

Conflict Update # 313

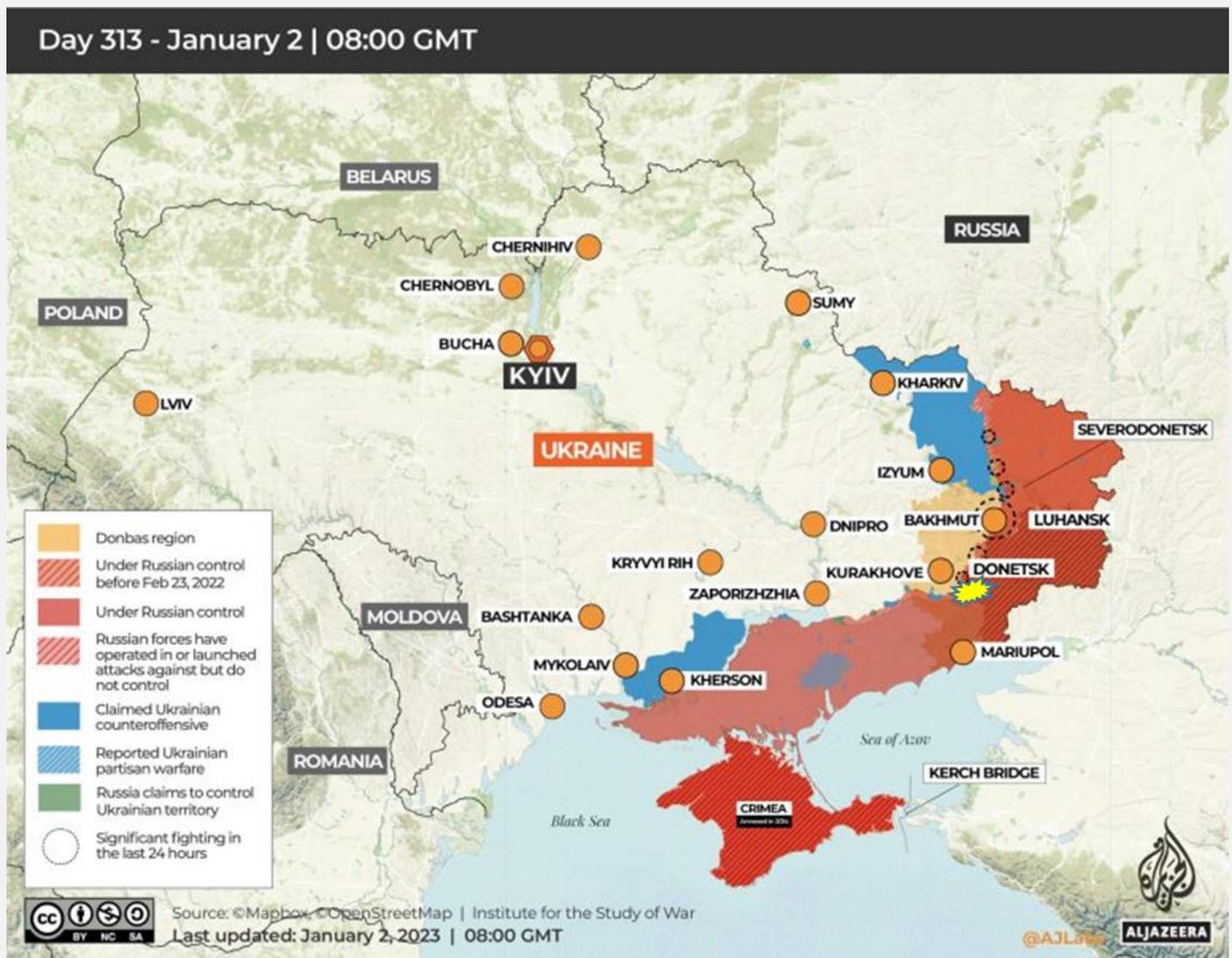
January 2nd, 2023

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Conflict Assessment

Russian losses – 107,440 (720) soldiers killed, 3,031 (+0) enemy tanks, 6,093 (+9) armored combat vehicles, 2,027 (+6) artillery systems, 423 (+0) MLRS systems, 213 (+0) air defense systems, 283 (+0) warplanes, 269 (+0) helicopters, 1,836 (+44) UAVs of the operational-tactical level, 723 (+0) cruise missiles, 16 (+0) warships/cutters, 4,725 (+5) trucks and tankers, 4 Iskander Missile Launchers (+0), 239 fuel bowsers (+0) and 181 (+1) units of equipment.

Key Takeaways



Ukrainian missile attack kills hundreds of Russian soldiers – Ukraine successfully attacked a barracks in the town of Makiivka just outside the occupied region around Donetsk City – shown as  in the map above - on New Year's Eve when they struck a military barracks with multiple HIMARS rockets, it is reported.

The barracks was in Vocational School No. 19 in Makiivka.

It is estimated that between 400 and 600 newly mobilized Russian soldiers were killed when at least 25 HIMARS rockets struck the building simultaneously, reducing it to rubble, pictured alongside.

Reports coming in depict numbers of trucks carrying bodies away from the site. I was watching blogger reports last night showing before and after footage of the building, (before) standing alone on a city block and 5 or 6 stories high and (after) a pile of rubble and dust as if imploded.

The building reportedly also contained an ammunition dump in the basement, which exploded upon impact, contributing to its complete destruction.

The before picture showed a suburban hotel-like building, whereas the after picture showed utter devastation.

Russian officials contested the figure, saying only 63 troops were killed, and not hundreds, but this is typical of their reporting. It is extremely rare for Moscow to confirm any battlefield casualties.

But this was such a deadly attack, says the BBC's Russia editor Steve Rosenberg, that staying silent most probably wasn't an option. It is the highest number of deaths acknowledged by Moscow in a single incident since the war began ten months ago.

Igor Girkin, a pro-Russian commentator, said hundreds had been killed and wounded, although the exact number was still unknown because of the large number still missing. The building itself was "almost completely destroyed," he said.

He added that the victims were mainly mobilised troops - that is, recent conscripts, rather than those who chose to fight. He also said ammunition was stored in the same building as the soldiers, making the damage worse.

"Almost all of the military equipment was also destroyed, which stood right next to the building without any disguise whatsoever," he wrote on Telegram.

A later statement from the Ukrainian military's general staff said "up to 10 units of enemy military equipment" were "destroyed and damaged" in the strikes, and that "the losses of personnel of the occupiers are being specified".

Ukraine has not confirmed the strikes were carried out with HIMARS missiles, maintaining a long-held strategy of not releasing specific details about its attacks.

Donetsk has been held by pro-Russian separatists since 2014 and it is one of four Ukrainian regions that Moscow sought to annex in October in violation of international law.

Russian units have been pressing an offensive towards the city of Bakhmut in Donetsk for months but have suffered heavy losses as Ukrainian forces have targeted them in what is largely open rural territory. These units originate in Russia and then transit along the rail line through Kreminna en route to Donetsk City, and then to the front line.



Another Ukrainian attack on Wagner Group building – Ukraine has again attacked a Wagner Group building, killing an unknown number of mercenaries. Watching a blogger transmission last night, it showed Wagner chief Yevgeny Prigozhin walking around the damaged building looking at fallen soldiers and later as bodies were being transferred to a truck for removal.

Russia sends in drones on New Year's Day – Russia launched a number of drones immediately after the Donetsk strike, mentioned above, of which large numbers – 39 reportedly - were shot down by Ukrainian defense batteries.

Several waves of Russian drones targeted critical infrastructure in Ukraine's capital and surrounding areas, officials said, as Moscow extended its constant bombardment into a second day in 2023.

Strikes on Beryslav: Five people have been injured by alleged Russian tank fire on a market in the southern Ukrainian town of Beryslav, according to the regional governor. "Presumably, the fire was conducted from a tank from the temporarily occupied Kakhovka," said Yaroslav Yanushevych, governor of Kherson region, where Beryslav is located, on his official Telegram channel. Kakhovka is on the opposite side of the Dnipro River.

Russian mercenary leader's war of words with Moscow's military brass deepens amid fighting in Bakhmut - As the frontline Donbas city of Bakhmut has turned into the site of some of the fiercest fighting under way in Ukraine, tensions between the notorious Russian mercenary company, the Wagner Group, and the Russian military have spilled out into the open.

In the latest episode, Wagner head Yevgeny Prigozhin took aim at Russia's military leadership and the stalling war effort in Ukraine days after an expletive-filled video surfaced of Wagner mercenaries near Bakhmut cursing out Valery Gerasimov, Russia's chief of the General Staff of the armed forces, and complaining about a lack of ammunition in their battles against Ukrainian forces.

Several Russian media outlets and pro-war bloggers initially suggested that the video was a fake, featuring alleged "Ukrainian nationalists" dressed up as fighters in an attempt to undermine Russian resolve, but Prigozhin dispelled that theory during a December 27 message shared on the Telegram channel of Concord Management's press service, which is owned by the Russian oligarch.

"There are no [Ukrainian] nationalists in that notorious video," Prigozhin said in the audio message, before confirming that the men in the video are Wagner mercenaries and taking a shot at Russia's military brass.

Russian radio host says he wants Kyiv to become 'uninhabitable' – A Kremlin aligned Russian radio host said he wants Ukraine's capital of Kyiv to "became an uninhabitable city."

The comments were made by Sergey Mardan, a presenter on the Komsomolskaya Pravda radio station, on December 31, according to a translation from the Russian Media Monitor, which monitors Russian TV and radio to combat "propaganda."

Speaking after a wave of Russian missiles were fired at Ukrainian cities, Mardan said: "In the morning, Kalibr [missiles] started to fly towards Ukraine. They've flown towards the scent of diesel fuel, towards the scent of Ukraine's armed forces."

"I would prefer it if Kyiv became an uninhabitable city. I would prefer that on the night on December 31st the unfortunate residents of Kyiv would go off towards the border with Poland, leaving this cursed city, this cursed place, behind them. Most of them will leave it forever."

The Russian Orthodox Church celebrates Christmas on January 7, nearly two weeks after it is marked in the West.

Putin

Putin's war lacks strategy, only aim is to bring suffering – analysis - Scrambling for a strategy, Putin has resorted to targeting infrastructure in the winter with the sole purpose of making Ukrainians cold.

He is increasingly relying on missiles and drones to attack Ukraine, apparently abandoning any real war aims except to make Ukrainian civilians suffer. This new tactic relies on lobbing missiles and drones at civilians and civilian infrastructure with no pretense that the targets are military ones.

One of the features of this campaign can be seen in the use of Iranian drones. Saddam Hussein's Iraq targeted Iran's cities in a method similar to Russia's targeting of Ukraine's.

Russia continued to launch missile attacks against Ukraine on New Year's Eve.

According to CBS, "Ukrainian officials say Russia is now deliberately targeting civilians, seeking to create a climate of fear and destroy morale."

Impacts

Ex-Russian commander credits Ukraine's success to Kremlin's sloppiness - Former Russian military commander Igor Girkin attributed Ukraine's successes against Putin's troops to the Kremlin's sloppiness on Sunday after Moscow launched a New Year's Eve missile strike against Kyiv.

Girkin's remarks come more than 10 months after Putin ordered the Ukraine "special military operation" on February 24, aiming for a quick victory prevented by Ukraine's spirited defense operations, bolstered by Western military aid.

Despite the vast size of the Russian military, Putin's soldiers have struggled to achieve substantial goals in Ukraine, which has recaptured control of key areas formerly occupied by Russia throughout the fall and winter. Facing mounting losses, the Russian leader has now pivoted to missile strikes against Ukrainian civilian infrastructure as his on-the-ground forces struggle to maintain motivated, well-trained forces.

Girkin, a Russian nationalist known by the alias Igor Ivanovich Strelkov and for his role in the 2014 annexation of Crimea, blamed Ukraine's success on Russian military leaders' sloppiness in a Telegram post on Sunday.

He wrote that Ukraine and Russia in recent days launched missile attacks on each other, though Ukraine has only targeted military facilities—not civilian infrastructure like Russia has. He conceded that attacks were successful, and continued to offer his explanation for why Russia has floundered against its smaller Eastern European neighbor.

"Unfortunately, in some places their strikes on our military facilities turned out to be both targeted and successful. Due to the ongoing excessive profligacy of the command of units and formations of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation," he wrote. "It is an impression that our command is unteachable in principle."

Russia launched missile strikes of its own, targeting residential areas including Kyiv, Ukraine said. Ukraine's Minister of Foreign Affairs Dmytro Kuleba tweeted: "This time, Russia's mass missile attack is deliberately targeting residential areas, not even our energy infrastructure. War criminal Putin 'celebrates' New Year by killing people."

Girkin added Russian missile strikes, largely hitting infrastructure than areas where civilians are living, have intensified. However, he still said the strikes will "definitely not work to force the Kiev Nazis to make peace" with Russia.

When launching the war, Putin said that his goal was to rid the Ukrainian government of Nazis. The justification has long faced scrutiny, as Ukrainian President Zelenskyy is Jewish.

As the Ukraine war flounders, Girkin has been among the military experts who has criticized the way the Kremlin is handling the war. He condemned Russia's military command in a Telegram post earlier in December.

"I have to state once again that our military command - according to the degree of stupid stubbornness with a complete inability to create - deserves comparison rather with representatives of *Ovis arise* [domestic sheep] – animals of the mammalian class, the order of artiodactyls of the *polorogi* family of the genus rams, than with representatives of primates (not to mention humans)," he wrote.

German Intelligence sees growing activity by Russian, Iranian Secret Services - The interest of Russian intelligence services in Germany continues to increase the longer the war in Ukraine lasts, according to Germany's domestic intelligence service. The head of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, Thomas Haldenwang, also counts China and Iran among the states whose intelligence services are active in Germany. "Russia's intelligence interest here in Germany is not only unbroken, but is also increasing as the effects of the war continue," Haldenwang told dpa. Since the start of Russia's war on Ukraine, many European states expelled Russian agents, with Germany expelling 40 members from Russia's Berlin embassy.

How Russia's war on Ukraine is worsening global starvation - Hulking ships carrying Ukrainian wheat and other grains await inspections before sailing through the Bosphorus in Istanbul to ports around the world.

When Russia invaded and imposed a naval blockade on Ukraine, the number of ships passing through the narrow strait, which connects Black Sea ports to the wider seas, plummeted. Under diplomatic pressure, Moscow began allowing certain ships to pass, but it continues to control most exports from Ukraine who, along with Russia, once exported a quarter of the world's wheat.

At the few Ukrainian ports that do operate, Russian missile and drone attacks periodically disable grain terminals where wheat and sorghum are loaded onto ships from Ukraine.

The lingering global food crisis has become one of the most far-reaching consequences of Russia's war, contributing to widespread starvation, poverty and premature death.

US and allies are scrambling to minimize the damage with US officials organizing efforts to help Ukrainian farmers get food from their country through rail and road networks connecting Eastern Europe and ships plying the Danube River.

But as deep winter sets in and Russia presses attacks on Ukraine's infrastructure, the crisis is worsening. Food shortages are already being exacerbated by drought in the Horn of Africa and unusually severe weather in other parts of the world.

The UN World Food Program estimates more than 345 million people vulnerable or at risk severe food insecurity, more than twice as much as in 2019.

"We are now facing a massive food insecurity crisis," US Secretary of State Blinken said at a summit with African leaders in Washington last month. "This is the result of many things, as we all know, including Russia's aggression against Ukraine," he said.

Food shortages and high prices are causing severe pain across Africa, Asia and the Americas. US officials are particularly concerned about Afghanistan and Yemen, both destroyed by war. Egypt, Lebanon and other major food-importing countries are finding it difficult to service their debts and other expenses because of rising food costs. Even rich countries like the US and UK have seen inflation, fueled in part by the disruptions of war, drive food crises for the poor.

"By attacking the world's breadbasket in Ukraine, Putin is attacking the world's poor, fueling global hunger when people are already on the brink of starvation," said Samantha Power, administrator of the USAID.

Ukrainians compare events to the Holodomor when Stalin created a famine in Ukraine 90 years ago, killing millions.

Blinken announced a move is to ensure that companies and institutions do not withhold aid for fear of US sanctions.

State Department officials said it was the most significant change in US sanctions policy in years. The UNSC adopted a similar resolution on sanctions last month.

But Russia's deliberate disruption of the global food supply presents an entirely different problem.

Moscow has restricted its own exports, driving up costs elsewhere and, more importantly, stopped selling fertilizer to farmers around the world. Before the war, Russia was the largest global exporter of fertilizer.

Atop these moves, its hostility in Ukraine has also had a major impact. From March to November, Ukraine exported an average of 3.5 million metric tons of grains and oilseeds per month, a steep drop from the five million to seven million metric tons exported before the invasion started according to data from their Ministry of Agriculture Policy and Food.

That number would be even lower if not for a deal struck in July by the UN, Turkey, Russia and Ukraine – the “Black Sea Grain Initiative” whereby Russia agreed to allow exports from three Ukrainian ports.

Russia continues to block seven of the 13 ports used by Ukraine. (Ukraine has 18 ports, but five are in Crimea, which Russia annexed in 2014.) In addition to three on the Black Sea, three are on the Danube.

The initial contract was only for four months, but extended for another four months in November. When Russia threatened to leave in October, global food prices rose five to six percent, said Isobel Coleman, USAID's deputy administrator.

“The consequences of this war are huge, very disruptive,” she said. “Putin is driving millions into poverty.”

While increases in food prices last year were particularly sharp in the Middle East, North Africa and South America, no region was immune.

“You're seeing price increases of everything from 60 percent in the US to 1,900 percent in Sudan,” said Sarah Menger, chief executive of Gro Intelligence, a site for climate and agricultural data that tracks food prices.

Before the war, food prices had already risen to their highest levels in more than a decade due to supply chains and widespread drought.

The world's major grain producers, the US, Brazil and Argentina, experienced three consecutive years of drought. The level of the Mississippi River dropped so much that ships carrying American grain to ports were temporarily grounded.

Many foreign currencies have weakened against the US dollar, forcing some countries to buy less food on the international market than in previous years.

“There were a lot of structural problems, and then the war made it worse,” Ms Menker said.

US officials say Russia deliberately targeted and destroyed Ukrainian grain storage facilities and wheat processing plants in Ukraine, a potential war crime

Many farmers in Ukraine have gone to war or fled their land, and the infrastructure for processing and transporting wheat and sunflower oil to foreign markets has broken down. Russian forces have also stolen mechanical equipment from farms and sent these back to Russia.

At a farm 190 miles south of Kiev, 40 of 350 employees joined the army. The farm is struggling with other deficits and Kees Huinga, a Dutch co-owner, said the attacks on the energy grid had led to the closure of his farm and a plant that supplied nitrogen fertilizers to others.

As natural gas prices rose because of the war, other fertilizer plants in Europe shut down or were forced to cut production last year. Natural gas is important for fertilizer production.

“So this year’s harvest has already been reduced,” Mr. Huizinga said in November. “If the Russians continue like this, next year’s harvest will be even worse.”

He added that transport costs for farmers in Ukraine have risen sharply.

Before the war, farmers shipped 95 percent of Ukraine’s wheat and grain exports via the Black Sea. He said Huinga’s farm paid \$23 to \$24 per ton to transport its produce to ports and ships, a cost now doubled, he said. And an alternative route – by truck to Romania – costs \$85 per tonne.

Under this arrangement, every ship leaving one of the three Ukrainian ports on the Black Sea must be inspected upon arrival in Istanbul by joint teams of Ukrainian, Russian, Turkish and United Nations officials. Huinga said he suspects Moscow is provoking action by slowing inspections.

The teams are looking for any unauthorized cargo or crew members, and ships bound for Ukraine must be empty of cargo, said Ismini Balla, a spokeswoman for the UN office overseeing the program.

Sanctions

Russian ruble hits 8-month low against dollar, as falling oil prices and sanctions bite - Russia’s currency hit an eight-month low Thursday, adding to sharp declines in December as global oil prices fell, and Western sanctions targeted Russia’s energy sector.

The ruble hovered below 72 to the dollar, down 18% from the start of the month, and its weakest level since late April.

After almost halving in value in the first weeks of the war, the ruble has held up remarkably well for most of the year, trading within a narrow range.

The ruble has been helped by measures from Russia’s central bank, which more than doubled interest rates at the start of the war, introduced capital controls, and forced exporters to convert 80% of their earnings into rubles, artificially creating demand for the currency. It later rolled back some of those policies as the exchange rate stabilized.

Germany’s import ban on oil from Russian pipelines came into force as Berlin speeds up its effort to wean itself off Moscow’s exports.

The British Foreign Office said the country has stopped importing Russian LNG. “Today the UK has ended all imports of Russian Liquefied Natural Gas,” the office said on its Twitter page.

Russia’s Gazprom said it would ship 42.4 million cubic metres (mcm) of gas to Europe via Ukraine on Monday, a similar volume to that reported in recent days.

Russian gas exports outside ex-Soviet states fell 46 percent in 2022, Gazprom figures show - Russian gas exports to countries outside a group of former Soviet republics plunged 45.5 percent in 2022, figures from gas giant Gazprom showed on January 2. Gazprom said in a statement that exports outside the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) totaled 100.9 billion cubic meters compared to 185.1 billion in 2021. Europe was previously Gazprom’s main export market but supplies have been drastically reduced because of sanctions following Russia’s offensive in Ukraine in 2022.

Containment

Netanyahu asked for Ukraine's support at UN — and Zelenskyy asked for military aid - Israeli PM Netanyahu in a phone call late Friday asked Ukrainian President Zelenskyy to vote against a UN General Assembly resolution that calls on the International Court of Justice to issue a legal opinion on the consequences of Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories, Ukrainian and Israeli officials told Axios.

The big picture: Ukraine had voted in favor of the resolution during a UN committee vote but did not attend Friday's GA vote "in order to give a chance to the relationship with Netanyahu," the Ukrainian official said.

Catch up quick: The UN GA approved the resolution late Friday, with 87 countries voting in favor, 24 countries voting against and 53 countries abstaining.

According to the resolution, the ICJ will draft an advisory opinion on the Israeli occupation of the West Bank — a process that could take between one to two years.

The opinion should address the legal consequences of Israel's "occupation, settlement and annexation ... including measures aimed at altering the demographic composition, character and status of the Holy City of Jerusalem," the resolution reads.

The opinion should also address the question of "how the policies and practices of Israel affect the legal status of the occupation, and what are the legal consequences that arise for all States and the United Nations from this status."

Ukraine defied Israeli requests to vote against the resolution during the UN committee vote several weeks ago because of Israel's refusal to provide military assistance to Ukraine, Ukrainian officials had said.

Israeli foreign ministry officials were furious at the time and summoned the Ukrainian ambassador for a tough conversation.

Behind the scenes: Netanyahu, who was sworn in as prime minister on Thursday, called Zelenskyy as part of a series of phone calls with leaders of some countries that had previously voted in favor of the resolution. Israel wanted them to change their votes and oppose the resolution or at least abstain, a senior Israeli official told Axios.

During the call with Netanyahu, Zelenskyy said that in exchange for voting against the resolution or abstaining, he wanted to hear how the new Israeli government would change its policy and provide Ukraine with defense systems against Russian attacks using ballistic missiles and Iranian-made drones, a Ukrainian official told Axios.

The Ukrainian official said Netanyahu didn't commit to anything but said he was ready to discuss Zelenskyy's requests in the future.

According to the Ukrainian official, Zelenskyy didn't like the answer and didn't agree to vote against the resolution or abstain. Instead, he instructed Ukraine's ambassador to the UN to not attend the vote.

What they're saying: "The two leaders weren't satisfied and didn't get what they wanted. Zelenskyy decided that we will not attend the vote in order to give a chance to the relationship with Netanyahu," the Ukrainian official said.

A senior Israeli official said that even though Ukraine didn't vote in favor of the resolution, Israel was disappointed that instead of abstaining, Kyiv decided not to attend the vote.

Netanyahu's office told Axios: "Netanyahu spoke to Zelenskyy, and Ukraine which voted before in favor of the anti-Israeli resolution, didn't attend the vote this time. Other than that we will not comment on diplomatic conversations."

Zelenskyy tweeted on Saturday that in the two leaders' phone call, he "congratulated Netanyahu on taking office as Prime Minister. We discussed bilateral cooperation between our states, including in the security sphere and interaction on international platforms. We also touched on the implementation of the Ukrainian peace formula."

Ukraine waiting for first portion of \$19 billion aid package from EU, Zelenskyy says - Ukrainian President Zelenskyy said Monday that Ukraine was waiting for the first tranche of a \$19 billion support package from the European Union in January, following a call with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen.

He added that Ukraine was also awaiting the first "batch of LED-lamps school buses, generators and modular houses."

Von der Leyen tweeted that she had conveyed her "wholehearted support and best wishes for 2023 to the Ukrainian people," to Zelensky on their first call of the new year. "The EU stands by you, for as long as it takes. We support your heroic struggle. A fight for freedom and against brutal aggression," she said.

After call with Zelenskiy, Von Der Leyen says EU stands by Ukraine 'For as long as it takes' - European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has reiterated the European Union's emphatic support for Ukrainians "for as long as it takes" to thwart Russia's 10-month-old invasion, noting that she'd had her first call of the new year with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy.

"I conveyed my wholehearted support and best wishes for 2023 to the Ukrainian people," von der Leyen wrote on Twitter on January 2. "The EU stands by you, for as long as it takes."

In a statement following the call, Zelenskiy said Ukraine was expecting to receive the first 2023 tranche of EU macro financial aid this month.

"We feel support & will win together," he wrote on Twitter.

Germany takes over leadership of NATO's 'Spearhead Force' - Germany has assumed leadership of NATO's Very-High-Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) at the start of the new year. Germany contributes 8,000 soldiers of the VJTF's total of 11,500. As the force with the highest readiness for short-term deployments, the VJTF must be prepared for deployment to any location within 48-72 hours. "While Russia's illegal war in Ukraine continues to threaten peace and security in Europe, there must be no doubt about NATO's determination to protect and defend every inch of the alliance's territory," NATO spokeswoman Oana Lungescu said.

Geopolitics

"China is ready to increase political cooperation with Russia," Xi says – In opening remarks during a video conference Friday, Putin invited his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping to visit Moscow next spring. He added that the two countries would strengthen cooperation between their armed forces, and pointed to growth in trade despite "unfavorable market conditions."

Bilateral relations are "the best in history, and withstand all tests," he said. "We share the same views on the causes, course and logic of the ongoing transformation of the global geopolitical landscape."

Xi also delivered opening remarks, saying "against the background of a difficult international situation, China is ready to increase political cooperation with Russia" and to be "global partners," according to the Russian state media translation of the broadcast.

Moscow and Beijing have drawn closer in recent years, with Xi and Putin declaring the two countries had a "no limits" partnership weeks before Russia invaded Ukraine in February.

China has since refused to condemn the aggression, instead repeatedly laying blame for the conflict on NATO and the US – and remaining one of Russia’s key remaining supporters as it grows increasingly isolated on the global stage.

But more than 10 months into the grinding war, the world looks much different – and the dynamic between both partners has shifted accordingly, experts say.

Instead of an anticipated swift victory, Putin’s invasion has faltered on the battlefield, including a lack of basic equipment. Morale within parts of Russia is low, with many civilians facing economic hardship during the bitter winter.

On Thursday, Russia launched one of the biggest missile barrages since the war began in February, with explosions rattling villages and cities across Ukraine, damaging civilian infrastructure and killing at least three people.

Ukrainian officials had been cautioning for days Russia is preparing to launch an all-out assault on the power grid to close out 2022, plummeting the country into darkness as Ukrainians attempt to ring in the New Year and celebrate the Christmas holidays, which for the country’s Orthodox Christians falls on January 7.

“China is eager for (the war) to end,” said Yun Sun, director of the China Program at the Washington-based think tank Stimson Center.

“Xi will try to emphasize the importance of peace to Putin,” she added. “As Russia is getting impatient with the lack of progress on the battlefield, the timing is ripening for peace talk in China’s eyes.”

Comment – It may be reported that China wants to increase political cooperation with Russia, but reading Yun Sun’s statement, it appears more that they are seeking an end to the conflict. Reading into other Chinese moves in diplomatic channels China seems to be softening its rapport with the US.

The longer the Russian-inspired conflict drags on, the longer it takes for China to further progress its desired long-term bi-polar world order, something it desperately needs for more reasons than just expanding cooperation with Russia.

Kosovo needs stronger NATO security presence, Prime Minister says - Kosovar Prime Minister Albin Kurti has called for NATO to boost its peacekeeping force in Kosovo after ethnic tensions once again flared with Serbia. "A substantial increase in NATO soldiers and military equipment in our country would improve security and peace in Kosovo and in the entire Western Balkans region," Kurti told Germany's Die Welt newspaper in an article published on January 1. The NATO-led KFOR protection force has been tasked with guaranteeing security across Kosovo since 1999, following a war over the region that ended the same year. It comprises nearly 3,800 soldiers from more than two dozen countries.

In every modern war, Ukraine has been the big prize – Bloomberg - The biggest story of 2022 was the war in Ukraine, which put that country on the front lines of the great struggle of this century: the contest between democracy and authoritarianism. But if the war surprised many observers, the position in which Ukraine finds itself is remarkably familiar.

With only modest exaggeration, we could call the past 100 years or so the Ukrainian Century, for that country has figured centrally in every great global clash of the modern era.

Ukraine is a strategic prize due to resources and geography. Occupying some of the richest agricultural land anywhere, it produces large shares of the world’s wheat, corn and barley; it accounts for 6% of all calories traded on international food markets. Ukraine is Europe’s second-largest country by geographical size, and overlooks the Black Sea, which links European Russia to the world.

Most important, Ukraine is the hinge connecting what the great geopolitical thinker Halford Mackinder termed the Eurasian Heartland, with its enormous lands, agricultural riches and energy resources, to the economically advanced countries of Europe.

Any European empire seeking to expand eastward must pass through Ukraine; any Eurasian power seeking to project influence into Europe must do likewise. Mackinder had Ukraine (and Poland) in mind when he argued in 1919: “Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; Who rules the World-Island commands the World,”

Hyperbole, perhaps, but a formula that helps explain why Ukraine has been so tragically prominent in so many terrible struggles.

“As much as anything, World War I turned on the fate of Ukraine,” the scholar Dominic Lieven wrote. Conquering the area, then part of the Russian empire, was central to Germany’s plans to create a resource-rich Mitteleuropa from the North Sea to the Caucasus. When German armies wrested Ukraine away from a post-revolutionary Russia in 1918, Berlin briefly achieved its Eurasian vision — which crumbled when it lost the war on the Western front, undoing its Eastern conquests and allowing Lenin’s Soviet Union to create its own Eurasian empire under Communist rule.

Ukraine again loomed large in Adolf Hitler’s dreams of hegemony. It possessed the “living space” and the foodstuffs that could render Germany impregnable against the continent-sized enemies — the British Empire and America — that Hitler ultimately planned to fight for global primacy.

The Nazis’ genocidal “hunger plan” envisioned looting Ukrainian wheat, corn and agricultural products, and leaving as many as 30 million citizens there and elsewhere in the Soviet Union to starve. (In effect, it was a replay of the “red famine” that Stalin had inflicted on Ukraine in the 1930s as a means of consolidating Moscow’s rule there.) Some of the most desperate battles of World War II were fought on Ukrainian soil, as giant armies collided in this vital zone.

The Allied victory ensured merely that Ukraine remained subordinated to a totalitarian Soviet empire. As the Cold War began, the US sought to exploit the resulting dissatisfaction by parachuting Ukrainian paramilitaries into the country to foment violent resistance.

That initiative was a bloody fiasco, but the geopolitical logic behind it wasn’t entirely wrong. When the Soviet Union began to fragment decades later, it was Ukraine’s decision to bolt by declaring independence — and refusing to participate in schemes to hold a looser union together — that helped seal the system’s fate.

“Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire,” former national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski observed in 1994, “but with Ukraine suborned and then subordinated, Russia automatically becomes an empire.”

That’s a good guide to understanding why Putin launched his project to restore Moscow’s mastery, beginning with Russia’s meddling in Ukrainian elections in 2004 and culminating in the full-on invasion in February.

He targeted Ukraine in hopes of subduing one crucial piece of the post-Soviet landscape, and thereby bringing others, from Belarus to Kazakhstan, into line. A quick Russian victory would have been a testament to the strength and strategic cunning of the world’s autocracies. It would have fundamentally changed the strategic situation in Europe by casting pervasive insecurity from the Black Sea to the Baltic, and left a freshly invigorated Chinese-Russian partnership clearly dominant within Eurasia.

Not much has gone according to plan, and a Ukrainian victory would bring very different consequences. It would make one the world’s leading tyrants look pathetic rather than preeminent. It could create tension in Russia’s partnership with China by forcing an enfeebled Putin to beg for assistance that Beijing would be reluctant to give. It would produce

a revitalized Western community with a commanding position against a dangerous but degraded Russia. Once again, a war involving Ukraine will shape the contours of world order.

The war is also a reminder about how core features of geopolitics remain the same, even as so much in the world changes. Geography still matters. Land-hungry tyrants still seek to dominate their surroundings through conquest and murder.

In every generation, optimists hope that the world has left these ugly truths behind. As Ukraine's experience teaches us, we forget them at our peril.