

Conflict Update # 318

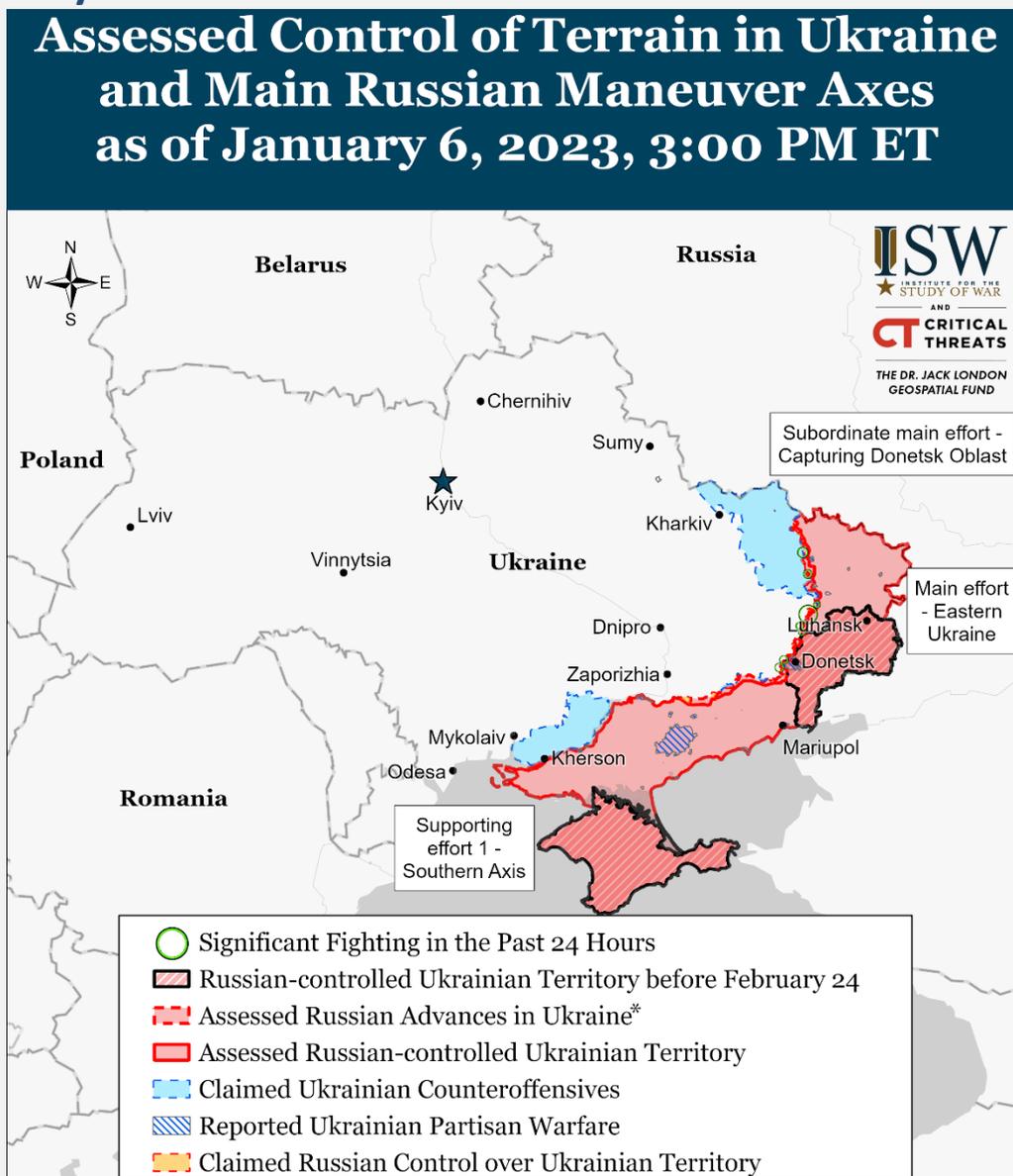
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Conflict Assessment

Russian losses – 110,740 (490) soldiers killed, 3,066 (+2) enemy tanks, 6,125 (+1) armored combat vehicles, 2,062 (+3) artillery systems, 431 (+0) MLRS systems, 217 (+2) air defense systems, 285 (+0) warplanes, 272 (+0) helicopters, 1,844 (+0) UAVs of the operational-tactical level, 723 (+0) cruise missiles, 16 (+0) warships/cutters, 4,798 (+1) trucks and tankers, 4 Iskander Missile Launchers (+0), 239 fuel bowsers (+0) and 182 (+0) units of equipment.

Key Takeaways



Artillery shells fly on Ukraine's front lines despite 'ceasefire' - Exchanges of artillery fire were reported along the front lines in Ukraine's Bakhmut, Kreminna and other locations in Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

Russian and Ukrainian artillery have continued to pound targets in war-scarred eastern Ukraine despite Russian leader Vladimir Putin saying he ordered his forces to observe a 36-hour ceasefire for the Orthodox Christmas.

Exchanges of artillery fire were reported along the front lines of Ukraine's city of Bakhmut, the town of Kreminna, and other locations in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions on Friday after the start of Moscow's order for its forces to maintain a unilateral truce from midday in observance of the Russian holiday.

Russian rockets also rained down on residential areas in the cities of Kherson and Kramatorsk before the truce was scheduled to begin at noon Moscow time.

US president Biden said Putin was "trying to find some oxygen" by floating the ceasefire, noting that the Russian leader did not implement the break on 25 December, which many Orthodox Ukrainians celebrate, or on New Year. Putin's announcement was likely an information operation intended to damage Ukraine's reputation, according to US thinktank the Institute for the Study of War.

Belarus? - In December, Ukraine's minister of defence, Oleksii Reznikov, and army commander, Valeriy Zaluzhnyi, said Russia would attack from Belarus again this coming February. Conversely, Ukraine's military intelligence said they believed the possibility of an attack from Belarus was low.

According to Skibitsky, Russia only has one division – of about 15,000 personnel – in Belarus. In February last year, it had 45,000 and was unsuccessful in taking Kyiv, even though Ukraine was underprepared, he said.

Now, Ukraine's northern defensive positions are strong and Ukraine is ready, he said. The Guardian spent New Year's Eve on the border in Ukraine's north-eastern Sumy region where the local defence forces expressed the same opinion.

"Of course, this could change if Belarus joins the war," said Skibitsky. Belarus has a force of about 45,000.

But even if Russia has the numbers, said the US military expert Rob Lee, it does not automatically mean that its units will be effective – leadership, ammunition and training are problems right now in the Russian army.

It remains an open question as to how well Russia can integrate the newly mobilised forces as there has not been a comparative war in recent times, said Lee.

"If you mobilise 500,000 guys those problems don't go away, you just kind of have similar issues with just more manpower," said Lee, noting that less well-trained troops were better for defending territory than offensive operations.

Train carrying Russian troops arrives in Belarus: Defence ministry - A train carrying Russian troops and equipment yesterday arrived in Belarus, Minsk's defence ministry said on Friday.

Belarus, which is closely allied with Moscow, said on Thursday it would receive more weapons and equipment from Russia as the two boost their military cooperation.

This has raised concern that Belarus could be used as a staging post to attack Ukraine from the north.

Lukashenko visits Russian troops stationed in Belarus - Lukashenko visited a military base where Russian troops are stationed, the defence ministry said on Friday. During the meeting, Lukashenko and an unnamed representative from the Russian army discussed the two countries' joint military drills, it said.

"At this stage, units of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation are ready to carry out tasks as intended," the representative said. Belarus, which is closely allied with Moscow, said on Thursday that it will receive more weapons

and equipment from Russia as the two boost their military co-operation, fuelling fears it could be used as a staging post to attack Ukraine from the north.

Russia, shaken by Ukrainian strike, said mulling more drones - Russia is preparing to step up its attacks on Ukraine using Iranian-made exploding drones, according to Ukraine's president, as Moscow looks for ways to keep up the pressure on Kyiv after a Ukrainian attack killed a huge number of Russian soldiers in the latest battlefield setback for the Kremlin's war strategy.

"We have information that Russia is planning a prolonged attack by Shaheds (exploding drones)," President Zelenskyy said in his nightly video address late on Monday.

He said the goal is to break Ukraine's resistance by "exhausting our people, (our) air defence, our energy", more than 10 months after Russia invaded its neighbour.

Putin

Putin's war plan reaching 'critical moment'—Ukraine Ambassador - Ukraine's ambassador to the UK has warned Kyiv and its Western partners will face a "critical moment" when Putin floats an insincere peace offering as the Kremlin looks to ease pressure on its beleaguered forces occupying swaths of Ukraine's south and east.

Ambassador Vadym Prystaiko—formerly the foreign affairs minister, head of Ukraine's mission to NATO and the ambassador to Canada—told Newsweek in an interview at Ukraine's Embassy in London that Kyiv and its foreign backers must stand firm and ignore any apparent conciliation from Moscow.

Just hours before Putin ordered a 36-hour cease-fire along the entire Ukrainian front to mark Orthodox Christmas celebrations this weekend, Prystaiko warned against any Russian offer of a temporary halt to the fighting.

"They might offer this and feed it into the system, saying, 'We are peaceful, we're offering the cease-fire,' using this time—as they did with the Minsk agreements—to reshape their own military and to resupply." He was referring to the deals that paused fighting in the east of Ukraine in 2014 and 2015.

To get inside the Russian mind, Prystaiko said, "I use the same exercise as I did when I was chief negotiator for the Minsk agreement."

He went on: "If I'm a Russian, I would raise the stakes, I will say each and every time that we're not going to negotiate with Ukraine, we have to finish this work. All the targets of the so-called special military operation are being achieved or will be achieved very soon. But at some time, I would offer another 'goodwill gesture.'

"I would keep the rhetoric high and then drop an information bomb, like Putin is open for negotiations with President Joe Biden or NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg. Not with all of you [Ukrainians] because I'm so high above you.

"Then it will be a very difficult moment for all of us, especially for Ukrainians," he continued. "Ukraine will come under a lot of pressure from our international partners.... This will be a critical moment where we have to remind them that sovereignty is the basic thing. Without this, they will come again. And not just for us."

Putin's regime crumbling as spies defect and Russia keeps relatives 'hostage' - More than 20 Russian diplomats and spies have defected since the invasion of Ukraine in a sign Putin's flailing regime faces collapse over the war, the Mirror can reveal.

The unprecedented swapping of sides has spurred the tyrant to put "Stalinist" restrictions on foreign postings. Most of Moscow's officials on foreign missions now have to accept family members being left at home during their posting,

effectively kept hostage and the latest of Putin's cruel safeguards against further catastrophic defections as family members could be jailed or worse if an official swaps sides.

Even if family members return to Russia whilst a spy or diplomat is on posting they will be kept at home as collateral.

It is believed ex-KGB officer Putin personally intervened and insisted on the "hostage to fortune" measures to stop further defections.

The defections are also thought to be an indication his Kremlin regime is hugely under threat of collapse over their disastrous Ukraine invasion.

Bruce Jones, one of the UK's top Russia analysts told the Mirror: "I have been told by very senior and well-informed sources that there have been a number of defections of both Russian diplomats and intelligence officers.

"Some of them are known about publicly but in the background there are many more, possibly more than 20 and this is indicative of an extremely hazardous time for the Kremlin.

"This is being kept quiet for obvious reasons but these defections are not just to the west but across Asia as well."

Close to one million have fled their homeland - many escaping Putin's brutal draft of new recruits for the frontline.

It comes as troop losses in Ukraine frontline are soaring towards 110,000 and increasingly Putin is relying on Wagner Group mercenaries.

A Ukrainian source told the Mirror: "Losses of up to 500 in one strike are a disaster, a genuine blow to Putin and his position is becoming precarious.

"Defections do reflect this as people become increasingly nervous about the future of their country and it is not looking positive for Putin.

"If something happens to him and those close to him it will happen very fast and from within but these military defeats are a very poor reflection on his decision to go to war."

Impacts

Why Russian soldiers' mothers aren't demonstrating the strong opposition they have in previous conflicts - Ukraine's military launched a devastating strike on New Year's Day hitting a building housing recently mobilised Russian soldiers in the occupied region of Donetsk.

Russia's official response has been surprising. The ministry of defence took the unusual step of swiftly announcing the deaths of 63 (later revised to 89) soldiers – the largest number of casualties so far acknowledged in any incident since the start of Russia's mass invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

But just as surprising has been the lack of organised public opposition to this announcement of mass military deaths from the mothers of Russia's soldiers fighting in Ukraine.

Our ongoing research project uses analysis of words used about the war on Russian news media and social media to examine gendered responses to the war in Ukraine. While our research is still at an early stage, we are finding that the responses of soldiers' mothers are far from straightforward.

When Russia's mass invasion of Ukraine began, many observers expected Russia's soldiers' mothers to lead grassroots opposition to the "special military operation," and with good reason.

Historically this has been an ever-present and vociferous characteristic of Russian wars of choice.

Mothers with power

One of Russia's best-known and most-respected civil society organisations, the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia (CSMR) and its network of committees provided a focal point for opposition to Moscow's unpopular wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya, particularly by defending the rights of conscripted soldiers.

The CSMR and committees across Russia provided free advice on legal ways to defer or evade conscription, and even took the ministry of defence to court to compel the state to fulfil its legal obligations to its own soldiers.

But this movement has changed a great deal since the 1990s. No longer "a coherent and unified force," they have evolved into a loose network of organisations. Some committees express strong support for traditional values, patriotism and the military, while others campaign for progressive human rights and against militarism.

Many mothers initially appealed to their local committees for help in getting information about sons sent to Ukraine. As war continued they have not been using the committees to articulate their concerns and amplify their voices.

They have, instead, turned to social media, initially to search for posts that might provide them with information about loved ones, and then to create digital communities as alternatives to the old-style committees of soldiers' mothers.

Without the backing of the committees of soldiers' mothers, with their valuable networks and experience, mothers of soldiers fighting in Ukraine are not able to speak with one voice. Instead, they organize on a much smaller scale, typically around units that their sons serve in, a particular military incident, or the regions where they were recruited from. Their messages are therefore fragmented and often inconsistent, although there are some themes.

They are focused, first and foremost, on the welfare of their sons, although concerns do not necessarily translate into straightforward opposition to the war itself.

Instead, demands are often couched using language of patriotism and simultaneously supportive of the Kremlin and critical of Russia's military leadership, for example by calling upon the state to prepare their sons more effectively.

Another factor is that the Kremlin has drawn recruits primarily from regions deep into Russia with different cultures and languages. They are not "Russians."

Moscow and St. Petersburg have largely been spared from callup, and this is where social media is far more ubiquitous.

In the "backwoods" access to modern technology and thus everyday websites is not so readily available, electronically marooning and isolating individual families and dialogue. Disposable income is extremely hard to come by so purchase of laptops, tablets and cell phones is more a luxury than a necessity, and certainly not as socially prevalent as in the two major cities.

Why the change in the mothers' support groups has left these "hinterland mothers" rather alone and unempowered.

Army provides employment

In many parts of Russia with high levels of socio-economic deprivation, the family's economic survival is dependent upon the military service of their sons. The army offers employment and the opportunity for a respectable career.

For these mothers, a soldier son who is killed in combat is a double tragedy: the loss of the loved one as well as the loss of the salary that sustains life for others. It is no wonder that some mothers call upon the state to provide them with financial compensation.

The "partial mobilisation" announced by Putin in September has added a further layer of complexity, introducing a new category of soldiers' mothers: mothers of men who might unwillingly become soldiers.

The reluctance of their men to be mobilized has placed these women in direct, if covert, opposition to the state. They have protested on the steps of military recruitment offices and helped men to escape over borders.

Given the very limited opposition shown by soldiers' mothers to the war, the Russian state might be expected to pay little attention to this group. In fact, it is just the opposite.

It wants the approval of soldiers' mothers and feels the need to respond to their concerns because, especially during wartime, they command a great deal of public respect and moral authority. At the same time, it simply does not trust them to spontaneously articulate the "correct" views.

The Kremlin's solution is carefully staged performances giving the appearance of unity. A prime example was Putin's televised meeting in November with a group of women who may be soldiers' mothers but who are far from ordinary.

All were carefully chosen, some for their connections to national or regional political elites, others for their membership of patriotic organisations that openly support the war.

Where does this leave the mothers of Russia's soldiers? Our research is still ongoing, but we do not expect the mothers to lead mass protests condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine. We do, however, see more subtle forms of resistance which, over time, are contributing to the erosion of Russian society's support for the war in Ukraine.

From an article in *The Conversation* dated yesterday.

Ukraine will need at least \$1.79 billion to restore its telecommunications sector to pre-war levels, a U.N. agency said on Friday, alleging Russia had "destroyed completely or seized" networks in parts of the country.* Costs for hiring ships to transport commodities from the Black Sea have risen by more than a fifth since the start of the year, reflecting higher war risk insurance rates, industry sources have said.

Chinese tracking device is 'discovered inside UK government car', as senior politician slams Beijing as a 'systematic' threat to Britain's security.

At least one hidden Chinese tracking device was discovered in a UK government car after officials forensically searched vehicles.

A SIM card capable of transmitting location data was found in a security sweep which discovered 'disturbing things', a security source said. The tracker was found inside a sealed part that had been imported from China.

What can the trackers transmit?

The SIM cards, which can transmit location data, have been discovered in UK government cars.

The cards are now commonplace in vehicles feeding information about the performance of the car to the manufacturer.

Electronic Control Units (ECUs), which contain the SIM cards, are primarily sourced from China.

The cards would allow access to information including where the car has been, how long it was stopped and even the way in which it was driven.

Containment

Sea Sparrow RIM-7 Surface-To-Air Missiles Are Headed To Ukraine - The RIM-7 Sea Sparrow will be paired with Soviet-era Buk launchers and radar systems in a bizarre but potentially much needed mash-up.

Ukraine is to receive an undisclosed number of radar-guided RIM-7 Sea Sparrow surface-to-air missiles, or SAMs, which will be integrated onto Ukrainian Armed Forces' existing Soviet-era Buk air defense systems. The missiles are included as part of the latest U.S. aid package for Kyiv, which significantly also includes M2 Bradley infantry fighting vehicles.

The provision of Sea Sparrow missiles was first disclosed by Politico. Most interestingly, the same story, citing two unnamed people familiar with the matter, noted that Ukraine has already succeeded in integrating the U.S.-made missiles into its Buk system. No further details of this "bit of battlefield innovation" were provided. The integration with the Buk system was subsequently confirmed to The War Zone.

The Buk series are tracked self-propelled from the later part of the Cold War. Bucs the conflict in Ukraine, on both sides. The tragic shoot-down of MH17 over eastern

In its original form, direct air-to-air naval the RIM-7 hugely has served the U.S. many allied it first service in



SAM systems, the first versions of which date of various types have seen extensive use in system is probably best known for the Ukraine in 2014.

Raytheon's RIM-7 Sea Sparrow was a development of the AIM-7E Sparrow missile. In its application, became popular and widely with Navy and nations since entered 1967.

Primarily born as a fast-reaction point-defense system that has grown into an intermediate-range weapon for warships, the RIM-7 Sea Sparrow is able to intercept aircraft or cruise missiles. It can also engage surface targets under certain circumstances. In particular, it was tailored to defeat pop-up anti-ship missiles, which can appear with very little notice, and which move fast and low over the water. In maritime use, the range of the basic Sea Sparrow is limited to around 12 miles, although most engagements would be at a shorter range, depending on the intercept parameters, conditions, and the specific variant of the RIM-7 missile and fire control system. For instance, early versions used manually directed radar illuminators. Then the system became more automated and integrated with the ship's fire control architecture. Today, the latest RIM-162 Evolved Sea Sparrow Missile (ESSM) Block II variant features an active seeker and datalink and is capable of working without illuminators at all.

RIM-7 provides a very useful, localized capability against many of the kinds of threats that Ukraine now faces. These include subsonic cruise missiles as well as a variety of drones, battlefield helicopters, and low-flying manned aircraft.

Ukraine needs Leopard 2 tanks. its Allies are getting closer to providing them - In the space of a few days this week, France, the United States and Germany all announced they would donate to Ukraine powerful armored vehicles: French AMX-10RC scout vehicles, American M-2 infantry fighting vehicles and German Marder IFVs.

So which of Ukraine's allies is going to be the first to pledge Leopard 2 tanks? There are several candidates, and it might be only a matter of time—and not much time—before one of them opens up its arsenals and turns the engines of long-stored, surplus Leopards.

It was clear, with the trio of decisions, that something had changed on the political front of Russia's 11-month-old wider war on Ukraine. Kyiv's NATO allies have pledged many thousands of mostly secondhand vehicles to the war

effort, but so far most of those vehicles have been either artillery pieces, or lighter armored vehicles that are best suited for support roles.

Now NATO is offering up heavier, deadlier hardware—vehicles that could complement or supplement Ukraine’s pre-war inventory of aging, ex-Soviet tanks and fighting vehicles and tip the tactical balance in battles with Russia’s own aging, ex-Soviet vehicles.

But so far, none of Ukraine’s allies has offered up Western tanks. Yes, Poland, the Czech Republic and Macedonia have donated a few hundred of their surplus, Soviet-made T-72 tanks. And Slovenia sent to Ukraine a couple dozen M-55s—basically, super-upgraded, 1960s-vintage Soviet T-55s.

While the Ukrainian army already had T-72s in its inventory and certainly welcomed fresh copies to both make good battlefield losses and form new tank battalions, the army is desperate for more and better tanks. Surplus Leopard 2s, of which there are many hundreds across Europe, are the obvious solution. "We need these tanks," Oleksii Makeiev, the Ukrainian ambassador in Berlin, said back in May.

It’s not hard to see why Ukrainian tankers crave Leopard 2s. They easily outmatch Russian tanks such as the T-72, T-80 and T-90.

US adds offensive weapons for Ukraine in \$2.85 billion package - The Biden administration is sending a \$2.85 billion package of military hardware to Ukraine, supplying the sort of powerful weapons that it had previously withheld as the country looks to press a counteroffensive against Russia.

This is significant as up to now, NATO and other donor countries have avoided sending any weapons that can be defined as “offensive in nature” to Ukraine for fear of invoking a response from the Kremlin.

Following up on Washington’s recent decision that the Pentagon will be “OK” with Ukraine striking targets inside Russia proper used as launching platforms by the Kremlin for attacks on Ukrainian infrastructure and other targets, this announcement is a significant step forward from that statement.

It is evidence that the West is intent on providing Ukraine meaningful aide and any Russian backlash will be contained.

There appears to be consensus among Ukrainian Allies in this regard indicating some agreement of sorts for such a simultaneous and matching upscaling of both support and weaponry.

There seems to be an awareness of looming fronts and conflicts, new battlegrounds and strike points between Ukraine and Russian forces along the southern border as well as (potentially) the north, requisite of upgraded types of field armor and ammunition.

This is very good news for Zelenskyy and bad for the Kremlin as it may be a harbinger of what is still to come. I can see Ukraine receiving offensive anti-ship weaponry for example in order to ward off Russia’s Black Sea fleet missile attacks.

There are also a number of further Russian airfields as well as brigade marshaling points for troop massing ahead of action in Ukraine.

The new weaponry headed to Ukraine has longer range and reach than what is presently on hand, which in and of itself sends a clear message to Putin and the Kremlin that targets such as Moscow and St. Petersburg are reachable. The mere success of Kyiv drone attacks on airfield, fuel and ammunition sites deep inside Russia has spooked them into moving desperately needed S300 and S400 batteries from the front to these two cities, as mentioned in earlier Updates. Movement of these systems has served to ease the way for Ukraine to penetrate deep Russian targets.

Marders, Leopards, Abrams, Bradleys: what's all this new western weaponry being sent to Ukraine? - In a flurry of announcements, Ukraine's allies pledged advanced armored combat vehicles.

Both the US and Germany said they would provide new powerful weapons to Kyiv: 50 M2 Bradley fighting vehicles from Washington and 40 Marder infantry fighting vehicles from Berlin.

The announcement came a day after France made a similar pledge to send new weapons -- AMX-10 RC armored reconnaissance vehicles -- in a development that marks a clear escalation of Western military support.

While representing a significant upgrade in military aid, the Bradley vehicles are not atop Kyiv's main wish-list: main battle tanks, such as the U.S.-made M1 Abrams or the German Leopard are.

"There is no rational reason why Ukraine has not yet been supplied with Western tanks," Zelenskiy said in a video address on January 4.

The developments come as Europe's largest military conflict since World War II approaches its first anniversary on February 24. Intense fighting continues in eastern and southern regions, with Moscow regularly carrying out missile and drone strikes targeting Ukraine's civilian energy infrastructure and causing regular cutoffs of electricity, heating, and water across the country.

Ukrainian officials have also been warning that Moscow could be planning a major offensive in coming weeks.

But what exactly is the West providing now, and are its infantry fighting vehicles a step toward providing the heavy armor that Kyiv craves?

Tank Killers

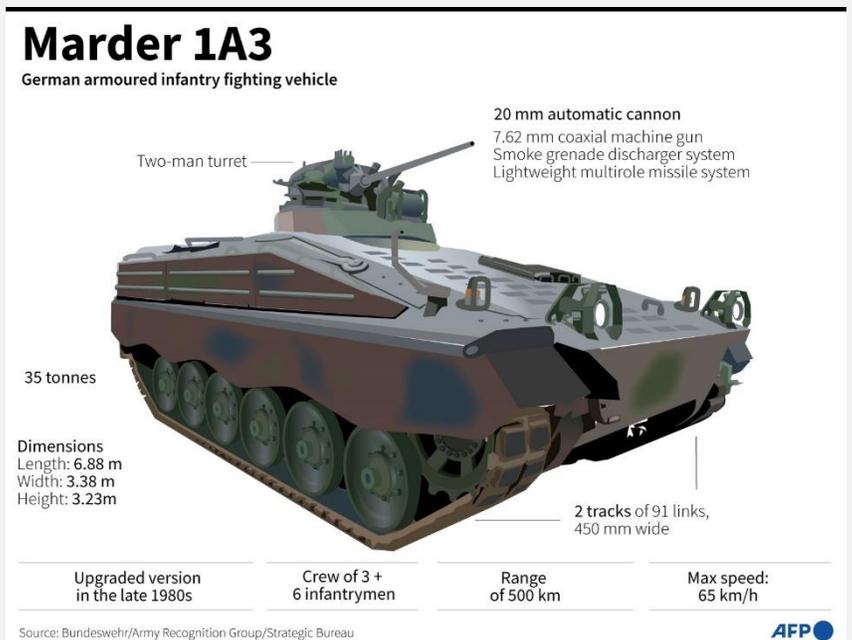
The **Bradley** has been the workhorse of the U.S. military since the 1980s. The vehicle destroyed more enemy tanks in combat in Iraq than the Abrams tank, according to Military-today.com.

"The Brad...is NOT a tank," wrote retired U.S. Lieutenant General Mark Hertling on Twitter," but it can be a tank killer...and a troop carrier."

Bradleys can provide "support of both offensive and defensive operations, providing a level of firepower and armor that will bring advantages on the battlefield as Ukraine continues to defend their homeland," Pentagon spokesman Brigadier General Pat Ryder said on January 5.

Germany's **Marder**, meanwhile, is also considered an effective antitank weapon, according to experts, supporting an antitank missile system called the MILAN, in addition to a 20-millimeter cannon.

The French vehicles, sometimes classified as a "light tank," are a highly mobile vehicle -- with wheels, not treads -- that are built around a turret-mounted 105-milimeter gun.



Hertling described the **French AMX-10 RC** as a "tank killer," adding it is "a great piece of kit." The vehicle is also often described as a tank "hunter."

"These are also low-maintenance, high-mileage, easy to support, and great cross-country on any kind of terrain," he added.

Comment – As included in yesterday's Update, the two main pillars of new support are firstly, anti-missile units, particularly the Sparrow RIM-7 which is effective against sub-sonic low-flying drones and missiles – precisely the type being used by Russia including Iranian supplies and defensive in nature and secondly, armored vehicles needed in support of Ukrainian offensive actions.

War Crimes

London to host international war crimes meeting to discuss Ukraine - It comes as Putin continues to target crucial energy infrastructure in a military offensive.

The investigation into alleged war crimes in Ukraine will be at the top of the agenda when justice ministers from across the world meet in London in the spring.

Deputy prime minister and Justice Secretary Dominic Raab will host the meeting in March at Lancaster House alongside his Dutch counterpart.

The group will hear from the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) Karim Khan, about the court's work and the role of the international community in supporting its investigations.

It comes as Putin continues to target crucial energy infrastructure as he looks to plunge Ukrainian citizens into darkness and wipe out central heating supplies during the freezing winter temperatures.



Russian Mobilization

Russia preparing to mobilize extra 500,000 conscripts, claims Ukraine - Kyiv's deputy military intelligence chief says force will form part of new offensives over spring and summer.

Ukraine's military intelligence has claimed that Russia is set to order the mobilisation of as many as 500,000 conscripts in January in addition to the 300,000 it called up in October, in another apparent sign that Vladimir Putin has no intention of ending the war.

Vadym Skibitsky, Ukraine's deputy military intelligence chief, said Ukraine believed the conscripts would be part of a string of Russian offensives over the spring and summer in the east and south of the country.

Russia has denied it is preparing a second wave of mobilisation, with Putin saying last month it was "pointless" to talk about a new call-up, claiming that only half of those already mobilised had been sent to Ukraine.

Geopolitics

Russian hackers targeted US nuclear labs amid Vladimir Putin's threats - A team known as Cold River conducted a digital blitz over the summer, as Putin indicated Russia was willing to use nukes to defend its territory

Dubbed 'one of the most important hacking groups you've never heard of', Cold River has been involved in dozens of recent high-profile hacking incidents.

A Russian hacking team known as Cold River targeted three nuclear research laboratories in the United States this past summer, according to internet records reviewed by Reuters and five cybersecurity experts.

Between August and September, as Putin indicated Russia would be willing to use nuclear weapons to defend its territory, Cold River targeted the Brookhaven (BNL), Argonne (ANL) and Lawrence Livermore National Laboratories (LLNL), according to internet records that showed the hackers creating fake login pages for each institution and emailing nuclear scientists in a bid to make them reveal their passwords.

Reuters was unable to determine why the labs were targeted or if any attempted intrusion was successful. A BNL spokesperson declined to comment. LLNL did not respond to a request for comment. An ANL spokesperson referred questions to the US Department of Energy, which declined to comment.

Cold River has escalated its hacking campaign against Kyiv's allies since the invasion of Ukraine, according to cybersecurity researchers and western government officials.

Cold River, which first appeared on the radar of intelligence professionals after targeting Britain's foreign office in 2016, has been involved in dozens of other high-profile hacking incidents in recent years, according to interviews with nine cybersecurity firms.

Reuters traced email accounts used in its hacking operations between 2015 and 2020 to an IT worker in the Russian city of Syktyvkar.

"This is one of the most important hacking groups you've never heard of," said Adam Meyer, senior-vice president of intelligence at US cybersecurity firm CrowdStrike. "They are involved in directly supporting Kremlin information operations."

Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB), the domestic security agency that also conducts espionage campaigns for Moscow, and Russia's embassy in Washington did not respond to emailed requests for comment.

Will Pakistan strike Taliban-controlled Afghanistan? - As Islamabad increasingly voices concern about the sheltering of a Pakistani insurgent group in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, there is speculation whether the Pakistani military might strike targets in the neighboring country and how that would impact the region's fragile security.

Observers say the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in 2021 appears to have revived the armed insurgent group Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan known as the TTP which has sought the establishment of an Islamist government in Pakistan like the Afghan Taliban, but has been weakened by intense Pakistani military operations over the past decade. Afghanistan has faced accusations it has been harboring the TTP.

After months of inconclusive talks facilitated by the Afghan Taliban in 2022, the government of Pakistan and TTP appear headed back to war between each other.

This past week, top Pakistani military and civilian leaders convened to discuss options for countering TTP threats, which they now claim emanate from Afghanistan.

"No country will be allowed to provide sanctuaries and facilitation to terrorists and Pakistan reserves all rights in that respect to safeguard her people," said a statement issued by the government of Pakistan after the meeting on Monday.

CNN Opinion - Analysis by Nick Paton Walsh, International Security Editor, CNN

It Would Be Hard for Ukraine to Lose the War to Russia - Moscow is in the process of demoting itself from putative great power to sick man of Eurasia.

Russia's war in Ukraine has proven almost every assumption wrong, with Europe now wondering what left is safe to assume. Its invasion in February managed to startle in every way.

To those who thought Moscow was sane enough to not attempt such a massive and foolhardy undertaking. To those who felt the Russian military would waltz across a land of 40 million people and switch to clean-up operations within 10 days. And to those who felt they had the technical and intelligence prowess to do more than just randomly bombard civilian areas with ageing artillery; that the Kremlin's military had evolved from the 90s levelling of Grozny in Chechnya.

And finally, to those who felt nuclear saber-rattling was an oxymoron in 2022 – that you could not casually threaten people with nukes as the destruction they brought was complete, for everyone on the planet.

Still, as 2022 closed, Europe is left dealing with a set of known unknowns, unimaginable as recently as in January. To recap: a military once considered the world's third most formidable has invaded its smaller neighbor, which a year ago excelled mostly in IT and agriculture.

Russia spent billions of dollars apparently modernizing its military, but it turns out that it was, to a large extent, a sham. It has discovered its supply chains don't function a few dozen miles from its own borders; that its assessment of Ukraine as desperate to be freed from its own "Nazism" is the distorted product of nodding yes-men, feeding a president – Putin – what he wanted to hear in the isolation of the pandemic.

Russia has also met a West that, far from being divided and reticent, was instead happy to send munitions to its eastern border and now promising further and even more advanced weaponry. Western officials might also be surprised that Russia's red lines appear to shift constantly, as Moscow realizes how limited its non-nuclear options are. None of this was supposed to happen. So, what does Europe do and prepare for, now that it has?

Key is just how unexpectedly unified the West has been. Despite being split over Iraq, fractured over Syria, and partially unwilling to spend the 2% of GDP on security the United States long demanded of NATO members, Europe and the US have been speaking from the same script on Ukraine. At times, Washington may have seemed warier, and there have been autocratic outliers like Hungary. But the shift is towards unity, not disparity. That's quite a surprise.

Declarations that Russia has already lost the war remain premature. There are variables which could still lead to a stalemate in its favor, or even a reversal of fortune. NATO could lose patience or nerve over weapons shipments, and seek economic expediency over long-term security, pushing for a peace unfavorable to Kyiv. But that does, at this moment, seem unlikely.

Russia is digging in on the eastern side of the Dnipro River in southern Ukraine, and has the advantage that the Donetsk and Luhansk frontlines in Ukraine's east are nearer its border. Yet its challenges are immense: poorly trained, forcibly conscripted personnel make up 77,000 of its frontline troops – and that's according to the glossy assessment voiced by Putin. It is struggling for munitions, and seeing regular open, internal criticism of its winter supply chain.

Ukraine is on home territory, with morale still high, and advanced Western weapons still arriving. Since the collapse of Moscow's patchwork of forces around the northeastern city of Kharkiv in September – where their supply lines were cut by a smarter Ukrainian force – the dynamic has all been against Moscow.

The prospect of a Russian defeat is in the broader picture: that it did not win quickly against an inferior adversary.

Mouthpieces on state TV talked about the need to “take the gloves off” after Kharkiv, as if they would not be exposing a fist that had already withered. Revealed almost as a paper-tiger, the Russian military will struggle for decades to regain even a semblance of peer status with NATO. That is perhaps the wider damage for the Kremlin: the years of effort spent rebuilding Moscow’s reputation as a smart, asymmetrical foe with conventional forces to back it up have evaporated in about six months of mismanagement.

The question of nuclear force lingers still, chiefly because Putin likes to regularly invoke it. But even here Russia’s menace has been diminished. Firstly, NATO has been sending unequivocal signals of the conventional devastation its forces would mete out were any form of nuclear device used. Secondly, Russia’s fair-weather allies, India and China, have quickly assessed its losing streak and publicly admonished Moscow’s nuclear rhetoric. (Their private messaging has likely been fiercer.)

And finally, Moscow is left with a question nobody ever wants to learn the answer to: if its supply chains for diesel fuel for tanks 40 miles from its border do not function, then how can they be sure The Button will work, if Putin reaches madly to press it? There is no greater danger for a nuclear power than to reveal its strategic missiles and retaliatory capability do not function.

Despite this palpable Russian decline, Europe is not welcoming in an era of greater security. Calls for greater defense spending are louder, and heeded, even if they come at a time when Russia, for decades the defining issue of European security, is revealing itself to be less threatening.

Europe is realizing it cannot depend on the US – and its wild swings between political poles – solely for its security.

Meanwhile thousands of innocent Ukrainians have died in Putin’s egotistical and misguided bid to revive a Tsarist empire. More broadly, authoritarianism has been exposed as a disastrous system with which to wage wars of choice.

Yet some good has come from this debacle. Europe knows it must get off its dependence on Russian gas immediately, and hydrocarbons in general in the longer term, as economic dependence on the fossil fuels of dictators cannot bring longer-term stability.

Comment – The western world is also realizing the need to accelerate and expedite green technological development, funding and legislating, not only to wean itself off fossil fuels, but simultaneously to “weather” a global climate change demand looming ever more strident and frontal. Countering this of course will be an American and Australian push for their fossil fuels to replace those of Russia. This, if achieved in toto will, I think, pave an easier path to a bi-polar global order for China and Russia.

So, how does the West deal with a Russia that has experienced this colossal loss of face in Ukraine and is slowly withering economically because of sanctions? Is a weak Russia something to fear, or just weak? This is the known unknown the West must wrestle with. But it is no longer such a terrifying question.

For over 70 years, the Russians and West held the world in the grip of mutually assured destruction. It was a peace based on fear. But fear of Moscow should be ebbing slowly, and with that comes the risk of miscalculation. It also raises a less chilling prospect: that Russia – like many autocracies before it – may be fading, undermined by its own clumsy dependence on fear domestically.

Europe’s challenge now is to deal with Russia in a state of chaotic denial, while hoping it evolves into a state of managed decline. One abiding comfort may be that, after underestimating Moscow’s potential for malice, the risk for Europe would be to overstate its potential as a threat.