

Conflict Update # 40

April 25th, 2022

Conflict Assessment

Russian forces resumed ground attacks against Mariupol's Azovstal Steel Plant in the last 24 hours. Russian officers may assess they will be unable to starve out the remaining defenders by May 9 (a possible self-imposed deadline to complete the capture of Mariupol). Russian forces will likely take high casualties if they resume major ground assaults to clear the facility.

Russian forces are accelerating efforts to secure occupied Mariupol but will likely face widespread Ukrainian resistance.

Continued Russian attacks in eastern Ukraine took little to no additional territory in the past 24 hours.

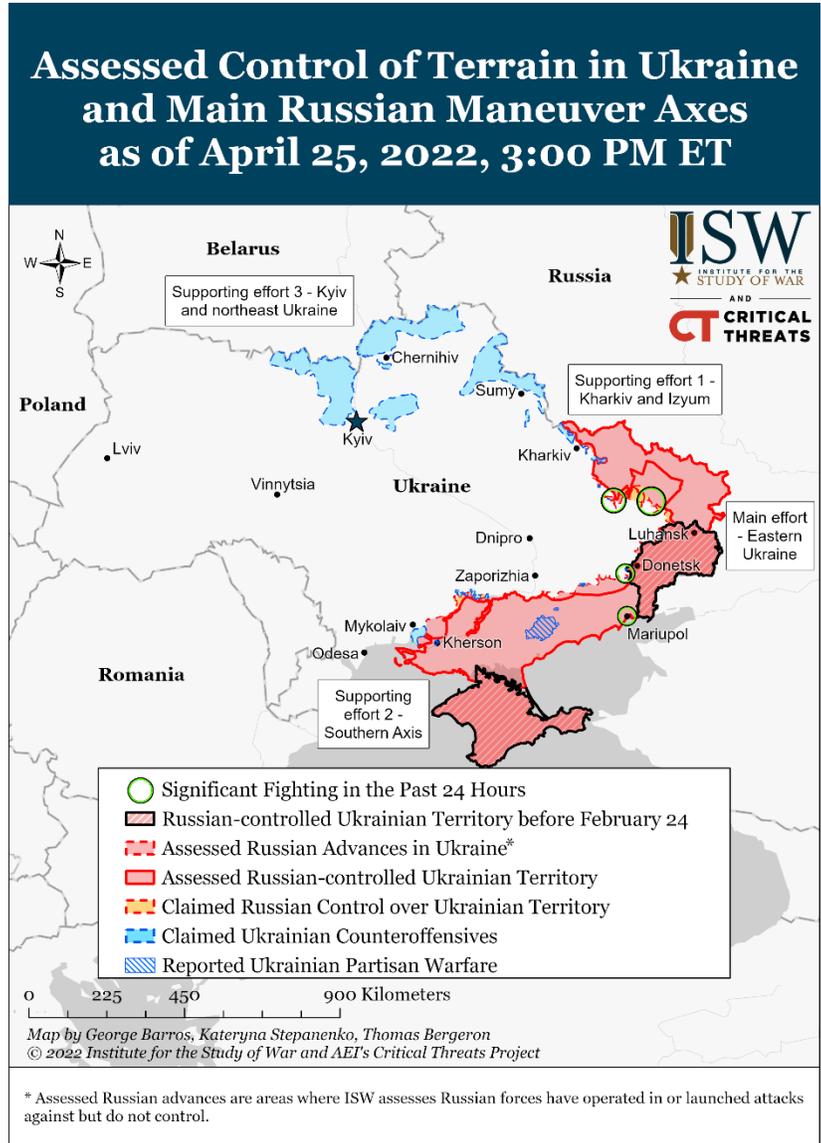
Prudent tactical Ukrainian counterattacks around Izyum are likely impeding Russian efforts to complete even tactical encirclements of Ukrainian forces.

Russian forces are preparing for renewed attacks to capture the entirety of Kherson Oblast in southern Ukraine after minor losses in the past 48 hours.

Russian forces likely conducted a false flag attack in Transnistria (Russia's illegally occupied territory in Moldova) to amplify Russian claims of anti-Russian sentiment in Moldova, but Transnistrian forces remain unlikely to enter the war in Ukraine.

Subordinate Main Effort—Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts - Russian forces continued shelling along the entire frontline in Donetsk and Luhansk and did not secure any confirmed advances in continuing ground attacks on April 25. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian assaults against Koroviy Yar and Rubizhne and that fighting is ongoing in Popasna.

Supporting Effort #1—Kharkiv and Izyum - Russian forces continued to mount unsuccessful ground offensives southward from Izyum toward Barvinkove and Slovyansk on April 25.



Supporting Effort #2—Southern Axis - The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces are consolidating in the southern direction to conduct limited attacks west toward Mykolaiv and north toward Kryvyi Rih after conducting limited withdrawals from several forward positions in the past two days.

Supporting Effort #3—Sumy and Northeastern Ukraine - There was no significant change in this area in the past 24 hours.

Immediate items to watch

- Russian forces will likely continue attacking southeast from Izyum, west from Kreminna and Popasna, and north from Donetsk City via Avdiivka or another axis.
- Russian officers may assess they will be unable to starve out remaining defenders by May 9 (a possible self-imposed deadline to complete the capture of Mariupol) but will likely take high casualties if they resume major ground assaults to clear the facility.
- Russian forces will likely increase the scale of ground offensive operations in the coming days, but it is too soon to tell how fast they will do so or how large those offensives will be. It is also too soon to assess how the Russians will weight their efforts in the arc from Izyum to Donetsk City.

Putin’s Ukraine Problem Keeps Getting Worse (More US Weapons Are Coming) - US Secretary Of State and Defense Meet With Zelensky In Kyiv – While their mission was supposed to be a clandestine one due to security concerns, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin flew to Kyiv via Poland and met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. During the meeting, the US pledged over \$300 million in new aid for Ukraine.

And more importantly, the US has also pledged to also re-open its embassy in Kyiv. This visit by the two secretaries was the highest-level American visit to Ukraine since the Russian invasion began on February 24.

Ukrainian Forces Annihilate Column Of Russian Tanks – Ukrainian drone images show a column of Russian tanks advancing before they are suddenly hit by Ukrainian ordnance. Some of them come to a standstill, while others can be seen attempting to turn around.

The footage then cuts and shows the Russian tanks with the white letter ‘Z’ daubed on them. The camera pans upwards and shows damaged Russian tanks, still smoking after being hit by Ukrainian weaponry.



The footage then cuts and shows some of the tanks up close. The tanks can also be seen with the letter ‘Z’ daubed on them, with one of the military vehicles even having had its caterpillar tracks blown off, stopping it dead.

It is unclear if any of the Russian soldiers managed to flee after their attempted advance on Ukrainian positions was repelled.

The British government says it believes 25% of the Russian combat units sent to Ukraine “have been rendered not combat effective.”

Russian oil depot ablaze - Russia's Energy Ministry acknowledged a massive fire at an oil depot in the western city of Bryansk, less than 100 miles from the Ukraine border, on the same day Russia attacked Ukrainian rail and fuel installations.

Fire Engulfs Key Russian Oil Depots Near Ukraine - A fire has erupted at a key Russian oil depot and a second military site near the Ukrainian border, Russian authorities said early Monday. Social media accounts based in Russia's Bryansk region shared footage of what they described as explosions and a fire at the Transneft-Druzhba depot. The state-run oil export company's subsidiary runs one of the world's longest oil pipelines from Russia to Europe.

Russia scared?

Russia running scared III? Over the past two Updates I have listed why I believe Putin and Russia are "scared," what they have done and against these acts were perpetrated.

Today we link that intent and action to culpability and guilt.

By the very act of calling the invasion a "Special Military Operation" so as to avoid falling foul of Russian law, Putin is showing a presence of mind, an intent to change perception of action, the mindful ability to make the decision and criminal intent.

He has shown his ability to distinguish right from wrong, that his mind is conscious thereof and that he keenly aware of what he is doing by re-phrasing an illegal act as a legal one.

That he then outlawed calling it a "war" further enforces his consciousness of mind, his criminal intent and his ability to distinguish right from wrong – he knows it to be wrong, so he calls it something else in order to circumvent the illegality of the act – again proving a sense of mens rea.

Purposeful and intentional targeting of civilian communities and adjacent innocent participants such as hospitals and rail stations similarly illustrates a determined sense of mind, a goal of action and an acknowledgement of intent.

Putin and his surrounding counsel of advisors are all proving their culpability, both in terms of the Russian constitution as well as international law.

Russia's youth are still technologically 'one step ahead' of Putin's regime - and can get access to social media and international news. Despite the Kremlin's grip on information in Russia, one Russian journalist said the country's youth still have ways to access banned social media networks and websites — and are "one step ahead" of a regime trying to control the narrative of the war in Ukraine.

"It is really important to understand that new generation in Russian Federation is more sophisticated than Vladimir Putin and his team, technologically," said Ekaterina Kotrikadze, news director and anchor for independent Russian news outlet TV Rain, in a Sunday interview with CNN. "They know how to be one step ahead of the regime, so that's why they are still getting information," Kotrikadze said.

Peace Talks

The fact that negotiations continue through daily virtual talks was confirmed in Moscow, even if the positive spin was reduced by Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who asserted that Russia would not tolerate any "ultimatums" from Ukraine (Izvestia, April 22). Zelenskyy had previously stated that talks would be broken if Russia continued to murder the defenders of besieged Mariupol (RBC, April 16). Putin responded by giving a direct order to Defense Minister Sergei

Shoigu not to storm but merely to blockade the last bastion of armed resistance, at the Azovstal steel plant, located across the river from the port city's central district (Kommersant, April 21).

The futility of negotiations is determined not by the complexity of the issues related to security guarantees but by the firm Ukrainian demand that all Russian troops withdraw to the positions held prior to February 24, when the present war started on Putin's order (Meduza, April 22). This plain proposition denies Russia any territorial gains, including the defiant Mariupol, and erases the land corridor to Crimea, which Moscow tries to consolidate by installing local puppet governments in the partly occupied Kherson region (Grani.ru, April 21).

Ukraine cannot win the war by merely defending against Russian attacks, but the increased supply of heavy arms from the United States, as well as from the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and other European countries, makes it possible to launch counter-offensive operations, aimed specifically at Kherson (Nezavisimoe Voennoe Obozrenie, April 21).

Moscow is irked and alarmed by these expanded deliveries for several reasons. **First**, they even more firmly anchor Ukraine to the West, as the visit to Kyiv of US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has demonstrated (RIA Novosti, April 25). **Second**, Moscow is upset because the Russian military-industrial complex, targeted specifically by Western sanctions, is increasingly revealing that it is unable to produce key weapon systems necessary to compensate for the heavy losses incurred on the Ukrainian battlefield (Svoboda.org, April 23). Putin tried to obscure this shortcoming by boasting about the first test launch of the Sarmat intercontinental ballistic missile (IBCM), which he announced was ready for deployment back in May 2018 (Kommersant, April 22). The Sarmat may finally become operational in another four years. But what matters now is the complete disorganization of the Russian aircraft-building industry, which cannot obtain crucial technological components due to the breakdown of supply chains (Riddle.io, April 18).

Sanctions

A top Russian lender canceled nearly \$6 billion in accrued interest on a perpetual bond as companies struggle to meet debt obligations. Russian lender Sovcombank PJSC canceled \$5.81 billion of interest accrued on one of its perpetual bonds, the first firm to make such a move as sanctions continue to impact creditors' ability to make debt payments, Bloomberg reported Monday.

The rights and claims of bondholders over the canceled interest "shall become null and void," it said in a Monday regulatory filing.

Sovcombank's move with its perpetual bond — a fixed income security without a maturity date — is uncommon among European banks.

The West's wartime sanctions have made it difficult for Russian companies to meet debt obligations, and many firms have had to pay in rubles, or have payments pending.

U.S. Holds Sanctions on Rumored Putin 'Mistress' Kabaeva - The United States halted planned sanctions against President Vladimir Putin's rumored "mistress," former Olympic gymnast Alina Kabaeva, at the last minute, The Wall Street Journal reported Sunday.

Construction of Norway-Poland gas pipeline resumes - Work on a pipeline to deliver natural gas from Norway to Poland has resumed in Denmark after a nine-month suspension. The Baltic Pipe, which is expected to deliver 10 billion cubic metres of gas annually to Poland — about half of the country's total consumption — should be fully operational from 1 January 2023. (Euronews).

Putin: US, allies are trying to 'split Russian society' with war in Ukraine - Putin today is accusing the United States and its allies of trying to "split Russian society" following its invasion of Ukraine.

Speaking at a meeting with top officials at the Prosecutor General's office, Putin said Russia has come under "unprecedented Western sanctions" for its military campaign in Ukraine, which is now in its 61st day.

He charged that the U.S, and its allies have sought to "split the Russian society and to destroy Russia from within," adding that their plans have failed.

India's Russian oil purchases since Ukraine invasion more than double 2021 total - India has bought more than twice as much crude oil from Russia in the two months since its invasion of Ukraine as it did in the whole of 2021, according to Reuters calculations, as Indian refiners snapped up discounted oil that others have shunned.

Refiners in India have placed orders for at least 40 million barrels of Russian oil since the invasion on Feb. 24, Reuters calculations based on information from crude tenders and traders show. The purchases are for loading in the June quarter.

Putin

Putin Health Speculation Intensifies – A viral video showing Vladimir Putin's hand trembling before a meeting with his Belarusian counterpart has added to concerns about the health of the Russian leader.

In the footage, Putin can be seen holding his hand up and shaking it before he greets Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko and embraces him. Putin also appears to walk with a stiff leg before taking a few steps forward, sparking further concern for his health.

Russia Accused Of Faking Putin's Easter Appearance - Over the past week, people have been observing Putin's body language across a number of clips. For example, in one clip he can be seen gripping the table and looking a bit bloated. While attending the Easter mass service on Sunday, April 24, Putin could also been biting his lips and slightly swaying, bolstering theories that he's in poor health.

Anders Aslund, a former adviser to Russia and Ukraine, said he looked 'depressed and seemingly in bad health,' as per Metro. However, another theory regarding the Easter service has emerged: some believe the footage has been doctored, and Putin wasn't there whatsoever, either due to being ill or busy with the invasion of Ukraine.

In the footage, Putin can be seen attending in Moscow's Christ the Saviors Cathedral alongside the city's mayor Sergei Sobyanin. Both men were wearing similar attire to last years' service.

Humanitarian

Mariupol - Ukrainian President Zelenskyy said new evidence is emerging that shows Russian troops killed tens of thousands of civilians in Mariupol and then tried to cover it up.

International Criminal Court to join probe into possible war crimes - The International Criminal Court in The Hague will join the investigation into allegations of war crimes committed in Ukraine. A Joint Investigative Team was set up by Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine to prepare possible prosecutions within countries and before the international court. ICC Prosecutor Karim Khan and the prosecutors general of the three countries signed an agreement Monday.

Mariupol officials say new mass grave found - Officials in the embattled Ukrainian city of Mariupol say a new mass grave has been identified north of the city.

Mayor Vadym Boychenko said authorities are trying to estimate the number of victims in the grave about 10 kilometers (about 6 miles) north of Mariupol. Satellite photos released over the past several days have shown what appear to be images of other mass graves.

Evidence some Ukrainian women raped before being killed, say doctors - Forensic doctors carrying out postmortem examinations on bodies in mass graves north of Kyiv say they have found evidence some women were raped before being killed by Russian forces.

“We already have a few cases which suggest that these women had been raped before being shot to death,” said Vladyslav Perovskyi, a Ukrainian forensic doctor who with a team of coroners has carried out dozens of autopsies on residents from Bucha, Irpin and Borodyanka who died during Russia’s month-long occupation of the area.

“We can’t give more details as my colleagues are still collecting the data and we still have hundreds of bodies to examine,” he said.

Following the withdrawal of Russian troops from towns and suburbs around the capital, dozens of women have told police, the media and human rights organisations about atrocities they say they suffered at the hands of Russian soldiers. Investigators have heard testimony of gang-rapes, assaults taking place at gunpoint and rapes committed in front of children.

Ukraine’s human rights commissioner, Lyudmila Denisova, has officially documented the cases of 25 women who were kept in a basement and systematically raped in Bucha, a town north of Kyiv now synonymous with Russian war crimes. Authorities have warned those cases could be the tip of the iceberg and accused Russian troops of using rape as an instrument of war.

Nuclear

As the fighting grinds on, the war is looking more familiar and increasingly resembles many other conflicts over the last seven decades. This suggests that general, structural features of the situation are imposing themselves on the belligerents, guiding their choices into surprisingly well-worn grooves. Ukraine, in short, is following the pattern of limited war in the nuclear age, echoing a script written in Korea and copied many times since. This is not a new era, only a new phase in the old one. And even the new phase is playing by the same old rules—with significant implications for the remainder of the war and beyond.

The struggle will either conclude with a negotiated settlement involving a territorial status quo ante, or it will subside into a frozen conflict along the armies’ stalemated line of contact in the east. That is, the war’s end will resemble those in the Korean and Gulf Wars or the situation in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria. Either way, as in Korea, the shock of the initial aggression has galvanized a broader balancing coalition that will remain even when the fighting stops. Russia chose a hot war and will get a cold one in the bargain.

Whatever some interpretations of Russian military doctrine might suggest, Moscow will not use nuclear weapons during the conflict. Since 1945, every leader of a nuclear power, from homespun politicians such as U.S. Presidents Harry Truman and Lyndon Johnson to mass-murdering sociopaths such as Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong, has rejected the use of nuclear weapons in battle for excellent reasons. Putin will be no exception, acting not from a soft heart but a hard head. He knows that extraordinary retaliation and universal opprobrium would follow, with no remotely comparable strategic upsides to justify them—not to mention the fact that the radioactive fallout from such use might easily blow back onto Russia itself.

For related reasons, NATO will not attack Russia or try to decapitate the Russian regime so as to avoid making Putin desperate. There will be no introduction of NATO troops, no no-fly zone, and no hot pursuit of Russian forces should

they withdraw back into home territory. All these actions would carry major risks of escalation, which NATO wants to avoid as much as Moscow. Conversely, NATO will feel compelled to deny Moscow a significant victory, not just for Ukraine's sake but to avoid setting the dangerous precedent that nuclear weapons are useful for protecting the ill-gotten gains of conventional aggression. (Foreign Affairs)

Impacts

EU, India agree to broaden ties amid Ukraine war – The European Union (EU) and India agreed on Monday to set up a trade and technology council to step up cooperation as the bloc's chief held talks with officials in New Delhi who have seen a flurry of top visits since the start of the Ukraine war.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen is on a two-day trip to India's capital, part of Western efforts to encourage New Delhi to reduce ties to Russia, its main weapons supplier, following Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.

India has refrained from explicitly condemning Russia's invasion, while calling for an immediate end to violence.

Russia becomes an Asian nation - Sanctions may be empowering Russia to create the pathways for financial and economic independence from the West. Russia, according to a recent caustic headline in Bloomberg, is facing “reverse industrialization” due to the US-led sanctions regime that has been imposed for its invasion of its neighbor, Ukraine.

Certainly, the American sanctions have done much harm in the near term to Russia's economy (and, therefore, its political stability at home and its long-term ability to conduct wide-ranging military operations).

In the long term, however, the sanctions have merely hardened Russian resistance to the West and intransigence on the Ukraine issue. More important, the regime of President Vladimir Putin appears unwilling to abandon its present course of action in Ukraine, no matter how tightly Washington and Brussels squeeze Moscow economically.

In fact, Western sanctions have forced Moscow to begin employing new, dynamic strategies for surviving the economic assault Russia is being subjected to.

For example, as the West has enacted its partial, self-imposed moratorium on the importation of cheap, important Russian natural gas as punishment for the invasion of Ukraine, Moscow has merely shifted its energy flows away from Europe to thirsty markets in the Far East (notably those in India and China).

So, what we are witnessing is not the total defeat of Russia (though Ukraine has, with help from the Western alliance, held its own against the Russian invader). Instead, what one is witnessing today is the death of Western Russia and the birth of an Asian Russia.

Foreign investors are ditching China. Russia's war is the latest trigger - Investors are ditching China on an unprecedented scale as a cocktail of political and business risks, and rising interest rates elsewhere, make the world's second biggest economy a less attractive place to keep their money.

China witnessed \$17.5 billion worth of portfolio outflows last month, an all-time high, according to most recent data from the Institute of International Finance (IIF). The US-based trade association called this capital flight by overseas investors “unprecedented,” especially as there were no similar outflows from other emerging markets during this period. The outflows included \$11.2 billion in bonds, while the rest were equities.

Europeans are trying to root out Russian spies - Amid the war in Ukraine, a clandestine battle is being waged throughout Europe.

Since the beginning of March, more than 400 Russian diplomatic staff have been expelled from embassies and diplomatic missions across the continent, including in most EU countries.

The majority of those expelled are suspected of being Russian intelligence operatives.

Major expulsions of diplomatic staff have happened before. European countries expelled nearly 200 Russians after Russian intelligence operatives attempted to assassinate defected spy Sergei Skripal in the UK in 2018.

Containment

US invites 14 non-NATO nations to Ukraine defense summit - The invite list for a high-level military meeting around Ukraine, hosted Tuesday in Germany by US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, includes 14 non-NATO nations ranging from Japan to Kenya to Israel, according to planning documents viewed by Breaking Defense.

All told, 43 countries, including all NATO members, were invited to the meeting at Ramstein Air Force Base, where the US will make a push for how allies and partners can come together to best support Ukraine's ongoing defense against Russia.

The non-NATO countries who were invited to Tuesday's meeting come from around the globe:

- Key Pacific partners: Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand
- Representatives from the Middle East: Israel, Qatar and Jordan
- A quartet of African nations: Kenya, Liberia, Morocco and Tunisia (note – no South Africa or Nigeria)
- Three European nations whose future is in the balance: Sweden and Finland, which appear poised to move towards NATO membership within weeks, and, of course, Ukraine itself

As to the substance of the meeting, it will kick off with opening comments from Austin and Ukrainian defense minister Oleksii Reznikov, according to a tentative schedule also viewed by Breaking Defense. The first major presentation will come from Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Mark Milley and will include an intelligence assessment of Russia's shift in tactics and strategy, particularly in the Donbas, where the Russians now appear to be focusing their efforts.

Other presentations include comments from a Polish representative, a roundtable of "views from the eastern flank" that will include representatives from Romania, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Lithuania and Hungary. It will also feature a brief from US European Command head Gen. Tod Wolters on Ukraine's military requirements. (Breaking Defense).

U.S. Wants to See Russia Weakened, Says Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin After Ukraine Visit - The U.S. aims to degrade Russia's military capabilities and strengthen Ukraine's to prevent Moscow from attempting to conquer territory by force in the future, U.S. officials said in a new statement of the Biden administration's policy goals toward the two countries.

Mr Putin's accusations of the West attempting to "destroy Russia", made during a speech on Monday, appeared to be in response to Mr Austin's comments.

Again, as mentioned in yesterday's Update "Ukraine is not all about Ukraine."

Heavy weaponry pours into Ukraine - Western countries are rushing heavy weaponry to Ukraine as the war enters what promises to be a deadly, and potentially protracted, new phase.

Those deliveries are coming amid increasingly desperate pleas from Ukrainian battlefield commanders as they endure withering Russian artillery and rocket fire that could last weeks or months.

Over the past two weeks, the Biden administration began shipping out \$1.2 billion worth of howitzers, around 200,000 artillery rounds, armored vehicles, counter-battery radars and experimental new armed drones capable of flying into targets. The deliveries are a significant advance from the small arms and Javelin anti-tank armor shipments that

dominated the first eight weeks of fighting, and which helped stave off Russian thrusts toward the capital of Kyiv in the early days of the invasion.

On Friday, France and Canada unveiled new plans to send long-range artillery systems for the first time, and the U.K. is looking to backfill heavy armor to Poland as Warsaw contemplates sending Polish tanks to Ukraine.

On Sunday, during a surprise trip to Kyiv by Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, the U.S. announced more than \$300 million in foreign military financing to allow Ukraine to purchase more sophisticated weapons, along with an additional \$165 million for ammunition.

Russia Warns United States Against Sending More Arms to Ukraine - Russia told the United States to stop sending more arms to Ukraine, warning that large Western deliveries of weapons were inflaming the conflict and would lead to more losses, Moscow's ambassador to Washington said.

NATO

Sweden and Finland agree to submit NATO applications, say reports - Sweden and Finland have agreed to submit simultaneous membership applications to the US-led NATO alliance as early as the middle of next month, Nordic media have reported.

Finnish daily Iltalehti said on Monday that Stockholm had “suggested the two countries indicate their willingness to join” on the same day, and that Helsinki had agreed “as long as the Swedish government has made its decision.”

Swedish newspaper Expressen cited government sources as confirming the report. The two countries' prime ministers said this month they were deliberating the question, arguing Russia's invasion of Ukraine had changed Europe's “whole security landscape” and “dramatically shaped mindsets” in the Nordic region.

Airbase in Albanian town once named after Stalin to be used by NATO - An airbase in an Albania town once named after Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin is now being transformed into a NATO position. The base in Kucova, in central Albania, had been used since the collapse of the USSR in 1990 as a graveyard for Soviet- and Chinese-made jets.

Now, NATO is investing \$55 million (€50.4 million) to renovate it into a tactical operational base for state-of-the-art military planes complete with refueling capabilities and ammunition storage. The project was agreed upon in 2018 and construction began earlier this year, before Russia launched its military assault on Ukraine on 24 February. It is expected to be completed in 2023.

Widening of conflict and war

Japan's Crucial Role in Southeast Asia amid the Ukraine War - Russia's attack on Ukraine is a moment of reckoning for many international bodies. The implications of the crisis range from questioning the viability of the rules-based order and the fitness of the United Nations system to challenging the concepts of war and defense. And these debates are unfolding as countries face the trickle-down economic effects of sanctions on Russia and other disruptions. As the international community takes different positions on this conflict, the role of influential actors is even more critical. And Japan—both capable and willing to bridge the growing fissure—is increasingly taking on that role.

The war in Ukraine may seem a faraway matter for many not directly involved, and this has been a frequent argument as to why some countries prefer distancing themselves from the issue diplomatically. In Southeast Asia, many have opted to stick with the traditional nonalignment philosophy of not taking sides to avoid being entangled. Other than Singapore, which has decisively condemned Putin's attack and applied economic sanctions on Moscow, other countries have taken a much lower profile stance. That is due to an array of factors, including relatively positive bilateral

relationships with Russia. Vietnam in particular is in a hard place, given that over 80 percent of its defense equipment is supplied by Moscow. For Indonesia and Malaysia, although much less in comparison, Russia is also a major exporter.

Increasingly the global spotlight is on Southeast Asia, particularly countries that this year play a wider regional role. Indonesia chairs the G20, Thailand chairs the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit, and Cambodia chairs the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and East Asia Summit (EAS). There has been increasing diplomatic pressure to exclude Russia from these gatherings, putting their respective chairs in a difficult position. Calls to disinvite Russia from multilateral forums, particularly the G20, may yield a reverse effect if not skillfully applied. For one, it is perceived that pressure comes from the “West,” and if too imposing, may be interpreted as infringing on the host countries’ independence of judgment. Indonesia, even before the war in Ukraine, has on a number of occasions voiced discontent that U.S. diplomats seeking the country’s support against China and other revisionist powers “interferes” with Jakarta’s own independent foreign policy. Yet, it is Indonesia—the region’s largest democracy—that will shoulder more of that diplomatic scrutiny this year, not only by virtue of its G20 chairmanship, but also because it is the only country that sits in ASEAN, APEC, and the G20.

Six “external powers” share membership in the G20, APEC, and the East Asia Summit: Australia, China, Japan, Russia, South Korea, and the United States. Of these, Japan is in the best position to engage in the subtle diplomacy with hosting nations necessary to manage tensions over Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. While Seoul and Canberra also have significant interests in the region, in this critical juncture, they both have been preoccupied with domestic priorities: elections. The Republic of Korea just conducted an election in March, and Australia’s voting date is May 21. Tokyo’s position in Southeast Asia has been comparatively more entrenched. Reaping the benefits of long-term and deeply engaged partnerships in the region, it has enjoyed a consistently high level of trust. One indicator of the trust that Tokyo enjoys is the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute’s annual survey of regional elite perceptions, in which Japan has continuously been seen as Southeast Asia’s most trusted partner. Despite a minor drop compared with last year, neither the general view of Japan nor Tokyo’s commitment to the region are likely to experience major swings.

Strong economic ties and mutual recognition of interdependence make Southeast Asia and Japan much closer compared to others. Even with regard to conceptions of the Indo-Pacific promoted by a number of countries and institutions, which some in Southeast Asia worry undermine ASEAN centrality, the grouping’s views favor Tokyo’s more inclusive vision of the region. Consecutive leaders of Japan have clearly prioritized Southeast Asia, making a habit of visiting one of the ASEAN capitals as part of their inaugural international travels. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited Hanoi in 2012, and Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga also visited Vietnam and Indonesia after taking office in 2020. While Prime Minister Fumio Kishida is relatively new in the position, he already visited Cambodia—this year’s ASEAN and EAS chair—last month. He is reportedly planning another trip to Indonesia, and possibly Thailand or Vietnam, in the coming weeks. Tokyo’s active and skillful diplomacy may not guarantee that it can sway Jakarta, Bangkok, Phnom Penh, or anyone else, but it stands the best chance to engage more constructively. (CSIS).

One Year After Kyrgyz-Tajik Conflict, Tensions Still High Along Border - The armies of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan fought brief but destructive skirmishes along their frontier at the end of April 2021. Tensions had been building for years before that, and despite efforts to build trust and calm emotions after last year's conflict, three people have been shot dead since March in clashes between border guards

Both are members of the old Soviet Union and under a watchful eye from Moscow.

Croatia - Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova accused Croatia of "destroying bilateral relations" for failing to provide “humanitarian” passage for 24 Russian diplomats and embassy staff who were expelled from Croatia over the war in Ukraine. Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic said the claims are Russian propaganda.

Moldova - Explosions in separatist Moldovan region of Transnistria, which borders Ukraine. Police in the Moldovan separatist region of Transnistria say several explosions believed to be caused by rocket-propelled grenades hit the Ministry of State Security on Monday, causing no reported injuries but breaking windows and prompting smoke to emanate from the building.

Transnistria, a strip of land with about 470,000 people between Moldova and Ukraine to the east, has been under the control of separatist authorities since a 1992 war with Moldova. Russia bases about 1,500 troops there nominally as peacekeepers, but there are growing concerns that the forces could be used to invade Ukraine.

Russian commander Rustam Minnekayev said last week that the country's forces intend to take control of southern Ukraine, which would open the way to Transnistria.

Russia investigating claims of 'sabotage' by British SAS in Ukraine - Russia says it will look into reports that British SAS have been deployed to western Ukraine – again ratcheting up tensions with the West.

If Vladimir Putin's forces find that the Special Air Service are operating in the country, that could dramatically escalate the war because Britain is a NATO member.

Russia's RIA Novosti news agency quoted a Russian security source this weekend as saying about 20 members of the elite fighting unit had been sent to the Lviv region.

Independent observers have long ago come to view Russian claims about the war with severe skepticism, but the UK did not deny that its forces were there.