we go?

The Russian MoD's attempts to claim Russian forces responded to the December 31 Ukrainian strike against Russian positions in Makiivka are generating further discontent in the Russian information space. The Russian MoD announced on January 8 that Russian forces conducted a "retaliation operation" against Ukrainian forces for the December 31 strike on Makiivka that killed up to 400 mobilized soldiers due to Russian command failures and poor personnel dispersal practices. The Russian MoD falsely claimed the retaliatory strike targeted several temporary Ukrainian deployment points in Kramatorsk, Donetsk Oblast, and killed over 600 Ukrainian personnel. This claim is false — a Finnish reporter visited the site of the strike in Kramatorsk on January 8 and noted that it hit an empty school. Several Russian milbloggers responded negatively to the Russian MoD's claim, pointing out that the Russian MoD frequently presents fraudulent claims and criticizing Russian military leadership for fabricating a story to "retaliate" for the Makiivka strike instead of holding Russian leadership responsible for the losses accountable.

The Russian MoD application of a grievance-and-retaliation framework to many of its operations has created a negative feedback loop with prominent members of the pro-war Russian information space. At the beginning of the massive campaign of strikes against Ukrainian critical infrastructure in October 2022, the

Russian MoD employed a similar framing of “retaliation” against claimed Ukrainian strikes on the Kerch Strait Bridge and other Russian infrastructure. The Russian MoD partially used this framing to mollify escalated demands from the pro-war community to “avenge” Ukrainian actions but provoked an array of responses from milbloggers outlining other instances that the Russian MoD should equally “retaliate” for. The Russian MoD has thus created a negative feedback loop, wherein it attempts to respond to Ukrainian offensive successes with a discrete, retaliatory, offensive action, which then opens the MoD up to continued criticism from discontented Russian milbloggers highlighting their beliefs that the MoD is responding in the wrong manner or to the wrong event. The Russian MoD’s response to the Makiivka strike is a clear continuation of this grievance-and-retaliation model that has once again opened Russian military leadership to staunch criticism of their conduct of the war.

The UK MoD confirmed ISW’s previous assessments that Russian forces are preparing for the possibility of future Ukrainian counteroffensives in Zaporizhia or Luhansk oblasts. The UK MoD reported on January 8 that in recent weeks, Russian forces have expanded defensive fortifications in Zaporizhia Oblast along the Vasylivka-Orikhiv line and are maintaining a large force grouping in this sector in a way that suggests that Russian commanders are concerned by the possibility of a major Ukrainian counteroffensive push in southern Ukraine. The UK MoD suggested that Russian forces are facing two equally exigent counteroffensive scenarios: A Ukrainian breakthrough on the Zaporizhia line that could seriously challenge the viability of the Russian land bridge linking Rostov Oblast with occupied Crimea, or a Ukrainian breakthrough in Luhansk Oblast that could further unhinge the Russian offensive objective of occupying the entirety of Donbas. ISW has previously noted indicators of preparations for a Russian decisive effort (likely of a defensive nature) along the Svatove-Kreminna line in Luhansk Oblast and assessed that the Russian force posture and prevalence of defensive structures in Zaporizhia Oblast suggest that Russian forces may be preparing for potential Ukrainian efforts against this sector.

Russia to produce Iranian drones - Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council Secretary Oleksiy Danilov stated on January 8 that Russia plans to begin domestic production of Iranian-made drones.

Russian forces continued counterattacks to regain lost positions along the Svatove-Kreminna line on January 8. Luhansk Oblast Head Serhiy Haidai stated on January 8 that Russian forces transferred several battalions from the Bakhmut area to the Kreminna area.

Soledar - Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Serhiy Cherevaty stated on January 8 that Russian forces do not control Soledar, and other official Ukrainian sources reported that Ukrainian forces captured Russian positions near Bakhmut. Prominent Russian milbloggers expressed divergent opinions of the potential for the Russian encirclement of Bakhmut.

Russian forces continued offensive operations around Bakhmut and along the western outskirts of Donetsk City.

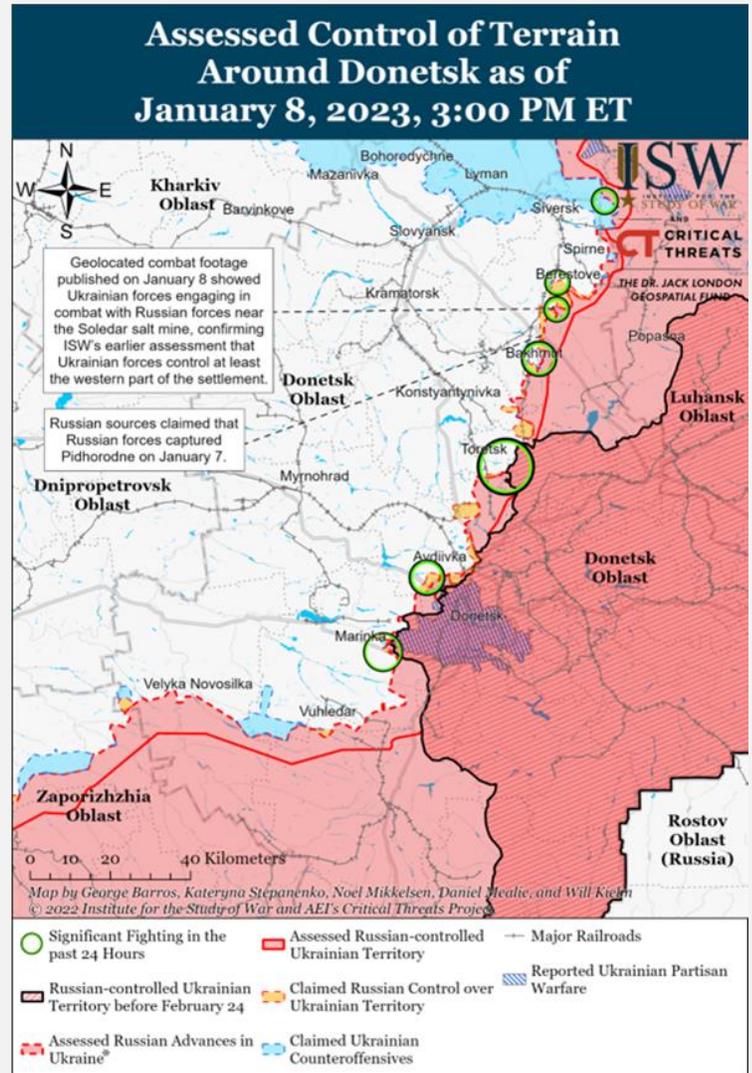
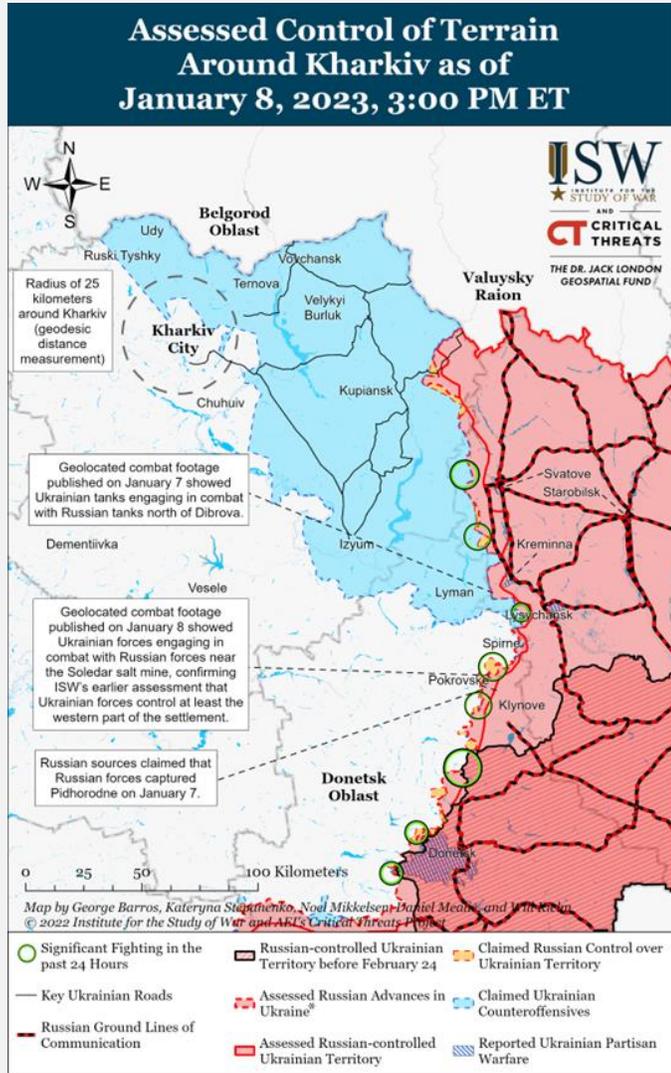
Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov claimed on January 7 that 300 Chechen Akhmat-1 OMON personnel deployed to Ukraine.

Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces used incendiary munitions to strike civilian infrastructure in Kherson City overnight on January 7–8.

Russian forces are continuing to intensify filtration measures to identify partisans in occupied territories. Russian occupation authorities claimed that likely Ukrainian partisans committed sabotage by mining a gas pipeline in Luhansk Oblast on January 8.

Russian occupation authorities intensified passportization efforts in occupied territories on January 8.

ISW's December 15 MDCOA warning forecast about a potential Russian offensive against northern Ukraine in winter 2023 remains a worst-case scenario within the forecast cone. ISW currently assesses the risk of a Russian invasion of Ukraine from Belarus as low, but possible, and the risk of Belarusian direct involvement as very low. This new section in the daily update is not in itself a forecast or assessment. It lays out the daily observed indicators we are using to refine our assessments and forecasts, which we expect to update regularly. Our assessment that the MDCOA remains unlikely has not changed. We will update this header if the assessment changes.



Western weapons starting to bite Russia - As Russia becomes more and more convinced and exasperated by its conclusion that the US and Nato are now fully and actively involved in the war, the conflict could well escalate into a Russia-NATO war. This will put the entire global community on a knife edge as the likelihood of the use of nuclear weapons will become real and the full outbreak of WW III probable.

The latest developments alter the complexion of the war frighteningly. Russia has previously stated that when a non-Ukrainian missile strikes a Russian territory, the response would be not to Ukraine but to the countries that had supplied the missile. Now, the ongoing "fact-finding mission" is likely to find the missile fragments and trace them back to their country of origin.

The headache will be when Russia finds that although the HIMARS launchers had originated from Washington, they could have been supplied by other Nato members. Whichever way the finding goes, it will inevitably lead to

confrontation with Nato, which constantly dangles a threat of Article Five that refers to “an attack on one member is an attack on all.”

Meanwhile, Ukraine has been buoyed by unprecedented military and financial backing from the US and Nato that has seen chances of a truce diminish by day as the government of Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky vows to annihilate Russian forces with help from Washington and largely the Global North.

The war, which has caused the sky-rocketing of prices for goods and services around the globe, is likely to escalate as it becomes much clearer that Ukraine “is in it to win it,” to paraphrase President Zelensky.

But what does the escalation in the war mean for global peace and security, as well as the economy? In one word, “gloom.” As the situation grows desperate and more dangerous, the death toll on all sides will continue to rise sharply, and antagonistic posture increasingly regular from all the warring sides.

Ukrainian forces face being surrounded by Wagner troops in Bakhmut—ISW - Russian forces have reportedly made gains near Bakhmut and Ukrainian troops face being surrounded by mercenaries fighting for Moscow.

ISW noted Russian sources and military bloggers had said that Wagner Group troops had broken through in Soledar, about 11 miles away from the Donetsk oblast city that has been fought over for months.

Although it was too soon to tell if Soledar had been captured entirely, one milblogger claimed that Russian troops had advanced as far as Krasnopillia, which lies around two and a half miles northwest and that “the Ukrainian grouping in Bakhmut is under threat of encirclement as a result.”

Comment – I have been watching developments in and around Bakhmut and Soledar for some time and yes, there are daily movements back and forth between the sides.

Although a major transport hub, but of dubious strategic significance, Bakhmut is important to Prigozhin, with success leading to his being able to claim the sole “victory” compared to federal Russian troops.

His group has made some progress but Ukraine has yesterday and today sent in reinforcements, as northwest of the town are salt mines with myriad numbers of tunnels where it stores equipment and supplies.

We’ll need to keep watching this area. The Wagner Group has been engaged here for six months in trying to seize the area. See the following article as well.

Wagner’s desensitized prison fighters keep staggering into Bakhmut like this is a zombie apocalypse - In the smoke-filled basement of a nondescript building in the city center of Bakhmut, eastern Ukraine, the men of the SKALA intelligence battalion are getting ready for a risky reconnaissance mission. One of them is burning a last cigarette in the dimly lit hallway. Clad in a bulletproof vest and helmet, a bearded soldier wraps yellow tape around both his arms—a sign used by Ukrainian soldiers to identify each other on the battlefield. “Be careful out there, there are snipers in this area,” a portly officer warns him, rising from his office chair facing a flatscreen TV that intermittently broadcasts the live feed of a drone flying over carnage in the city. “I can’t die, my mom won’t let me,” quips the soldier with a weary smile, checking his gear one last time before heading out.

The previously muffled sound of outgoing artillery becomes sharper and louder as the door to the street swings open. They take off.

“The situation is pretty tense, but we’re controlling it,” says 23-year-old Alexander, clutching his American-made M4 assault rifle. “We’re holding.” With his buzzcut and boyish looks, the young man wouldn’t look out of place in a trendy nightclub in downtown Kyiv. Yet, for weeks, Alexander and the grizzled soldiers of the SKALA battalion have been weathering the storm of daily Russian assaults and shelling on Bakhmut, hunkering down in the basement and doing

daily sorties in the gray zone—the stretch of land between Ukrainian and Russian positions. Named after its founder and leader Iurii Skala, the SKALA battalion is tasked with conducting air and ground reconnaissance, as well as “cleaning operations”—a euphemism meaning assaulting enemy positions and taking out the Russian soldiers manning them.

“The drones are our eyes out there,” says mining town of 70,000 inhabitants known devastated by months of relentless warfare that has prompted comparisons Passchendaele. The town is a major that runs through Ukraine’s Donetsk and Ukraine’s top generals—have argued that

However, it is one of the few frontline areas the success-starved Russian high victory, at any cost. Some have Bakhmut would constitute a Prigozhin, the founder of the group, whose mercenaries make up most of the Russian forces in the area. The U.S. believes Prigozhin has a financial motive: Wagner has often seized lucrative gold and diamond mines in areas where it operates in Africa, and Prigozhin may have set his sights on the salt and gypsum mines around Bakhmut.



Alexander. Out there is Bakhmut—a salt-for its sparkling white wine—that has been Russian shelling, and gruesome trench with the Battle of the Somme or transport hub and sits on a strategic highway Luhansk regions. Yet, some—including one of the town’s strategic value is dubious at best.

where the Russians are still on the advance, and command is desperate to claim a theorized that the capture of personal prize for Yevgeny infamous Wagner paramilitary group, whose mercenaries make up most of the Russian forces in the area. The U.S. believes Prigozhin has a financial motive: Wagner has often seized lucrative gold and diamond mines in areas where it operates in Africa, and Prigozhin may have set his sights on the salt and gypsum mines around Bakhmut.

According to Rem, a former car dealer from Dnipro now correcting artillery fire with the help of his drone, most of the soldiers sent in suicidal assaults on Ukrainian positions in Bakhmut are “zeks,” or convicts, recruited by Wagner to bolster the number of Russian forces in Ukraine. “Mobiks [conscripts] are usually scared, and they scatter when they get shelled. Those guys are not scared,” he said.

Of the Wagnerites, Rem says that they’re a much more effective fighting force than they’re usually given credit for: “They’re making progress, after all.” Desensitized to violence and with nothing left to lose, the prisoners—many of whom are violent criminals including murderers and rapists—are considered by Ukrainian soldiers a tougher enemy than the average army conscript.

The Russian tactic of sending prison recruits to attack Ukrainian positions—allowing them to identify defenses for the artillery to pummel afterwards—has proven effective, though slow and deadly. While no major breakthrough has occurred, they have slowly eroded Ukrainian defenses, and creeping ever closer to the eastern outskirts of the city.

This assessment was echoed in late December by Oleksandr Danylyuk, a former national security adviser for Ukraine currently working on military planning, who said of the prison conscripts: “They are—I cannot say fearless—but they have nothing to lose pretty much. So, they are attacking constantly and they’ve been killed in big quantities as well.”

According to a U.S. official quoted by The Guardian on Thursday, out of an initial force of nearly 50,000 Wagner mercenaries, more than 4,100 have been killed in action, and 10,000 have been wounded, including over 1,000 killed between late November and early December near Bakhmut.

Russia may blow up dam in Luhansk Oblast to slow Ukrainian advance - Russian forces may blow up the Svatove Reservoir dam in Luhansk Oblast, Ukraine’s National Resistance Center reported.

According to the center, a Russian engineering and sapper unit has arrived in temporarily occupied Svatove “to examine the possibility of blowing up the dam.”

Russian forces may also use the potential detonation of the dam as an “excuse to deport the local population” and attempt to accuse Ukraine of blowing up the dam, the National Resistance Center wrote.

“Such actions are a deliberate destruction of Ukrainian infrastructure and are not expedient because they do not change the position of forces at the frontlines,” the reported stated.

Svatove has become a focal point of Russia’s defense of occupied Luhansk Oblast alongside Kreminna.

The U.K. MoD reported Nov 21 that Svatove had become a vulnerable flank of Russian troops as they were facing the challenge of retaining a reliable defense in the sector while trying to resource offensive operations in Donetsk Oblast.

Comment – We have commented on multiple occasions that Svatove is an important hub straddling the rail link between Russia and all occupied Ukrainian oblasts. Ukraine has set this as an objective for some time now and is inching ever-closer to the city.

Ian Bremmer: US, NATO in 'hot war' with Russia - The Cold War might have ended decades ago, but the U.S. and NATO are now in a "hot war" with Russia through a proxy in Ukraine, according to a political risk consultancy group leader.

"We are not in a Cold War with Russia; we're in a hot war with Russia," Eurasia Group President Ian Bremmer told DW News on Friday. "Now, it's proxy war and NATO is not fighting it directly: We're fighting it through Ukraine."

Lethal weapons aid from the U.S. to Ukraine is proof positive of the proxy war being waged, according to Bremmer.

"But you see the more advanced military equipment that's being provided to Ukraine, literally every day this week, Ukraine can defend itself and Russia cannot win this war on the ground, can't win this war in the air, and yet Russia's position globally is deteriorating every day," he said.

"Its economy is contracting. NATO is becoming stronger and expanding. Ukraine itself is going to be one of the most powerful military forces in all of NATO. And diplomatically the Russians are becoming isolated."

Ultimately, Putin and Russia are going to expand their attention beyond the ground in Ukraine to attack NATO allies — even if it is the modern warfare of cyber-attacks and disinformation, according to Bremmer.

"The fact that Putin sees this as a war he is losing against NATO on the ground in Ukraine means this is going to increasingly affect NATO states directly," he said.

NATO

Sweden says it can't meet all of Turkey's NATO application demands - Sweden's PM said it is confident Turkey will approve its application to join NATO, but said Stockholm cannot meet some of Ankara's conditions.

"Turkey both confirms that we have done what we said we would do, but they also say that they want things that we cannot or do not want to give them," PM Kristersson said, without specifying to which conditions he referred.

Finland and Sweden signed a three-way agreement with Turkey in 2022 aimed at overcoming objections to their membership to NATO.

But Turkey has continued to block the bid, saying the countries have not done enough to crack down on groups it considers to be "terrorist" organizations and extradite people suspected of "terror-related" crimes. Turkish officials have most recently bristled at Sweden's top court's refusal to extradite journalist Bulent Kenes, who Turkey accuses of helping to plot a failed 2016 coup.

Comment – Some of these "terrorists" Turkey is demanding expatriation of are Kurds fighting to recover land they lost in terms of the Sykes-Picot Agreement in WWI. This was a secret UK/French agreement, with assent from the Russian

Empire and the Kingdom of Italy, and contrary to UK promises to Arab leaders regarding their independence and statehood – if they helped defeat the Ottoman Empire.

In 1917, the UK, France and Russia - The Triple Entente - in battle against the Central Powers – Germany, Austro-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire, believed the Ottomans to be the soft underbelly of the Central Power war structure.

So they, the UK, France and Russia (originally), decided on attacking this underbelly.

When Russia opted out of the war after the 1917 Revolution, Germany pivoted west, seeing London and Paris now desperately needing this to happen - sidetracking them in the south. And this is where the Arabs came in, enticed with the firm and distinct (UK) promise of being rewarded with statehood - once they assisted in defeating the Ottomans.

The Arabs rallied, forming independent armies and attacking the Ottomans in Mesopotamia and the Arabian peninsula, drawing critical Central Power focus away from Europe.

Secretly however Sykes and Picot had split the Middle East between the UK and France, creating the countries we see today and the source of much (subsequent) conflict. As part of that agreement the Kurdish people were deprived of their nationhood, something they have been fighting for ever since.

Present-day Kurd populations straddle Turkey, Syria, Armenia, Iran and Iraq, and subject to continuing suppression and genocide ever since the 1917 Sykes/Picot Agreement.

Turkey, created out of the defeated Ottoman Empire, views their defiance as “terrorism,” a label (conveniently) applied post-9/11 by many countries around the world to outlaw any political and national resistance to their rule.

Simultaneously, in 1917, Lord Balfour issued the “Balfour Declaration” which moved to recognize a Jewish homeland in Palestine, again something which was directly opposite to what had been promised Arab leaders in return for them joining the Allies against the Central Powers. At that time there were roughly 80,000 Jewish settlers and 700,000 Palestinians in Palestine.

For decades there had been rising anti-Semite activity across Europe, particularly in the east, and Jewish refugees had been moving to Palestine, where land was being purchased to settle them, but in sporadic fashion.

The UK was at the time, albeit erroneously, paranoid about Jewish influence in the Russian Revolution, where Russia had been an ally prior to the Bolsheviks grabbing power and taking them out of the war against Germany in 1917, a paranoia centered around a suspected influence 18-odd Jewish senior Bolsheviks were believed to be exerting against the UK and its Allies.

Thus UK PM Lloyd George adopted a closer relationship with Zionist rulers, particularly renowned British Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann who had long been pushing for a Jewish homeland in Palestine, in order to head off this mistaken belief of a Zionist influence on Lenin in Moscow.

Lloyd believed he could alienate any Zionist influence by issuing the Balfour Declaration to give Jewish people their long sought-after homeland, and so bring them in to support the Allied cause.

So, in 1917 Balfour, instructed by George, communicated the Balfour Declaration to the leader of UK’s Jewish community Lord Rothschild for transmission to the Zionist Federation.

Prior to this Russia, part of The Triple Entente and the (pre-Revolution) move to engage the Arabs, with a centuries-long desire for a sea gateway to the Mediterranean, was to receive Constantinople and the land area in today’s Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan as their reward for defeating the Ottoman Empire.

Opting out of the war, Russian leaders immediately renounced Zionism, completely undermining the basis of the George policy and the Balfour Agreement, and lost their promised sea port from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean.

They also exposed the inner secret files of Tzarist Russia's diplomatic envoys, agreements and deals, including the secret deal between Sykes and Picot.

The Allies, seeing a chance to once and for all reduce the centuries-old Russian geopolitical threat, attacked them post-WWI, but unsuccessfully.

The rest as they say, is history.

NATO 'will collapse from the inside,' Russian lawmaker predicts – A hawkish Russian lawmaker predicted the NATO alliance will collapse under the weight of internal division, as the Kremlin tries to frame its military quagmire in Ukraine as an existential struggle against the combined West.

Leonid Slutsky, the leader of the right-wing populist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia and the chairman of the State Duma's international affairs committee, said Tuesday he hopes the transatlantic alliance would crumble without outside pressure from its adversaries in Moscow and Beijing.

His post was a response to comments by United States Ambassador to NATO Julianne Smith, who wrote in the Financial Times on Tuesday that Moscow and Beijing are "sharing a toolkit" of strategies to undermine NATO members.

Containment

How to make Putin pay: give Ukraine weapons to hit Russian arms factories - don't block Ukraine from targeting Russian weapons factories – The US and many other Western countries continue to supply Ukraine with weapons to fight Russia's invasion and occupation.

Ukraine has done an admirable job of exposing Russia's weakness and degrading its armed forces. In less than a year, Ukraine estimates Russia has lost more than 111,000 soldiers, a figure greater than the entire military of Australia and equivalent to Canada's entire army.

In addition, Ukraine has destroyed or captured thousands of tanks and armored vehicles, 285 aircraft, 272 helicopters, and 16 ships and boats. That Global Firepower continues to rank Russia as the second most powerful military in the world is risible.

The White House, however, continues to impose restrictions on Ukrainian weaponry. It balks at providing Ukraine weapons systems that can strike into Russian territory, and even demands that Ukraine refrain from using American weaponry to strike into Russia-occupied Crimea.

After refusing for months to provide Ukraine with high-precision High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS), the Biden administration finally reversed course but then secretly modified the system to prevent it from firing long-range rockets into Russia.

This is bad policy on two levels. First, if the White House seeks artificially to limit the conflict to within Ukraine's borders, it removes the cost to Russia of continuing conflict. Second, while Ukraine degrades Russian equipment and shoots down or absorbs Russian missile strikes, numerous Russian factories work overtime to resupply the Russian military.

President Joe Biden may not want Ukrainian drones striking the Kremlin, and he need not worry about Ukrainians bombing Moscow apartment blocks the way Vladimir Putin did when he sought a casus belli against Chechnya.

There are still many military factories in the Moscow region that deserve to be hit:

- The Luch Design Office in Rybinsk, about 165 miles north of Moscow
- The Tactical Missile Corporation, Raduga Design Bureau in Dubna about 80 miles north of the capital
- The NPO Mashinostroyeniya rocket design bureau in Reutov, 14 miles to the east of Moscow
- The Tactical Missile Corporation, TRV Engineering in Korolev, 17 miles to the northeast of Moscow.

That the US and many EU states sanction each of these for their involvement in the Ukraine war only makes more illogical the fact that the White House shields them from the consequence of their action. At the very least, every employee in Moscow reporting to their factories should realize that each day could be their last.

The same holds true for Russians employed at the Votkinsk Machine Building Plant, which produces missiles ranging from Scuds to intercontinental ballistic missiles, in Votkinsk, 813 miles to Moscow's east; or those working in similar factories in Yekaterinburg or Omsk.

Just as hundreds of thousands of Russian men fled their country to avoid conscription, enabling Ukraine to strike at even one of these factories could encourage military industry workers to consider the attractiveness of life outside Russia versus being burnt to a crisp in a factory for meagre pay.

Putin may froth and saber-rattle, but he is increasingly a laughingstock. His redlines have become meaningless. Ukrainians are willing to do the job. President Biden, let them. Stop opposing strikes into the heart of Russia.

Stop allowing Russia to resupply its missile arsenals.

Ukrainian troops will start Patriot missile training later this month - Training on the Patriot missile system that the U.S. is supplying Kyiv will start in January, the White House said, amid anticipation over whether the equipment could mark a turning point in the war in Ukraine.

Although Washington has provided other significant military aid, such as the High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems, or HIMARS, the Patriots will be the most advanced surface-to-air missiles that the U.S. has given Ukraine.

Leopard tanks to Ukraine can't be ruled out: German economy minister - Germany cannot rule out the delivery of Leopard tanks, heavier fighting vehicles than the previously announced Marders, to support Ukrainian military forces in the future, the country's economy minister told German broadcaster ARD.

"Of course it can't be ruled out," Robert Habeck said.

His comments come two days after Germany said it wants to deliver around 40 Marder infantry fighting vehicles to Ukraine before the end of March, a decision Habeck said was good and long overdue.

U.S. 'top of the line' weapon will help change the war: Ukraine Ambassador - The abundance of new Western weapons heading to Ukraine will set an important precedent for expanding NATO support for Kyiv in 2023, one of the country's top ambassadors has said, as Ukrainian leaders press for victory over Russia in the coming year.

Vadym Prystaiko, Ukraine's ambassador to the U.K. and a former foreign affairs minister, told Newsweek at the Ukrainian Embassy in London that the evolution of Western military aid to include more advanced weapons is inevitable and vital to avoiding a frozen conflict.

"Let's bring it all up in a coordinated effort, and let's see what this can do," Prystaiko—who has also served as head of Ukraine's mission to NATO and ambassador to Canada—said about foreign aid. He warned that drip-feeding new weapons will be less effective. "Maybe it will be a breakthrough somewhere in the south, or the whole front will move

because of the additional artillery pieces and tanks and everything. So much so that the Russians will decide that enough is enough."

Wagner boss thinks military brass are out to get him - Wagner Group boss Prigozhin, the Kremlin-connected businessman who deployed his private army to help Putin terrorize Ukraine, says "people in uniform" connected to Russia's military may be out to get him because his mercenaries are outshining regular Russian troops on the battlefield.

In response to a question from local media Friday about social media posts that appear aimed at "discrediting" him, Prigozhin, through his press service, suggested that oligarchs may be targeting him as revenge for his criticism of their "negative influence on the future of Russia."

U.S. Patriots for Ukraine will have unimaginable result: Russian envoy - Russia's ambassador to the U.S. has warned that the arrival of the first Patriot surface-to-air missile system in Ukraine could have consequences "which cannot even be imagined." His comments come amid expanding American aid for Kyiv and President Zelenskyy's trip to Washington, which have rankled the Kremlin.

Ambassador Anatoly Antonov said Wednesday that Zelenskyy's visit to the U.S.—the first trip abroad by the Ukrainian leader since Moscow's invasion of his country began on February 24—showed that neither Kyiv nor Washington was serious about peace talks. These have been stalled since early in the invasion, with both sides refusing to compromise on their goals.

"Despite our warnings, [a] Patriot air defense system will be sent to Kyiv," Antonov said, Russia's state-run Tass news agency reported. "However, the country does not have specialists to work with them. So, will those be American specialists? Or citizens of another NATO country?"

"They cannot but realize here Western weapons are being systematically destroyed by our military. Everyone understands perfectly well what fate the personnel, manning these complexes on the territory of Ukraine, can face."

The Russian military has reportedly prioritized destroying high-profile Western weapons systems, including the M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket System—colloquially known as the HIMARS. To date, U.S. and Ukrainian officials say no HIMARS have been destroyed despite multiple Russian claims to the contrary.

Just this past week Russia claimed to have destroyed more HIMARS platforms.

Comment – Masters of disinformation.

Sanctions

France's GTT halts operations in Russia - French engineering group Gaztransport & Technigaz (GTT) has announced the suspension of the development of 15 ice-breaking LNG carriers in Russia.

This comes following an analysis of European sanction packages number eight and nine which prohibits engineering services with Russian companies.

Prior to these developments, GTT was involved in the design of 15 ice-breaking LNG carriers in Russia, under construction by the Zvezda Shipbuilding Complex. GTT was also involved in the design of three GBS1 for Saren B.V.2.

How Russia stole its way (thanks to the U.S. Navy) to stealth submarines - During the Cold War, US and Soviet weapons designers competed to field the best platforms in the air, land, and sea. Beneath the surface of the ocean, the competition was especially fierce; submarines had become a vital component of the nuclear triad – so fielding a capable submarine fleet had become a vital component of each great power's nuclear deterrence strategy.

The Soviets fielded capable submarines – but they had a catch, a fatal flaw. They were very, very loud.

“For a long time the Soviets didn’t seem to give a damn about the noise radiated by their submarines,” Ira Dyer, an ocean engineering professor at MIT, said during a 1987 interview.

Many Soviet Cold War submarines were very quick and armed to the teeth but nowhere near stealth. The high-decibel Soviet submarines had a problem with cavitation.

Much of the noise a submarine develops comes from the propeller. The excessive noise is a result of cavitation which occurs when a rapidly rotating propeller blade creates pockets of low pressure, forming bubbles along the surface of the propeller blade. As the propellers rotate, low-pressure bubbles detach from the blade, leaving a trail of “wake” behind the submarine. Once detached from the blade, the low-pressure bubbles snap back into a neutral-pressure state with a quite loud popping sound and easily detectable.

To fix the problem, the Soviets relied on espionage rather than industrial ingenuity. To gain America’s sub secrets the Soviets leaned not on one of their own citizens – but on an American: John Anthony Walker.

Walker joined the U.S. Navy in 1955 as an alternative to prison after being arrested for theft and did well, eventually becoming Chief Petty Officer aboard USS Andrew Jackson, an elite Navy Lafayette-class nuclear submarine where he was able to access classified information about the submarine, This is information Moscow would take much interest in and pay well for, which is what transpired when, in 1967, Walker walked into the Soviet Embassy in Washington D.C. and offer his services.

Struggling with debt and financially motivated, the Soviets milked him for nearly two decades. To assist with harvesting sensitive information, Walker recruited a spy ring, including members of his own family. His spy ring then sold his information to the Soviets – who began making significant improvements in their naval technology.

“The Soviet Union made significant gains in naval warfare attributable to Walker’s spying,” U.S. Naval Institute’s Naval History Magazine wrote. “His espionage provided Moscow access to weapons, sensor data and naval tactics, terrorist threats, and surface, submarine, and airborne training, readiness and tactics,” former Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger said.

Demonstrating Soviet naval improvements acme with the Victor III-class submarine, featuring a significantly reduced acoustic signature. Sailors of the US Navy would occasionally and cynically refer to it as the Walker submarine.

Geopolitics

Turkey-Greece conflict: President Erdogan on the brink of triggering war - He’s trashed Turkey’s economy. He’s locked up all opposition. He’s playing a deadly game standing between East and West. Now Erdogan is on the brink of triggering a war to boost his re-election chances.

It’s the centenary of Turkish democracy. On June 23, the nation that sits at the crossroads of Europe, Asia and the Middle East will go to the polls to choose a new president. It may be the last time its 85 million citizens get a chance to have a say in what path it chooses.

President Erdogan is in serious trouble. That’s despite rewriting the constitution, stacking the courts, jailing political opponents, guaranteeing the military’s loyalty and whipping up nationalistic fervor.

After 20 years of uninterrupted political success, his Islamist Justice and Development Party is polling just 30% support.

It’s little wonder why.

He refused to allow interest rates to rise, seeing inflation explode to 80% and Turkish lira collapse. Now people are simply unable to pay their bills.

Erdogan desperately needs a distraction.

In typically autocratic fashion, he's whipping up fear to justify a war. He's just not sure against whom it should be.

The embattled president is manufacturing border crises with his NATO ally Greece. Territorial waters, drilling rights and the future of Cyprus are all trigger points with this ancient foe.

Then there is the Kurdish minority in his own and surrounding countries. He's played this card several times before. Despite winning international acclaim for their successful stand against Islamic State, Erdogan paints them as separatists, terrorists and outsiders.

And that leads to another problem: Syria. Swarms of refugees have crossed the border from this civil-war-wracked neighbour. Now Erdogan is proposing to send in his tanks to resolve both issues with a single blow.

Each option, however, comes at a cost.

A war with Greece would trigger the NATO alliance against Turkey. Its relationship with Europe and the United States would evaporate. And sanctions would be the least of Erdogan's worries.

A war with Syria would topple Turkey's balancing act with Russia. Putin has been keen to use Erdogan as a wedge within the Western alliance. He's offered desperately needed cash in return.

But there is a third option: Making elections irrelevant.

Rules-based disorder

Erdogan paints himself as a protector of the people. Even if he has to protect them from themselves.

"This tactic, which he has utilized many times before, is an embodiment of devlet baba (or the Turkish concept of the state as a father)," Istanbul-based analyst Erin O'Brien writes in Foreign Policy. "Under this logic, the head of state can be flawed, corrupt, or make extreme decisions and still be trusted because he is believed to be doing so in the name of the family — the Turkish populace."

The most extreme example came in 2016.

A failed military coup enabled Erdogan to declare a state of emergency and detain some 110,000 people from opposition parties, media and academia. The legal fraternity, military and police received selective attention — as did ethnic-religious minorities. About 50,000 would be formally charged.

Since then, Erdogan has cemented these state-of-emergency powers as his own in perpetuity. And he continues to seize every opportunity to lock up any voice of opposition.

"Turkey today is a prime example of increasing authoritarian practices," says Center for Applied Turkey Studies in Berlin analyst Sinem Adar.

"Since the late 2000s, the country has steadily moved away from the rule of law and effective separation of powers ... The demise of Turkish democracy is arguably one of the most disappointing examples of a global trend."

With friends like these ...

Turkey is a member of NATO. It's an applicant to the European Union. But Erdogan has refused to impose sanctions against Russia for invading Ukraine, even as he sells advanced combat drones to the defenders in Kyiv.

“This initially appeared to be suicide for the president’s re-election prospects; but with hindsight, it made Turkey critical to all sides,” argues Ash.

But both sides are equally crucial to Erdogan.

Russia backs Syria.

Greece is part of NATO.

If Erdogan wants war with either, he’ll face consequences. Would the inevitable international backlash – whatever its source – be worth it?

Greece, however, is an ancient enemy. The border disputes between the two have prehistoric origins. Now the bickering has flared again. And such simmering hatred is a popular tool for autocrats struggling with problems at home.

“We can come suddenly one night ... if you Greeks go too far, then the price will be heavy,” Erdogan threatened late last year. “The islands you occupy do not bind us. We will do what is necessary when the time comes.”

Both Greece and Turkey are members of the NATO alliance. But NATO’s response to any conflict between the two is clear-cut.

An attack on any of its members is an attack on all.

Any member that becomes an attacker will be left to its own devices.

But Europe needs Turkey. And Turkey needs Europe.

“This is exemplified by the refugee deal that positions Turkey as Europe’s gatekeeper,” says Australian National University Turkish Studies expert Burcu Cevik-Compiegne.

“It partly explains the reluctance of Europe to impose sanctions on Turkey when Erdogan escalated the Greek-Turkish border crisis in 2020, sending a flood of refugees into Europe.”

Comment – With weakening of the Russian diplomatic and influencer role in Central Asia, Turkey is increasingly becoming more bellicose and ambitious in its self-view of this important East/West geographical junction.

As a child of the erstwhile Ottoman Empire and subsequent Young Turks, and just like with Russian geopolitical desires, he would like a larger and more important role on the global stage. He is flexing his muscles in any way he can.

But he needs to be observant of wider developments in this region. Iran is intently watching his every move and, also a descendant child of previous empire and influence, is seeking to raise its geopolitical profile.

And then we have China, bent on stepping into what it sees as a vacuum created by Russia, and in an area where success of their BRI program is dependent upon “local” goodwill.

Putin declares 'American world order' is ending, 'a truly multipolar world' has begun - Putin calls for an end to American world order and suggests the end of the U.S. being a world power is ending.

The war in Ukraine could mark the end of an international world order led by the United States, according to comments made by him last year.

What Happened: In July 2022, Putin told lawmakers in Russia that the dominance of the U.S. could be over soon, according to a report from Newsweek.

“They should have realized that they have already lost from the very beginning of our special military operation,” Putin said. “Its beginning also means the beginning of a radical breakdown of the American world order.”

Putin’s comments reference the involvement of the United States in providing support to Ukraine and also placing sanctions on Russia. “This is the beginning of the transition from liberal-globalist American egocentrism to a truly multipolar world.”

Putin said the transition “can no longer be stopped.”

Why It’s Important: Putin’s comments blame the Western countries, including the United States, for starting the war with Ukraine.

“It was unleashed by this very collective West, organizing and then supporting an unconstitutional armed coup in Ukraine in 2014, and then encouraging and justifying genocide against people in Donbas,” Putin said.

Humanitarian

Russia must face tribunal for ‘crime of aggression’ in Ukraine, say UK cross-party leaders - Pressure grows on Putin as politicians and lawyers point to principles that led to Nuremberg trials of Nazi war criminals

Demands for a special tribunal to investigate Russia for a “crime of aggression” against Ukraine have been backed by senior UK politicians from across the political divide in a move to show Putin and his generals that they will be held to account.

In a joint statement shared with the Observer, figures including the Labour leader Keir Starmer, former NATO secretary general George Robertson, former foreign secretary David Owen, and former Tory leader Iain Duncan Smith say the tribunal should be set up to look into the “manifestly illegal war” on the same principles that guided the allies when they met in 1941 to lay the groundwork for the Nuremberg war crimes trials of Nazi leaders.

While the International Criminal Court (ICC) is already looking at allegations of war crimes and crimes against humanity in relation to the Ukraine invasion, advocates for a special tribunal say it is needed because the ICC does not have the power to examine the crime of aggression. The UN defines an act of aggression as the “invasion or attack by the armed forces of a state on the territory of another state, or any military occupation.”

A special tribunal heaps further pressure on Russia and Putin, its advocates say. It would stop senior Russian officials from travelling for fear of arrest, show solidarity with Ukraine, which has requested the tribunal, and send a message from the international community that aggression will not go unpunished. It would also examine Belarus’s role.

“It has been 10 months since Russia, backed by Belarus, launched the largest ground invasion in Europe since WWII, they write. “Since then, thousands of Ukrainian civilians have been killed or injured, 8 million people have been internally displaced and around 8 million have become refugees. Civilian infrastructure and economic assets worth tens of billions have been destroyed or plundered, and irreplaceable cultural monuments reduced to rubble.

“If proven in court, these acts of aggression constitute what the Nuremberg trials termed the ‘supreme international crime.’ For it is the crime of aggression from which most other international crimes – war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide – often flow.”

The statement was drawn up by former PM Brown and Philippe Sands, a law professor who first raised the idea of a special tribunal. Others who signed the statement include human rights barristers Cherie Blair and Helena Kennedy.

The Netherlands said earlier it was willing to host such a tribunal backed by the UN. EU president Ursula von der Leyen has also said a new tribunal with broad support was needed to ensure Russia's invasion did not go unpunished. A Ukrainian delegation travelled to the US last month in an effort to gain support for the move.

A UK government spokesperson said: "There is growing evidence that appalling atrocities have been committed during Russia's illegal and immoral invasion of Ukraine. We have been actively supporting Ukraine's own domestic judicial system, investigations and prosecutions, as well as the investigation under way by the ICC. We are, of course, carefully considering other proposals for mechanisms to hold Russia to account."

The move came as Russia continued to launch attacks across Ukraine on Saturday, despite declaring a unilateral ceasefire for the Orthodox celebration of Christmas. One attack killed a civilian couple in their 60s in eastern Bakhmut.

Ukraine has the 'largest' minefield in the world: PM - Ukraine's PM Denys Shmyhal said the war has resulted in a minefield of 250,000sq km (96,526sq miles) in the war-torn nation.

"It is currently the largest minefield in the world," Shmyhal told South Korea's Yonhap news agency.

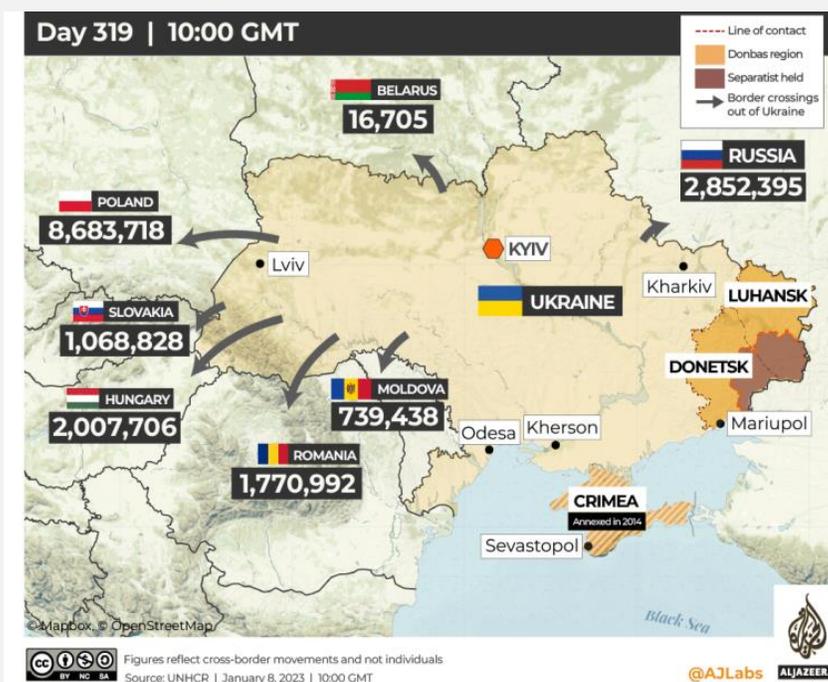
The mined area, according to Shmyhal, is equivalent to more than 40 percent of Ukraine's total land area.

"It's not only making it difficult for people to travel, but also causing major disruptions in farming, which is one of our main industries," he said.

Almost eight million people have fled Ukraine: UN - The Russian invasion of Ukraine has unleashed the largest wave of refugees since World War II, the UN refugee body has said.

"More than 7.9 million people have fled the country, and another 5.9 million are internally displaced," said the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees representative in Germany, Katharina Lumpkin.

The total figure of almost 14 million represents more than a third of the country's total population of around 41 million.



Putin

Moscow sees growing 'split in power' amid Putin's war: Ex-Russian commander - Moscow leadership is seeing a growing divide amid its floundering invasion of Ukraine, according to one ex-Kremlin commander.

Putin launched his "special military operation," aiming for a quick victory against his Eastern European neighbor. More than 10 months later, however, his troops are still continuing to struggle to make progress. In addition, the war has exposed weaknesses in Putin's military, allowing Ukraine to retake significant occupied territory.

Now, this lack of progress appears to be sparking a divide among Russian leadership, according to ex-commander Igor Girkin, a pro-war Russian nationalist who has become increasingly critical about the invasion's execution.

Girkin, in a Telegram post on Saturday, shared a report indicating that Yevgeny Prigozhin—who leads the Wagner Group—suggested that "money oligarchs" could be responsible for "discrediting" his organization's work in Ukraine (see article above).

Prigozhin's Wagner Group is a privately owned mercenary group, consisting of ex-convicts, that have been recruited to fight in Ukraine to make up for mounting Russian losses. The group has faced accusations of conducting human rights abuses and attacks on civilians, and has recently found itself at odds with some Russian authorities.

Girkin wrote that Prigozhin's remarks blaming oligarchs for new criticisms of the Wagner Group are illustrative of the growing division.

"If I knew how to draw, I would create a caricature on which two heads of our national coat of arms, equipped with faces, peck at each other," Girkin wrote. "The split in power is growing."