

Conflict Update # 258

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Conflict Assessment

Russian losses – 78,690 (740) soldiers killed, 2,804 (+3) enemy tanks, 5,682 (+16) armored combat vehicles, 1,805 (+3) artillery systems, 393 (+0) MLRS systems, 205 (+0) air defense systems, 278 (+0) warplanes, 260 (+0) helicopters, 1,499 (+16) UAVs of the operational-tactical level, 399 (+0) cruise missiles, 15 (+0) warships/cutters, 4,242 (+15) trucks and tankers, 4 Iskander Missile Launchers (+0), 76 fuel bowsers (+0) and 159 (+0) units of specialized equipment.

Key Takeaways

By the numbers – Russian daily losses are remaining high, with reports that these fatalities are predominantly untrained draftees in Lyman and Avdiivka areas in Donetsk Oblast.

Russian troops in the northern Kherson Oblast, from where Russia is allegedly withdrawing as per yesterday's Kremlin press conference, include some of their prime battalions and equipment. It stands to reason then that the Kremlin would like to extract these troops, in favor of untrained draftees elsewhere.

It is being reported that as they withdraw in northern Kherson Oblast, Russia is moving back methodically, barrier by barrier, mining vacated areas as they retreat, but leaving untrained draftees in these barricades and trenches to hold back Ukrainian advances whilst the more "valued" and experienced troops are allowed to slip away.

Russia is using civilian cover in two ways during this process with (i) trained soldiers donning civvie clothing and hiding out in Kherson City, masquerading as civilians – the Kremlin has even brought Moscow reporters and TV presenters into the city so as to portray Ukrainian forces killing "civilians," and (ii) withdrawing troops using civvie clothing and mingling in with evacuating civilians, to make them appear as if they are indeed civilians.

Question – When Ukraine made rapid advances in Kharkiv Oblast in September, they initially feinted action in Kherson Oblast. This drew the Kremlin to rush troops from Kharkiv down into Kherson, diluting their defences in the former province, only to find Ukraine attacking the Kharkiv and taking back huge tracts of occupied territory.

The question now should be "Is Ukraine feinting in Kherson now, with an attack through Donetsk Oblast headed for Mariupol on the Black Sea coast pending?"



Should this be the case, and should Ukrainian forces succeed, it literally splits the Russian occupation force in two.

If a successful attack on Kerch Bridge – sole link between Crimea and Russia – then follows, Ukraine will effectively isolate all Russian forces west of Mariupol, with limited or no means or channels of supply.

This ties into fierce Russian defensive combat stations in western Luhansk and Donetsk, coupled with their forces erecting large barricades north of Mariupol. They appear to be expecting something dramatic from Ukraine in this corridor.

This then explains their “reported” decision to evacuate from northern Kherson - and perhaps move withdrawn troops up to Donetsk in order to counter a move on Mariupol.

Ukraine is shortly to commence deploying newly-received extended-range artillery and equipment. Once fully implemented, their HIMARS and new rockets assaults will be able to reach across Crimea.

They patiently progress and (i) capture territory, (ii) lock down and consolidate defensive lines in the captured territory, (iii) advance weaponry into this territory, (iv) rotate and rest troops, (v) secure supply lines, (vi) reposition HIMARS and other equipment closer to Russian lines, (vii) critically analyze satellite and drone imagery to determine avenues of attack, (viii) take counsel with partisan groups behind enemy lines and then (ix) advance again. They take incremental steps in advancing, whereas Russian troops appear to blunder headlong into situations without consolidation or re-grouping.

An interesting suggestion was heard last night on a BBC broadcast that, “Should Ukraine effectively assault Crimea, will there be a brokered solution, a la Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, where the US retains possession of an area on the island, with Russia maintaining possession of Sevastopol harbor?” It is not believed that Ukraine will agree to this.

Ukrainian army advances in south, retakes 12 settlements as fighting rages in east - Ukrainian forces have captured 12 settlements in the south, advancing seven kilometers in two directions in the past 24 hours, Ukrainian Army chief Zaluzhnyi said this morning 10 as Russia ordered one of the war's biggest retreats.

Zaluzhnyi said Kyiv could not yet confirm whether Russia was indeed pulling out from the southern Kherson region but said Ukrainian forces were continuing their advance.

Withdrawing Russian forces destroying Kherson bridges – As Russian troops withdraw from northern Kherson Oblast strongholds, they are blowing up river, road and rail bridges in order to slow down Ukrainian advances.

Ukrainian troops hold the line in battle for Maryinka near Donetsk - Paratroopers with Ukraine's 79th Air Assault Brigade say they're holding positions around the small city of Maryinka in eastern Ukraine despite daily Russian attacks. They say Russia has deployed members of the Wagner private mercenary group, special forces, and recently mobilized infantry against them. Holding Maryinka is seen as critical to Ukrainian hopes of retaking the regional capital, Donetsk.

Biggest defeat for Russia in a generation as starving troops flee across a key Ukrainian river - The Kremlin has ordered its forces to withdraw from the city of Kherson on the Black Sea coast in southern Ukraine.

The order comes eight months after the Russians captured Kherson and its 300,000 residents, six months after Ukrainian troops began bombarding the Kherson garrison's supply line and two months after Ukrainian brigades launched a counteroffensive in the south aimed at liberating Kherson.

It's a profound victory for Ukraine, and a major defeat for Russia. Arguably the biggest Russian defeat in a generation.

The Ukrainians already had the momentum in Russia's nine-month-old wider war on Ukraine. Now it's safe to say the Ukrainians actively are winning the war—and soon could advance on other Russian-occupied territories and cities. The destroyed historic port of Mariupol, for instance. Or even the strategic Crimean Peninsula.

The order for Russian forces to retreat to the left bank of the wide Dnipro River, which runs just south of Kherson before emptying into the Black Sea, came from Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu rather than from Russian President Vladimir Putin. In that way, Shoigu insulated his boss from the outcry that followed the announcement.

Russian media figures and military bloggers melted down over Kherson. "What is happening is a combination of catastrophic mistakes," one blogger lamented.

Surovikin is right. But left unsaid is what happens once Ukrainian forces liberate Kherson and take up positions on the Dnipro opposite the Russians. From there, the Ukrainians with their European-made howitzers and American-made rocket-launchers easily can strike the Isthmus of Perekop, the three-mile-wide strip of land, 45 miles south of Kherson, that connects the Russian-occupied Crimean Peninsula to Kherson Oblast south of the Dnipro.

"Once Kherson is liberated and the Ukrainians cross the Dnipro River in significant numbers and capabilities, the Russians will have to make a tough choice," noted Luke Coffey, a fellow with the Hudson Institute in Washington, D.C.

That choice: to defend Mariupol or the Isthmus of Perekop. "I can't see how they can do both," Coffey said.

(Bitcoin Ethereum News).

Ukrainian troops celebrate capture of frontline town - The town, seen as the last remaining Russian-occupied town in the Mykolaiv region, is important for control of a strategic road that leads to the city of Kherson, which Russia captured in March.

Ukrainian troops claimed on Thursday to have recaptured the town of Snihurivka in the southern Mykolaiv region from Russian forces, speaking in video footage published on social media and by Ukrainian national television.

The town, seen as the last remaining Russian-occupied town in the Mykolaiv region, is important for control of a strategic road that leads to the city of Kherson, which Russia captured in March.

Ukraine's forces advance cautiously on Kherson, wary of Russia's retreat - Ukraine urged caution about Russia's announced withdrawal from the southern city.

Putin's 'fierce' navy stranded in hiding after devastating attack - The Russian Navy is still sheltering in its base in Crimea after a sweeping Ukrainian drone attack last week.

On Oct. 29, Ukraine launched 16 air and naval drones at Russian ships in the bay of Sevastopol, causing damage to at least one ship and leading Russia to temporarily pull out of the lauded grain export deal in retaliation. According to a recent analysis by the U.S. Naval Institute, Russia's fleet in the Black Sea has been timid since the attack, which is the latest in a series of setbacks since the invasion in February.

Russia's Black Sea Fleet dwarfs the remnants of the Ukrainian Navy and should by all accounts be able to launch missiles and amphibious landings off Ukrainian shores with relative impunity. But for all their strength on paper, the Russian navy has gone from disaster to disaster since the start of the war.

In March, Ukraine hit a Russian landing ship in the port of Berdyansk with a ballistic missile, forcing the crew to scuttle the vessel. Ukrainian forces also sank the Russian flagship Moskva with two anti-ship missiles in mid-April. While not as spectacular as sinking a flagship, Ukrainian missiles and drones destroyed smaller Russian naval vessels throughout the conflict.

Russia has a large navy, but its losses in the Black Sea are difficult to replace.

Moscow cannot simply send more ships to the Black Sea, since Turkey controls the straits leading from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean and has the legal right to restrict access during wartime. Turkey's refusal to let naval vessels through means that the vessels currently there are all Russia has in the short term and is why the Oct. 29 drone attack was so detrimental. Ukraine was able to put a large number of explosive drones near Russia's prized vessels, including one Kilo-class submarine. While it isn't clear how much damage was inflicted, that any of the drones were able to penetrate Russian defenses makes it uncertain if Russia's ships are truly safe when not in port.

That drone attack was the first time air and sea drones attacked simultaneously in this conflict, but both had been used in the area separately. Ukraine's one-way attack drones, which have seen infrequent use since June against Russian military and oil facilities, targeted the Russian Black Sea Fleet headquarters in mid-August. In September, a previously unseen Ukrainian Unmanned Surface Vessel (USV) washed up on a Crimean beach. Using both at once was an attempt to overwhelm Russian defenses and complicate future efforts to defend Crimea.

To make matters worse for Russia, Ukraine's Navy is slowly starting to grow again. Ukraine is receiving patrol boats from the United States and the Royal Navy is training Ukrainian sailors. The patrol boats are small and lightly armed, but they can still help Ukrainian naval and Special Operations forces along Ukraine's rivers and coastline. Given Ukraine's unexpected successes at sea, its partners are likely to continue and increase their support. And considering Russia's struggles to adjust to new threats on land and sea, Moscow will struggle to cope with the growing threat of Ukraine's missiles, drones, and new vessels.

Ukraine's innovative use of missiles and drones to fight the Russian Navy has made it challenging for Russia to operate at sea. The strategy has helped Ukrainian soldiers and civilians on land while keeping the grain export deal alive. Without good options for preventing future attacks and an eroding grip on the Black Sea, the Russian Navy will likely stay cautious.

Russia deploys Syrian fighters to shore up its defences - Russia has deployed more than 500 Syrian fighters in Ukraine for primarily non-combatant roles, tasking them generally with safeguarding facilities in Luhansk and Donetsk in the past few months, regional intelligence sources told Middle East Eye.

The sources said the experienced fighters were drawn mainly from pro-Syrian government units that were backed, trained and managed by Russia in the fight against opposition forces and the Islamic State group (IS). These include the 25th Special Mission Forces Division, known as the Tiger Forces, Fifth Corps and Liwa al-Quds, a militia made up predominantly of Palestinian Syrians.

A Syrian government official, speaking on condition of anonymity, told MEE that Russia had recruited the Syrians, including former rebels, through its special forces and the notorious Wagner Group private military contractor, and transferred them to Ukraine.

In March, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu said during a United Nations Security Council meeting that Moscow had received more than 16,000 applications from people in Middle Eastern countries to help fight in Ukraine.

Ukraine attacks Russian troops in Kherson, saying Moscow didn't ask for a 'green corridor' - Russian forces' imminent withdrawal from the west bank of the Dnipro River that separates the Kherson region is already ripe for intensified attacks with Ukraine reporting that it is destroying Russian units in the area.

Russia reportedly didn't ask the Ukrainian side to create a "green corridor," or safe route, to withdraw its troops from Kherson, according to a Ukrainian defense official quoted by the Ukrinform news agency.

Sergei Khlan, a member of the Kherson Regional Council, said on Facebook Thursday that the Russians were moving their equipment to the left bank of the Dnipro River, and Ukraine's forces were destroying it.

Separately, Ukraine's southern command unit said today that its forces had attacked "two strongholds of the Russian occupiers, a column of enemy equipment and an ammunition depot" on Thursday as enemy forces build up in the area.

"As a result of the attacks, the Ukrainian defenders eliminated 125 occupiers, three enemy tanks, five units of armored vehicles and an ammunition depot in the Berislav district," it added. Berislav lies up river from Kherson, on the same western bank of the river — the bank from which Russian forces are set to withdraw.

Clashes intensify in Donetsk region in Russia-Ukraine war



What Russia's Kherson retreat means, and what it doesn't - Even before they pulled off their jaw-dropping counteroffensive in the northeastern Kharkiv region, Ukrainian troops had thrashed Russian forces in the Kherson region 600 kilometers to the southwest, aided by powerful and precise Western weaponry.

Since mid-October, Ukrainians have crept southward along the west bank of the Dnieper River, pushing toward a strategic and symbolic goal: the port city of Kherson. Some of Russia's most elite units, including paratroopers from the 76th Guards Air Assault Division, made sure it was a grueling advance for them.

On November 9, however, Russian commanders said enough, and ordered the thousands of Russian troops on the Dnieper's west bank -- up to 30,000, to retreat to the east bank. If implemented in full, it would include abandoning the city of Kherson, the only regional capital Russia has seized since its invasion in February. That same day, Ukrainian forces hoisted the country's flag over Snihurivka, a town that sits on a major road into the city, 60 kilometers south.

With that, Russia's faltering eight-month-old invasion lurched into its newest phase, leaving analysts again wondering about the stamina of Ukrainian forces, the incoherence of the Russian assault, and the political fallout for the Kremlin.

"It's a huge political setback for Russia. This area was just annexed six or seven weeks ago -- you know, 'Russia Forever' and all that -- and now it's being given up," said Johan Norberg, a Russian military expert at the Swedish Defense Research Agency in Stockholm.

"It's been militarily wise for a long time, but there has been a political reluctance in Russia to actually do this, because it is a setback. It is very hard to put lipstick on this pig...that what you annexed six, seven weeks ago is no longer yours," he said. "But I think military necessity seems to have won the argument."

The announced retreat is part of a pattern that Russian commanders have followed during the war, said Ben Barry, a former British Army brigadier and ex-director of the British Army Staff: For example, after failing to capture Kyiv, Russia pulled out of northern Ukraine and redeployed forces to the east for an offensive in the Donbas.

"What they have displayed is a degree of pragmatism, cutting their losses after operations have failed, this falls into this pattern we've seen before," said Barry, now a senior fellow for land warfare at ISS in London.

"In military terms, they've made the assessment they can't hold [the west bank of the Dnieper] without excessive risk and excessive casualties," he said. "They see some benefit in shortening their front lines, crossing the river now under fire, which is a difficult thing to do in the best of times."

'HIMARS The Hell Out Of The Bridges'

Russian forces hold most of the part of the Kherson region that is on the east bank of the Dnieper. That provides control of a 'land bridge' leading from Russia's border with the Donbas to the isthmus that links mainland Ukraine to Crimea, the Black Sea peninsula Moscow occupied in 2014.

That Russia's position on the Dnieper's west bank was becoming indefensible had been clear for weeks. (**Comment** -- this Update has been clear on this for months).

The arrival of Western weapons --- US-made HIMARS artillery systems and M777 howitzers, French-made Caesar howitzers, German-made Panzerhaubitze self-propelled artillery, among others -- gave Ukraine the ability to hit Russian targets further behind the front lines from a safer distance.

That includes river crossings like the Antonivskyy Bridge which was rendered impassable over the summer due to repeated HIMARS strikes. To resupply the west bank and rotate out units, Russian troops resorted to portable pontoon bridges and ferry crossings -- which Ukrainians also pummeled.

"I've said for weeks Russia could not sustain their presence on the right [west] bank, because the Ukrainians have HIMAR'd the hell out of the bridges," said Konrad Muzyka, a Polish-based defense expert and owner of Rochan Consulting. The Dnieper's west bank is also called the right bank, because it is on the right side as the river flows southward toward the Black Sea.

"[The] Russians will have to pull back sooner and now the Dnieper will become the front line," he said. "But this is not going to be a walk in the park. Ukrainians will find it very difficult to cross the river especially as Russians are building up fortifications on the [east] bank."

"The Ukrainians will need a few weeks to rebuild their combat effectiveness, this is what happened after Kharkiv," he said, "but whether they will be able to cross the river, set up a bridgehead, I don't know how that's possible right now."

Ukrainian Skepticism, Russian 'Maskirovka'

Then there's the question of how the Russian announcement occurred.

General Surovikin, appointed early last month to take overall command of the war, made the recommendation during a televised meeting with Defense Minister Shoigu.

Shoigu, a Putin confidant and one of his longest-serving ministers, promptly agreed and issued the order in what appeared to be a choreographed display -- with Putin conspicuously absent. Shoigu has been under withering criticism from nationalists and military hawks for how the invasion has lurched and sputtered.

"I agree with your conclusions and proposals," Shoigu said after Surovikin recommended the retreat. "For us, the life and health of Russian servicemen is always a priority. We must take into account threats to the civilian population."

"Proceed with the withdrawal of troops and take all measures to ensure the safe transfer of personnel, weapons and equipment across the Dnieper River," he added.

The televised order -- a prime-time acknowledgement to the Russian public that things are not going according to plan -- drew skepticism from experts.

"What surprised me was the way this was announced, they just did it with such fanfare," Norberg said. "Why make such a fuss about it on Russian TV?"

"Politically this is bad news for Russia because Putin is giving up a province that he had tried to detach from Ukraine," said Mark Cancian, a military analyst at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington.

"Militarily, it's very sensible," Cancian said in an e-mail. "Russian forces on the west bank of the Dnieper were vulnerable. Pulling them back to the east makes them secure and frees up troops to strengthen the line elsewhere."

"There's a lot of PR stuff going on around this withdrawal, which I don't fully understand. I'm struggling to connect the dots," Muzyka said. "The Russians are very public about this withdrawal to the point that it makes me suspicious about their intentions. There are many shades of gray in this war, and in this particular event."

"Actions speak louder than words," Mykhaylo Podolyak, a senior adviser to President Zelenskyy, said on Twitter. "We see no signs Russia is leaving Kherson without a fight.... Ukraine is liberating territories based on intelligence data, not staged TV statements."

Still, any further Ukrainian advance -- either south to the city or southeast to the nearby riverbank -- will be problematic due to traps or slow, due to bridges and crossings destroyed by Russians to slow the advance.

Ukraine's southern command said troops were already confronting landmines and Russian-built roadblocks. Podolyak said Russian forces had mined "everything they can" in Kherson city, including apartments and sewers.

“The question is more political than military. To what extent does Moscow want the Ukrainians to fight for the city and largely destroy it?” Muzyka said. “Russia could also leave behind some of their mobilized troops to fight for the city -- until they die.”

Peace Talks

Russian statement on peace talks ‘another smoke screen,’ Ukraine Foreign Ministry says - Spokesperson for Ukraine’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Oleg Nikolenko, delivered a blistering response to Russia’s recent announcement that it is ready to engage in negotiations with Ukraine.

“The statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia is another smoke screen,” he said in a statement. “Russian officials start to mention the talks every time Russian troops are defeated on the battlefield. Moscow is not interested in restoring peace in Ukraine.”

“Simulating a readiness for dialogue, the Russian Federation is trying to buy time to regroup its units, prepare newly mobilized Russians, solve the issue of lack of weapons, eliminate the shortcomings of logistics, and then resort to new waves of aggression with new forces,” he added.

Earlier on Wednesday, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova told a news briefing that Russia is ready to negotiate and has never refused to do so, reported Russian state-owned news agency TASS. The announcement followed news that Russia would withdraw troops from the west bank of the Dnipro River.

According to Nikolenko, the feeling is similar to that of 2014 and 2015, following Russia’s annexation of Crimea. Despite statements coming from the Russian Federation indicating an openness to peace talks, Nikolenko sees Russia’s actions as directly contrary to those ends.

“Those who are really interested in peace negotiations do not destroy cities and villages, do not kill civilians, do not destroy energy infrastructure, do not abuse the residents of temporarily occupied territories, do not interfere with food supplies,” he said.

Ukraine has repeatedly assured allies that it is still open to negotiations, under its own terms.

“Let me remind you that Ukraine has repeatedly offered negotiations,” Nikolenko said. “But we always received either a contemptuous reaction and a demand to obey the Kremlin’s ultimatums, or another act of genocide against Ukrainians.”

Biden promises to follow Ukraine’s lead on talks - President Biden vowed not to try to dictate any talks between Russia and Ukraine as the dueling countries approach winter, saying that both sides will “lick their wounds” and decide whether they’ll compromise to end the war.

During a briefing last evening, he pledged the US is “not going to tell [Ukraine] what they have to do.”

Impacts

EU says it won't accept Russian passports issued in Ukraine, Georgia - The EU has announced it won't accept Russian travel documents issued in Ukraine and Georgia. It said in a statement earlier today the decision is a "response" to Russia's "unprovoked and unjustified military aggression against Ukraine" and Russia's practice of issuing Russian international passports to residents of the occupied regions. "It also follows Russia's unilateral decision to recognize the independence of the Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008," it added. The move still needs to be formally signed off by the European Parliament and EU member states.

Israel has the capability to strike Iran, Gantz says - Israel's outgoing Defense Minister Benny Gantz today that Israel has the capability to conduct a military operation against Iran.

Ukraine war offers China opportunity fraught with pitfalls - Framing of the rule of law and adherence to international law puts in a bind civilizationalist leaders like Mr. Xi, who, in line with Putin, define their countries' borders in civilizational rather than national terms while simultaneously paying lip service to international law.

These leaders see their international and/or domestic societal boundaries not as defined by internationally recognised frontiers but by civilizational reach.

In Russia's case, Russian-speaking populations and adherents to Russian culture constitute the Russian world and mark its borders.

In China, civilizational constitutes the framework for conflicts in the South and East China Seas and governs Chinese attitudes towards ethnic Chinese communities across the globe.

In many ways, China follows the path of the US, using trade, investment, infrastructure financing, and lending to countries across the Global South as its primary tools in shaping policies of other countries in its mold.

Nevertheless, Putin's invasion, and even more so, his most recent annexation of Ukrainian territory that constitutes civilizationalist thinking taken to its extreme, complicates regional geopolitics for Xi.

In contrast to Putin, who openly professes his desire to topple the current world order, Xi still sees an advantage in maintaining existing arrangements, albeit tweaked to be more accommodating to China.

Xi seeks to ensure that China, at least for now, is primus inter pares alongside the United States and that it can propagate its notion of a totalitarian surveillance state shielded from criticism.

This Russian Chinese divergence creates a double-edged sword for China. It generates geopolitical opportunity, nowhere more so than in Afghanistan and Central Asia, a region crucial to Chinese security, when the Ukraine war has altered the balance of power in the Chinese Russian relationship.

Russia has turned itself into a pariah state in Western eyes. It has put a bull's eye on itself by brutally challenging the international order and proving not good at it.

At the same time, the war in Ukraine threatens to dash Messrs. Putin and Xi's hopes of papering over differences in their diverging notions of a 21st-century world order while presenting a unified vision.

That was first evident in September at a summit of the China-Russian-backed SCO that includes Central and South Asian states. Putin was forced to concede that China had "questions and concerns" about the Russian invasion.

Two months later, Xi warned Russia not to employ nuclear weapons in Ukraine in his first public rebuke of Putin.

The warning reflected China's genuine rejection of nuclear war in Eurasia while offering Xi a low-cost way of garnering brownie points as he hosted German chancellor Scholz, the first European leader to visit Beijing since the eruption of Covid-19 and the Russian invasion.

Putin did not spell out China's questions and concerns, but what they involved is obvious.

Even if Putin's justification of the invasion on the basis that Ukraine and Russia were one nation resembles, in some ways, Chinese claims to Taiwan, it still violates China's principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of others.

To be sure, in contrast to Russian claims on Ukraine, China can point to an endorsement of its designs for Taiwan by an international community that, by and large, has accepted the One China policy as the basis for establishing relations with China.

China's reluctance to back Russia in its challenging of international borders shouldn't come as a surprise. It has refused to recognize Russian-inspired declarations of independence in 2008 by two regions of Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and Russia's grab of Crimea in 2014.

More recently, on a visit to Kazakhstan in September, Xi pledged to support Kazakhstan's "territorial integrity," a veiled warning to Putin not to act on his past statements that Kazakhstan, like Ukraine, never was a state.

Nonetheless, China does not want to see Russia defeated.

The poor performance of Russian weapons and other military hardware calls into question past Chinese reliance on Russian technology. It is likely to encourage China to become even more technologically self-reliant.

That was already happening before Ukraine with the rollout in 2017 of the fifth generation Chengdu J-20 Chinese fighter that is believed to be technologically superior to Russia SU-57E.

Add to this that the Ukraine war has strengthened NATO and demonstrated the power and efficacy of Western weaponry in battle.

Furthermore, the Ukraine invasion is likely to be the death knell for the presumed division of labour between Russia and China, whereby in broad lines, Russia focused more on security in Central Asia and the Caucasus while China played to its economic strengths with some forays into security.

Russian setbacks undermine cohesion within Russia's regional defense alliance, the CSTO. Today, it would be hard to imagine that CSTO forces would be called for help like in January, a month before the Ukraine invasion when they intervened in Kazakhstan to restore law and order amid mass anti-government protests.

Six months later, CSTO failed to respond to a request by Armenia in renewed fighting with Azerbaijan. In September, Kyrgyzstan pulled out of joint CSTO military exercises after the power vacuum in Central Asia enabled border clashes with Tajikistan.

Last month, Kyrgyzstan, home to a Russian military base, rejected a demand that it expels the Ukrainian ambassador.

The division of labor breakdown occurs as regional uncertainty rises with political violence in Afghanistan, social unrest in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and potential conflict between Russia and Kazakhstan.

China fears that Uygur militants will use Afghanistan to foster instability in its troubled northwestern province of Xinjiang and that other adversaries might seek to use Afghanistan as a base to target China or its interests from Central and South Asia.

Sharing an almost 1,800-kilometre-long border, Central Asia is critical to China. That is why the region was the starting point in 2013 for the Belt and Road Initiative, Xi's flagship foreign policy initiative.

A decade later, Central Asian attitudes are shifting as the region becomes warier of Russian security guarantees and/or dependence on a single external power.

That is particularly true for Kazakhs, whom Putin has, at least twice, described in similar terms to how he looks at Ukrainians, a people that never were a people and a state that never really existed.

Much like the Gulf states, Central Asians seek to reduce their dependence on an external power, Russia and diversify their foreign relations.

Helped by the Ukraine war, Central Asians have, so far, been more successful compared to the Saudis at not antagonizing external powers in ways that erupt in open animosity.

As a result, China's world changed when Russia invaded Ukraine.

For one, China has to reconfigure priorities in Eurasian transportation infrastructure that links it to Europe.

By taking itself out of the equation, Russia breathed new life into seemingly moribund routes allowing goods to travel across the Eurasian landmass without traversing Russia.

In doing so, Russia has complicated Chinese aspirations and boosted Turkish efforts to carve out a sphere of influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus that would cooperate and compete with China.

The fallout of Ukraine also enhances Iran's potential geopolitical significance at a time that the tightrope is tightening that China walks in maintaining a balance in its relationships with the Islamic republic and Saudi Arabia while seeking to capitalize on strains in the Saudi-US relationship.

China may welcome Turkey and Iran, two states opposed to US domination, making inroads in Central Asia in the hope that, to some degree, they may compensate for the degrading of Russia.

However, it may also find that Turkey's vision of a Turkish Century and Iranian rejection of a revival of long-dormant Pan-Turkist ideology could play roughshod on China's regional approach.

"In the context of BRI, China regards Turkey as both a bridge and an obstacle. Since 2017, Turkey has stayed silent on the Uyghur issue. However, China's mistrust continues. I don't think China believes it can be a real strategic partner with Turkey," said Umit Alperen, an expert on China's foreign policy toward Iran.

Nevertheless, Turkey, with close cultural ties to the Eurasian heartland, and Iran will be critical nodes in any alternative transportation route.

The alternatives have garnered a sense of urgency with China-EU shipments along the Northern Corridor, which connects China to Europe via Kazakhstan, Russia, and Belarus, already dropping by 40 per cent since the Russian invasion began.

Sanctions make transportation from China to Europe more complex and expensive.

At the same time, geography offers former Soviet republics leverage as China exploits opportunity to capitalize on the weakening of Russia's position in the region.

While transport along the Trans-Caspian route, dubbed the Middle Corridor, may not be able to replace the Northern Corridor immediately fully, it does help reduce bottlenecks and positions it strategically for the longer term.

The Middle Corridor's building blocks are already being put in place with the Trans-Kazakhstan railroad and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars line that make the Trans-Caspian the shortest and most cost-effective railway corridor between China and Europe. The new 826-kilometer-long Baku Kars line connects Azerbaijan's Caspian Sea port of Alat with Kars in Turkey.

Moreover, the China-Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan (CKU) railway project, estimated to cost around US\$4.5 billion, aims to connect China to Europe via Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Iran, and Turkey. Doing so would reduce the journey to Europe by some 900 kilometers and eight days.

Uzbekistan has long asserted that the railway would offer the shortest route from China to markets in the Middle East and Europe. The new railway would feed into the rail line connecting Uzbekistan to Turkmenistan's Turkmenbashi International Seaport on the Caspian Sea.

Sanctions

U.K. has frozen £18 billion of Russian assets since Ukraine invasion - The U.K. has frozen more than £18 billion of Russian assets since the start of Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, according to a new annual report published Thursday by the U.K.'s Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation (OFSI).

Why it matters: The U.K.'s sanctions regime against Russia is currently the "most extensive" regime it has established against any country, according to the report.

Containment

EU announces \$250 million package to help Moldova tackle harsh energy crisis - EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen paid an official visit to Moldova, where she announced a 250 million-euro (\$250 million) financial package to help one of Europe's poorest countries overcome a severe energy crisis amid Russia's war in Ukraine.

Von der Leyen said earlier today that Moldova was to receive 100 million euros in grants and the same amount again in loans from the European Union to help it meet its gas needs this winter, starting on January 1.

An extra 50 million euros will help the country's most vulnerable citizens, von der Leyen said at a joint news conference with Moldova's pro-Western president, Maia Sandu.

"European solidarity with the Republic of Moldova is unshakable," von der Leyen said. "We assure you that we will do our best to help you through this crisis."

UK to provide 1,000 more surface to air missiles to Ukraine - Defence Secretary Ben Wallace has announced the UK will shortly complete delivery of 1,000 additional surface to air missiles to Ukraine, in response to their requests for more air defence capabilities. Missiles will play a vital role in the provision of air defence for them, and the protection of critical infrastructure being continually targeted by Russia.

The missiles can be used in conjunction with existing Ukrainian capabilities and consists of launchers and missiles capable of shooting down air targets, including Russian drones and cruise missiles.

The announcement comes as Wallace today visited training sites where over 7,400 Ukrainian recruits have been trained by UK forces alongside eight partner nations.

Currently 1,900 Ukrainian recruits are in the UK taking part in the training programme and will soon return to their home country. When they complete the training, they are provided with items including combat clothing, body armour and ear defence, waterproofs and sleeping bags.

Canadian supplies to Ukraine - Canadian forces are training Ukrainian soldiers and providing them with "Canada-cold" winter kit, geared for sub-zero temperatures. Canada has also been sending vast amounts of this protective winter clothing to Ukraine for some months already, in preparation for the east European winter.

Heavy duty sleeping bags and roll mats, combined with heated accommodation and personal winter clothing, help to prevent cold-related injuries and ensure troops can operate effectively and efficiently.

It is reported that Russian troops, enlisted and drafted, do not have adequate winter clothing available. This brings to mind the Nazi winter situation that preceded defeat in Stalingrad during 1942/3.

How Hungary will never support Ukraine: it is not the arms deliveries - Hungary is ready to support Ukraine but will not sanction further loans taken out jointly by European Union states, Finance Minister Varga said in Brussels on Tuesday after a meeting of EU finance ministers.

Varga told Hungarian journalists on the sidelines of the meeting that Hungary will not support that form of aid “because it has bad experiences with the EU taking out loans.” Hungary has yet to receive the funding it is entitled to from the loan taken out during the coronavirus pandemic, he said. Meanwhile, Hungary is ready to continue supporting Ukraine; it has so far accepted over one million refugees and spent over 31 billion forints (EUR 77.2m) aiding the war-torn country, he added. It has also supported Ukraine before the war, by accepting macro-financial support and aiding ethnic Hungarians living in the country, he said.

Biden to raise concerns about Xi’s relationship with Putin ahead of G-20 summit - President Biden is expected to discuss Russia’s war in Ukraine with Chinese President Xi Jinping next week in a face-to-face meeting.

The meeting between the two leaders, the first since Biden ascended to the presidency, will take place ahead of the G-20 Summit in Bali, Indonesia.

“I think the president will be honest and direct with President Xi about how we see the situation in Ukraine with Russia’s war of aggression,” a senior Biden administration official told reporters on a call.

“This is a topic that the president and President Xi have spoken about several times before. They spoke about it extensively in March in their video call and then they spoke about it again in July, so it’s part of an ongoing conversation between the two of them,” added the official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

Biden administration approves \$400 million in military aid for Ukraine - The Pentagon announced a military aid package worth \$400 million for Ukraine, the 25th such installment.

Capabilities in this package include:

- Missiles for HAWK air defense systems
- Four Avenger air defense systems and Stinger missiles
- Additional ammunition for High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems, or HIMARS
- 21,000 155mm artillery rounds
- 500 precision-guided 155mm artillery rounds
- 10,000 120mm mortar rounds
- 100 high-mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicles
- 400 grenade launchers
- Small arms, optics, and more than 20 million rounds of small arms ammunition
- Demolition equipment for obstacle clearing

The United States has committed more than \$18 billion in security assistance to Ukraine since Russia’s invasion in February.

Geopolitics

Ethnic Serb police, lawmakers in Kosovo resign en masse - Ethnic Serb lawmakers, judges, and police officers in Kosovo have resigned en masse from their posts in protest over the dismissal of a police officer who refused to follow a government order on vehicle license plates.

The resignations, announced on November 5, come amid escalating tensions in Kosovo involving the country's ethnic Serb minority and the Kosovar majority who control most of the central government.

The latest dispute involves the question of vehicle license plates. This week, Kosovar authorities dismissed a senior Serb police officer in northern Kosovo who refused to respect an order mandating that all vehicle license plates used in Kosovo be issued by the Kosovar government, rather than Serbian plates.

The measure took effect on November 1, and Kosovo authorities said enforcement would be gradual.

Many ethnic Serbs in Kosovo refuse to recognize the country's independence from Serbia, which it declared in 2008, nearly a decade after a NATO-led military intervention halted a Serbia military operation.

Serbia, its **main ally Russia**, and some other countries refuse to recognize Kosovo as an independent nation. More than half of United Nations members, and most countries of the European Union, do.

China seeks upgrade of massive trade zone with Southeast Asian nations amid US hostility - Beijing says it will approach leaders in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations bloc this week about accelerating the Asean-China Free Trade Area 'Version 3.0'

China is looking to upgrade its Southeast Asia trade ties as the US government squeezes it economically through tariffs and curbs on its hi-tech sector.

China is expected to start talks with Southeast Asian nations about an upgrade to their giant free-trade zone in a potential boost to the stability of Beijing's manufacturing supply chains amid mounting rivalry with the United States.

Officials in Beijing have told state-run media they will approach leaders in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) bloc this week about accelerating negotiations for what they call the Asean-China Free Trade Area "Version 3.0." Chinese Premier Li Keqiang is in Phnom Penh to meet with the bloc's 10 members during a series of summits.

In September, the foreign ministry said establishment of Version 3.0 "is about to start." China is looking to expand the trade zone to keep supply chains and markets open in a part of the world it considers crucial.

"Everything is becoming more strategic these days, and every trade announcement is becoming more tied to geopolitics than ever before rather than to direct flows," said Jayant Menon, a visiting senior fellow with the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute's Regional Economic Studies Programme in Singapore.