

Conflict Update # 120

July 14th, 2022

Conflict Assessment

Russian General Killed With U.S.-Supplied Missiles - Ukraine has said it has killed another Russian general, following an attack in which Kyiv's forces used American-supplied weapons.

Serhiy Bratchuk, spokesman for the Odessa regional military, wrote on Telegram about the "liquidation" of Major General Artem Nasbulin, the chief of staff of the 22nd Army Corps "after HIMARS missiles hit the headquarters in the Kherson region" of southern Ukraine.

It came as Ukraine released footage it said showed a HIMARS attack on a mobile command post in Tavriisk, in the Kherson region.

Ukraine Marines Blast Russian Ammo Depots With Stugna-P Missile System - Ukrainian Marines pinpointed a Russian target on the screen before they unleashed a missile and apparently destroyed it.

The 36th Separate Marine Brigade, named after Rear Admiral Mykhailo Bilynskyi, said they used the "Stugna-P" Anti-Tank Guided Missile (ATGM) system to destroy Russian ammo depots in the southern Ukrainian region of Kherson Oblast.

The 36th Separate Marine Brigade said Tuesday: "While in the enemy's rear, one after another, military depots burst into flames."

Meet The Brimstone: The British Missile Killing Everything In Ukraine - You've heard of the air-launched Hellfire missile, but you may not know about a comparable munition called the Brimstone. The United Kingdom has sent hundreds of these systems to Ukraine. The Brimstone can be fired from the air, ground, or a truck, day or night, and in all weather. It is effective against tanks and armored vehicles – even small boats.

The Brimstone was initially designed to be launched by drones and airplanes, but the ever-resourceful Ukrainians adapted it to be fired from a vehicle. This ground mobility makes it even more lethal.

The supersonic Brimstone has been in British service since 2005. The

Royal Air Force used it in Iraq and Afghanistan. They are expensive, as each unit costs over \$200,000. Germany and Saudi Arabia have purchased them over the years. The missile is fire and forget and is equipped with radar and laser-seeking guidance.

The British Brimstone is a beyond line of sight missile. Only six feet long, the missile itself weighs 200 pounds and the armor-penetrating warhead is just 14 pounds, but it has proven in Ukraine that it can destroy tanks up to 12 miles away. The missile is fired out of a three-round launcher usually mounted on a civilian "technical" truck.



There is also a naval version of the Brimstone called the Sea Spear that can destroy small watercraft. This would likely be a separate order for the British to fill. It's not clear if Ukraine is using this variant as most of the videos on social media feature ground launchers mounted on trucks.

Could these technical trucks be parked on the shoreline to engage Russian shipping in the Black Sea? That would certainly take an experienced crew to pull off. The Sea Spear might have the ability to give the Ukrainians more anti-ship punch. But the range is likely too short, and the warhead is not big enough to cause major damage to larger ships, so it would be more apt to knock out Russian rescue tugs operating close to shore.

Mother of Dead Russian Soldier Vows Uprising Against Putin - The mother of a Russian soldier killed fighting Putin's war in Ukraine has called for an end to the conflict, as she said she believed mothers would rise up against the Russian leader.

Valya, who spoke to BBC News using a pseudonym for safety reasons, said she is in contact with soldiers' mothers across Russia. She said many of the mothers blame the Kremlin for the ongoing conflict and the deaths of their sons.

The distraught Russian mother told the BBC's Russia editor, Steve Rosenberg, that she last heard from her son more than four and a half months ago, with little to no communication from officials on his whereabouts after he was deployed to neighboring Ukraine in February.

She received official confirmation from Russian authorities after the interview that her son had been killed in combat, the BBC said. "They [Russian mothers] hate the government, they hate Putin," Valya said. "They all want this war to end."

Valya said she believes that eventually, the mothers of soldiers killed in Ukraine will rise up against Putin over his war, which he calls a "special military operation."

"If the mothers of all the soldiers who are fighting there and the ones who've lost sons, if they all rose up, can you imagine how big that army would be? And they will. Their nerves will snap," she said.

Russian forces achieved "no significant territorial advances" over the last 72 hours in Donbas - according to the UK Ministry of Defence. The latest British intelligence report reads: "In the Donbas, Russian forces continue to conduct artillery strikes across a broad front followed by, in some areas, probing assaults by small company and platoon-sized units. However, they have achieved no significant territorial advances over the last 72 hours and are in danger of losing any momentum built up following the capture of Lysychansk."

Intercepted call by SBU shows Russian troops failing morale - An intercepted call was published by the Security Service of Ukraine, revealing a conversation between Russian soldiers. One of them who has been reportedly fighting somewhere in Kharkiv Oblast, said that their unit continues to suffer losses. According to the speaker, due to constant attacks from the Ukrainian army, many soldiers do not want to participate in future offensives.

'Twelve of Putin's officers are killed' in strike on command post in occupied Kherson as 'Vladimir is enraged by failure of his S-400 defence system' while US-supplied HIMARS missiles inflict critical losses.

Twelve Russian officers are thought to have been killed in a single rocket strike as Ukraine's armed forces inflict punishing losses with American-supplied weapons.

The attack targeted a command post in at Chornobaivka Airport, near the occupied southern city of Kherson, and is rumoured to have killed at least one general and one colonel. It is thought to have been carried out using US HIMARS rockets.

Video shows what appears to be an ammunition dump at the base exploding, as Russian Telegram channels report Putin is infuriated at the inability of Russia's S-400 anti-air systems to protect his armed forces.

It comes as Ukraine readies its million-strong military for a major offensive around Kherson, aiming to recapture territory seized by Russia early in the conflict.

Russian Military Expert Concerned About Ukraine's New Weapons From West – A Russian military expert admitted that new Western weapons being supplied to Ukraine could make Russia's chances of winning the war difficult.

Igor Korotchenko, editor-in-chief of the online military publication National Defense, made the comments during an appearance on Russia-1, a Kremlin-run station. Journalist and Russian propaganda expert Julia Davis captured a clip from the news segment featuring Korotchenko and posted it Wednesday on Twitter.

Korotchenko said that regions in Ukraine that Russia has claimed it now controls—Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Kharkiv, Odesa and Mykolaiv—are now part of Russia and that attacks there should be considered attacks on Russia itself. He said his country's military should retaliate for Ukrainian strikes in these areas by taking out bridges and railways in western parts of Ukraine, where Western weapons arrive from Poland, as well as in the south, where weapons are transferred from Romania.

"The scale of additional Western arms deliveries will seriously complicate our success of conducting our special military operation," Korotchenko said, according to translated subtitles on Davis' post. Ukraine has benefited from Western weapons ever since Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the invasion in late February. In recent weeks, President Volodymyr Zelensky's military has seen an increase in heavy armaments provided by NATO countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom and Poland.

Ukraine aims to amass 'million-strong army' to fight Russia, says defence minister - Ukraine has touted plans to amass a "million-strong army" equipped with Nato weapons to fight Russian forces.

However, the comments by Defence minister Oleksii Reznikov are being seen as more of a rallying cry than a concrete plan for a counter offensive.

They come as Russia makes gains in the eastern Donbas region, and continues to pound areas across Ukraine. Mr Reznikov also said that retaking the country's southern Black Sea coast was vital to the country's economy.

In his interview with The Times newspaper, the minister said weapons deliveries needed to be sped up.

He praised the UK for being "key" in the transition from providing Ukraine with Soviet-era weapons to the more effective Nato-standard air defence systems and ammunition.

"We need more, quickly, to save the lives of our soldiers. Each day we're waiting for howitzers, we can lose a hundred soldiers," he said.

The defence minister added: "We have approximately 700,000 in the armed forces and when you add the national guard, police, border guard, we are around a million-strong."

Impacts

Russia has stolen \$613 million worth of agricultural products from Ukraine since February - According to Roman Neyter, a researcher at the Kyiv School of Economics, this is the estimated worth of the grain and agricultural oils Russia has stolen from Ukraine during the ongoing invasion. The total losses of the agricultural sector from the war can reach \$27.6 billion, according to him.

China factories are feeling some heat as U.S., Europe demand slows - European sales for Guangdong-based coffee machine company HiBrew have tapered off after a sterling run last year when pent-up global demand drove up purchases of Chinese consumer goods.

Sales have fallen 30% to 40% so far this year, a sharp contrast to the 70% growth in business last year, according to General Manager Zeng Qiuping.

Rising living costs in the U.S. and Europe as well as importers waiting for potential U.S.-China tariff cuts contributed to the downturn, Zeng said. But he is optimistic the current lull is just a blip and overseas demand will return.

While HiBrew doesn't sell much to the U.S., Zeng said fellow exporters tell him orders from the U.S. have also diminished.

This does not bode well for a Chinese economy geared to manufacturing and export, in exchange for foreign income and trading balance. Estimated GDP growth is now slated at 4.2%, down from original plans, and any further negative impact on this number has serious financial and societal implications for China.

Non-Han Chinese workers, already at a disadvantage against Han citizens, were relocated en masse from rural areas to manufacturing economic zones by the Chinese government, to boost production and provide low-cost labor.

Layoffs because of reducing demand in this vital Chinese societal sector may have serious challenges for China.

The one thing China fears is a budding unrest problem leading to societal unrest. COVID-19 downturns in employment sent negative ripples through China with people confined indoors.

A drop off in demand is the last thing China needs at this moment.

China crushes mass protest by bank depositors demanding their life savings back - Chinese authorities on Sunday violently dispersed a peaceful protest by hundreds of depositors, who sought in vain to demand their life savings back from banks that have run into a deepening cash crisis.

Since April, four rural banks in China's central Henan province have frozen millions of dollars of deposits, threatening the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of customers in an economy already battered by draconian Covid lockdowns.

Anguished depositors have staged several demonstrations in the city of Zhengzhou, the provincial capital of Henan, over the past two months, but their demands have invariably fallen on deaf ears.

On Sunday, more than 1,000 depositors from across China gathered outside the Zhengzhou branch of the country's central bank, the People's Bank of China, to launch their largest protest yet, more than half a dozen protesters told CNN.

The demonstration is among the largest China has seen since the pandemic, with domestic travel limited by various Covid restrictions on movement. Last month, Zhengzhou authorities even resorted to tampering with the country's digital Covid health-code system to restrict the movements of depositors and thwart their planned protest, sparking a nationwide outcry.

This time, most protesters arrived outside the bank before dawn -- some as early as 4 a.m. -- to avoid being intercepted by authorities. The crowd, which included the elderly and children, occupied a flight of imposing stairs outside the bank, chanting slogans and holding up banners.

"Henan banks, return my savings!" they shouted in unison, many waving Chinese flags, in videos shared with CNN by two protesters.

Global semiconductor production - Semiconductor chips have been in short supply for the past couple of years, as the supply chain has been whipsawed by the pandemic.

The shortage has impacted the entire electronics food chain of products, as chips are the basic building blocks of all things electronic.

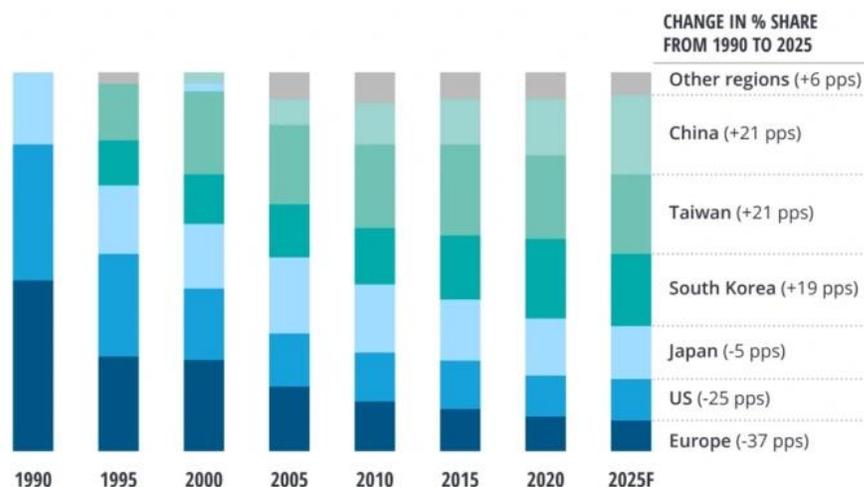
For China, this is an acute challenge as by being sanctioned by the US with a ban on sales of any semiconductor chips either manufactured by or designed by US technology, they are in danger of falling 25 to 30 years behind.

This explains in part the Chinese anxiety over Taiwan, where the majority of global semiconductor manufacture transpires, and South Korean and Japan.

Alongside is a graphic of chip output across the global manufacturing countries.

Global semiconductor capacity: Percentage share by region, 1990–2025

Semiconductor manufacturing capacity: Percentage share by location



Note: F indicates forecast.

Source: Deloitte analysis based on information gathered from publicly available third-party sources.

Tens of thousands flee 'cold

civil war' - Russians who disagree with Kremlin policy are fleeing the country. More than 100,000 are thought to have left since the start of the war in Ukraine. Those who stay risk losing their jobs — and their freedom.

All over Russia, state employees are being intimidated. They are told that anyone who is against the war is against the state — and must voluntarily resign. Recently, a threat directed at high school principals came from the Duma itself, the lower house of the Russian parliament. Its chairman, Vyacheslav Volodin, declared: "This is about the security of our state. About the future of our country. So, tolerance notwithstanding, the honorable principals should be aware of their responsibilities. If they aren't, they should just go. Stand up and walk away."

The Russian teachers' association fears that statements like these, coming from the very top, will be interpreted lower down the hierarchy as a call to action, and that critically-minded teachers will now be silenced. Speaking to DW, Svetlana Lozovskaya, a member of the association from Ulan-Ude, commented: "This is disastrous for Russia, for Russian society. We are now experiencing a kind of cold civil war in Russia." Society, she said, is divided. Nonetheless, she hopes that there will still be people who speak the truth who will stay, and who will carry on speaking it right to the end.

But there are fewer and fewer such people in Russia. It is estimated that more than 100,000 Russian professionals have already left their homeland, fearing persecution for their criticism of the Kremlin. Journalists, researchers, IT specialists, artists, and actors are fleeing to Georgia, the Baltic states, Turkey, or Germany.

Peace Talks

West's Ukraine Strategy Will Mean a Prolonged, Bloody Stalemate - Leaders of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization last month rallied around a new slogan for Ukraine: "As long as it takes." When a reporter asked President Biden to explain what that means, he said: "As long as it takes so Russia cannot, in fact, defeat Ukraine and move beyond Ukraine." Note what he didn't say: as long as it takes for Ukraine to win.

Ukraine Rules Out Ceding Land To Russia - As battles raged in the east and south of Ukraine, the war-torn country's foreign minister ruled out ceding any territory to Russia should peace talks ever resume and he made clear that no such negotiations were taking place.

“The objective of Ukraine in this war...is to liberate our territories, to restore our territorial integrity and full sovereignty in the east and south of Ukraine,” Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba told a briefing on July 13.

“This is the end point of our negotiating position.”

Russia has taken control of wide swathes of Ukrainian territory in the south along the Black Sea coast and in the eastern Luhansk and Donetsk provinces that make up the Donbas region.

Russia in 2014 also captured and illegally annexed Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula and has backed separatists occupying parts of Luhansk and Donetsk provinces since that time.

Russian opinion on peace talks - A top Russian official has said Ukraine must accept the “territorial realities” of the situation in order to resume peace negotiations with Moscow. Kyiv must provide a clear response to Moscow’s proposals that Ukraine accepts “non-aligned” and “non-nuclear” status in order to strike a peace deal, Russian deputy foreign minister Andrey Rudenko said, adding that Zelenskyy must also recognize Russia’s control over Crimea and the status of the pro-Russian self-proclaimed “people’s republics” in Donetsk and Luhansk.

Sanctions

At least 47 top companies at risk of having major assets seized by Russia - The stakes are becoming increasingly high for the companies that have refused to pull out of Russia following its brutal invasion of Ukraine.

A quarter of the world’s 200 largest companies are at risk of having key assets seized by the Russian government, according to a new report from the Moral Rating agency, an organization focused on tracking companies’ response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

These 47 multinationals, including gas giant BP and aircraft manufacturer Boeing, who have remained in Russia are now vulnerable to the Kremlin’s “expropriation blackmail” over assets that they still own in the country, according to Mark Dixon, the founder of Moral Rating.

As the Kremlin makes moves to seize Russian-based assets of foreign companies, firms are caught between staying and losing billions to expropriation or selling them off. According to the report, this may be Moscow’s attempt to force companies to make concessions and to put pressure on foreign governments.

On July 1, Putin signed a decree seizing full control of the Sakhalin-2 gas and oil project in Russia’s Far East by creating a new firm that will take over the Sakhalin Energy Investment company, in which Shell and two Japanese trading companies Mitsui and Mitsubishi hold nearly 50%.

While the decree doesn’t seize assets per se, the move allows Moscow to decide whether or not the companies get to continue with the project and gives the Kremlin the power to force the foreign entities to make concessions for staying on. Russia has also been preparing a law, expected to pass soon, that will allow the state to seize assets of Western firms that have decided to leave.

Unsurprisingly, most of the companies under high threat of expropriation are in the energy sector. With its natural wealth in oil and gas, Russia made a risky but attractive investment destination for international firms.

The list includes Mitsui, BP, TotalEnergies, China National Petroleum, Mitsubishi, Fortum, Sinopec, China National Offshore Oil, E.ON, Trafigura, Marubeni and Royal Dutch Shell.

Other companies are also at risk of having their assets seized, Moral Rating says, including PepsiCo, as well as LG Electronics, Nestle, Unilever, General Electric, Assicurazioni, Generali, Samsung Electronics, and Nissan.

To calculate the level of risk, the agency looks at Russian-based assets as a percentage of these companies' global businesses.

The corporations at risk are those that have either refused to leave Russia or made no comments, temporarily halted their local operations, have carved out activities to continue, or have promised to sell factories or businesses but failed to follow through, Moral Rating says.

There is evidence Russia's blackmail is working.

Decision to return Nord Stream 1 turbine to Germany was "very difficult" - Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on July 13 that it was a "very difficult decision" to return the gas pipeline's turbine to Russia through Germany. The turbine of the operational pipeline was being repaired in Canada at the facilities of a German company Siemens Energy. Ukraine said that returning the turbine to Russia would let it continue weaponize its energy supplies to Europe.

Ukraine is suing Canada to prevent the return of the repaired equipment.

Putin

A second wave of Russians is fleeing Putin's regime - For months now, Vladimir has been preparing paperwork and getting his affairs in order for a move to France.

A visa application process that was once relatively easy is now dogged with complexity, but the 37-year-old is confident that getting his family and employees out of Russia will be worthwhile.

"On the one hand, it's comfortable to live in the country where you were born. But on the other, it's about the safety of your family," Vladimir told CNBC via video call from his office in Moscow.

For Vladimir, the decision to leave the country he has called home all his life "was not made in one day." Under President Vladimir Putin's rule, he has watched what he called the "erosion of politics and freedom" in Russia over several years. But the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine was the final straw.

"I think, in a year or two, everything will be so bad," he said of his country.

The Russian Embassy in London and Russia's Foreign Ministry did not immediately respond to CNBC's request for comment.

Vladimir, whose surname has been removed due to the sensitive nature of the situation, is part of what he considers Russia's "second wave" of migration following the war. This includes those who took longer to prepare to leave the country — such as people with businesses or families who wanted to let their children finish the school year before leaving.

Such flexibility was not afforded to everybody. When Moscow invaded Ukraine on Feb. 24, alongside the millions of Ukrainians who were forced to flee their homes, life for some Russians became untenable overnight.

In the tech sector alone, an estimated 50,000 to 70,000 professionals left in the first month of the war, with a further 70,000 to 100,000 expected to follow soon thereafter, according to a Russian IT industry trade group.

'Not about territory': Russia wants to 'destroy' Ukraine's sovereignty - Ukrainian Ambassador to Australia Vasyl Myroshnychenko says Russia's invasion of Ukraine is not about taking territory but to make Ukraine "cease to exist."

He said Russia wants to "destroy" Ukraine's sovereignty, and it "will not stop."

“This is not about the territory – this is about the Ukrainian people,” he told Sky News Australia.

“About human lives who will be suffering there ... and they will suffer even more under the Russian occupation.”

Russian Parliament Mulls Extraordinary Meeting - The Russian parliament's organizing council was due to meet on Monday to decide on calling an extraordinary meeting of parliament on July 15, but it was not immediately clear what was to be discussed.

The lower house of parliament said the council was to meet on Monday due to "issues that require urgent solutions" and the need to consider "government initiatives". It gave no further details.

At the scheduled start of the council meeting, there was no public live translation on the meeting and no agenda was published, Reuters reporters said.

Sakhalin-1 and Sakhalin-2 - Putin ordered the assets of the Sakhalin-2 oil and gas development project to be transferred to the state, and he invited the consortium's foreign participants to obtain stakes in the new state company.

Putin Could Use Nukes If This Captured Town Is Taken Back By Ukraine, Says Former Russian Opposition Figure - Putin would be ready to use nuclear weapons in case Ukraine attempts to recover a key territory, according to an expert.

“Putin will react to attempts to seize Kherson as an existential threat to Russia – as he considers that to be part of Russia already – and would be ready to use nuclear weapons,” said Andrey Piontkovsky, a former member of the Russian Opposition Coordination Council, reported Yahoo News.

Piontkovsky, a self-exiled dissident, quoted Alexei Venediktov, the former editor-in-chief and co-owner of the recently banned Radio station “Echo of Moscow.”

Venediktov was reasoned to be credible by Piontkovsky. “Venediktov couldn't come up with that on his own – he's too concerned with his role of a civil society representative,” according to Yahoo News.

Why It Matters: Piontkovsky pointed to a particular example of a target city in the report — the western Ukrainian city of Lviv.

“These conversations took place, further indicating their despair and madness... [Putin] has nothing left but nukes,” said Piontkovsky. “But even if he annihilates, says, Lviv with a nuclear strike, killing a million people – what that would change in this war?”

Kherson was the first major Ukrainian city to fall to Russians after hostilities began in February 2022, reported The New York Times.

The Russian army has retaken some territory around the southern coastal regions north of Crimea around Kherson, according to a previous report. Putin told his generals recently to concentrate on the Donetsk province after capturing Ukraine's Luhansk region.

Did Putin blunder the Kremlin into a dystopian World War III? - Putin's justifications for invading — and by extension, his excuses for dragging the international world into his war — are ever-changing. First, it was to reunite Kievan Rus' based on obscure Medieval historical ties. Then it was to finish the work of World War II by “de-Nazifying” Ukraine. Currently, it is to create a multipolar world, which, conveniently, would entitle Putin to all of Ukraine.

No one in January — not President Biden, nor the Pentagon, nor even Putin — believed that by July the world would be embroiled in this equivalent of World War III. Plus, no equivalent of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand (sparking World War I) or a sneak attack on Pearl Harbor (bringing the U.S. into World War II) appeared on the horizon.

In early February, the debate was whether Ukraine could last 72 hours if Russia invaded. By late February, it had shifted to whether Kyiv could stand for 30 days. By late March, prognosticators debated if or when Putin would turn to tactical nukes to “escalate to de-escalate” his invasion.

Yet here we are. And, ironically, unlike in WWI when the Triple Entente and Triple Alliance triggered nations automatically into war, the NATO alliance to date has spared the U.S. from putting “boots on the ground” in Ukraine, thus enabling Washington to focus primarily on a modern-day lend-lease approach of militarily supporting Kyiv.

Presently, an equilibrium appears to have set in on the Ukraine battlefields, largely taking the form of a bloody stalemate more akin to the trench warfare of Verdun in WWI than to what any serious Pentagon military war planner envisioned a WWII might look or feel like. Thus far, Ukraine has effectively withstood repeated Russian assaults in large part because of superior NATO weaponry and training, as well as the valiant esprit de corps of its troops.

Russia, meanwhile, is tenuously avoiding a culminating point in Ukraine — Clausewitz’s classic definition of defeat — because of the Kremlin’s willingness to sacrifice however many Russian soldier deaths or wounded in action it takes to wage this war of attrition. Likewise, for now, China, India and Middle Eastern countries are willing to throw Putin economic lifelines in order to profit off Moscow’s severely sanctioned economy. China and India alone now account for 50 percent of the Kremlin’s oil exports at heavily discounted (as much as 30 percent) prices.

As Putin declares an operational pause in Donbas, Washington needs to quickly recalibrate how to decisively win this war. That begins with rapidly coming up to speed on where the battlefields are.

The obvious one is the roughly 9,000 square miles comprising Donbas — an area equivalent in size to New Hampshire or Vermont — where, paradoxically, a conflict global in scale is largely being fought on a relatively miniscule hot battlefield.

Despite recent territorial advances by Russia in Luhansk, progress has been slow and costly. Ukraine’s introduction of HIMARs and other advanced NATO offensive weapons may marginalize Russian artillery and change the course of the war.

Less obvious, in terms of understanding the war, is how economic alliances, as instruments of national power, are rapidly becoming the peer competitor, if not prevailing force, of military alliances. Much has been made of Western sanctions against Russia; however, Moscow, at least for now, has successfully deflected the impact of those sanctions back onto the U.S. and Europe in the form of higher energy and food costs.

It also means understanding that this war is unlikely to go nuclear. Despite fantasizing on Russian state media about using nuclear weapons to destroy Ukraine and/or NATO, Putin realizes that short of an attack by NATO on Russia, his military is in no position to take on the alliance’s military forces. Moscow struggles to advance a kilometer at a time in Donbas. It simply does not have the capacity or will to conventionally widen the conflict.

Plus, notably, to date the Kremlin has absorbed humiliating defeats without resorting to tactical nukes, including retreating from Kyiv, the sinking of the Moskva and, most recently, the embarrassing evacuation of Snake Island, Ukraine’s Alamo.

Still, Putin is unlikely to stop. Ukraine was merely the first steppingstone in retaking the heart of Kievan Rus’ — and beyond. His calculated plot has long been underfoot, and nothing will dissuade Putin from doggedly pursuing his would-be Peter the Great empire version of the Russian Federation.

This war is not what the Pentagon, politicians or Americans in general thought it might be: a nuclear and/or biological Armageddon. But it is global in scale — especially economically — and its outcome will be as defining as the end of WWII. Nothing less than global democracy as we have known it since 1945 is at stake. (Mark Toth – The Hill).

Humanitarian

A deal to resume exporting Ukrainian grain has been announced with the establishment of a coordination and monitoring centre in Istanbul. Turkey's defence minister Hulusi Akar said Ankara will ensure the safety of shipments in transit and the parties will jointly check grain cargoes in ports after officials from Ukraine, Russia, United Nations and Turkey met for talks in Istanbul on Wednesday. UN chief António Guterres described the talks as a "critical step forward" but said more work was needed before a deal is set to be signed next week.

Grain vessel traffic jam - A traffic jam of more than 130 cargo ships loaded with Ukrainian grain is waiting in the Black Sea to pass into the Danube. The ships are waiting to access exit routes through the Sulina, and Bystre estuary canals to reach a series of ports and terminals in Romania from where the grain can be transported on around the world.

Russia's long history of show trials in Ukraine - The trappings said courtroom — a lawyer, a defendant, a judge, charges being read. Everyone's behavior said otherwise.

As Ukrainian serviceman Bohdan Pantyushenko heard he was being accused of trumped-up terrorism charges that could carry the death penalty, the judge chattered away on her cell phone, discussing an upcoming manicure. Pantyushenko's appointed attorney bluntly told his client he was not there to defend him.

"I realized what absolute trash it all was," Pantyushenko said, recalling his horrific and at times farcical experience as a prisoner in the self-declared "Donetsk People's Republic" (DNR), which has served as a veneer for the Russian occupation in east Ukraine since 2014.

Pantyushenko, a tank driver, was captured in January 2015 when the Ukrainian army was battling Russian and Russian-backed forces near Donetsk airport. For nearly five years, he was bounced around basements and detention centers before landing in a pseudo courtroom in 2019.

There, he was swiftly charged and sentenced to 18 years in prison. Yet only two months later, on December 30, 2019, he got sent home as part of Ukraine's last big prisoner exchange before Russia's full-scale invasion this February.

Now, similar scenarios of capture, sentence and exchange are playing out in the same region, but with a larger, international pool of prisoners. Trials, both real and Potemkin, are becoming a critical means for Russia and Ukraine to seek to influence the course of the war through the court of public opinion.

The same terrorism charges levied against Pantyushenko have been brought against at least three foreigners under the same non-recognized DNR legal system.

Britons Aiden Aslin and Shaun Pinner and Moroccan Brahim Saadoun, all members of the Ukrainian armed forces, were sentenced to death on June 9 in a short show trial. Two more British men and two Americans are known to also be held in the DNR and the former have allegedly been charged under the same statute.

Meanwhile, Ukraine has swiftly sentenced three Russian soldiers for war crimes and begun several more trials — albeit in a far different (and legitimate) setting.

Russian missile attack against civilians - Nearly two dozen Ukrainians were killed in Russian cruise missile strikes in the central region of Vinnytsya, south of Kyiv, on Thursday. Ukraine's Interior Minister Denys Monastyrskyi told reporters that 21 people were killed in the alleged submarine-launched missile attacks, including three children, and another 91 were wounded. Here's video of the immediate aftermath, shared on Twitter Thursday morning.

"What is this, if not an open act of terrorism?" said Ukrainian President Zelenskyy on Telegram. Russia is "A killer country. A terrorist country," he wrote Thursday.

"This is terrorism, [the] deliberate murder of civilians to spread fear," Zelenskyy's top diplomat, Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, tweeted Thursday, adding, "Russia is a terrorist state and must be legally recognized as such."

A happy little girl...obliterated by Putin just minutes later: Killed four-year-old Down's Syndrome child and mother fighting for life are seen moments before Russian missiles killed 21 in Ukrainian city.

Liza, four, who had Down's Syndrome, was killed by Russian cruise missile that hit office in Vinnytsya, Ukraine.

A four-year-old girl with Down's Syndrome has become the latest innocent victim of Putin's war in Ukraine after she was killed in her pram by a Russian cruise missile which also left her mother fighting for life.

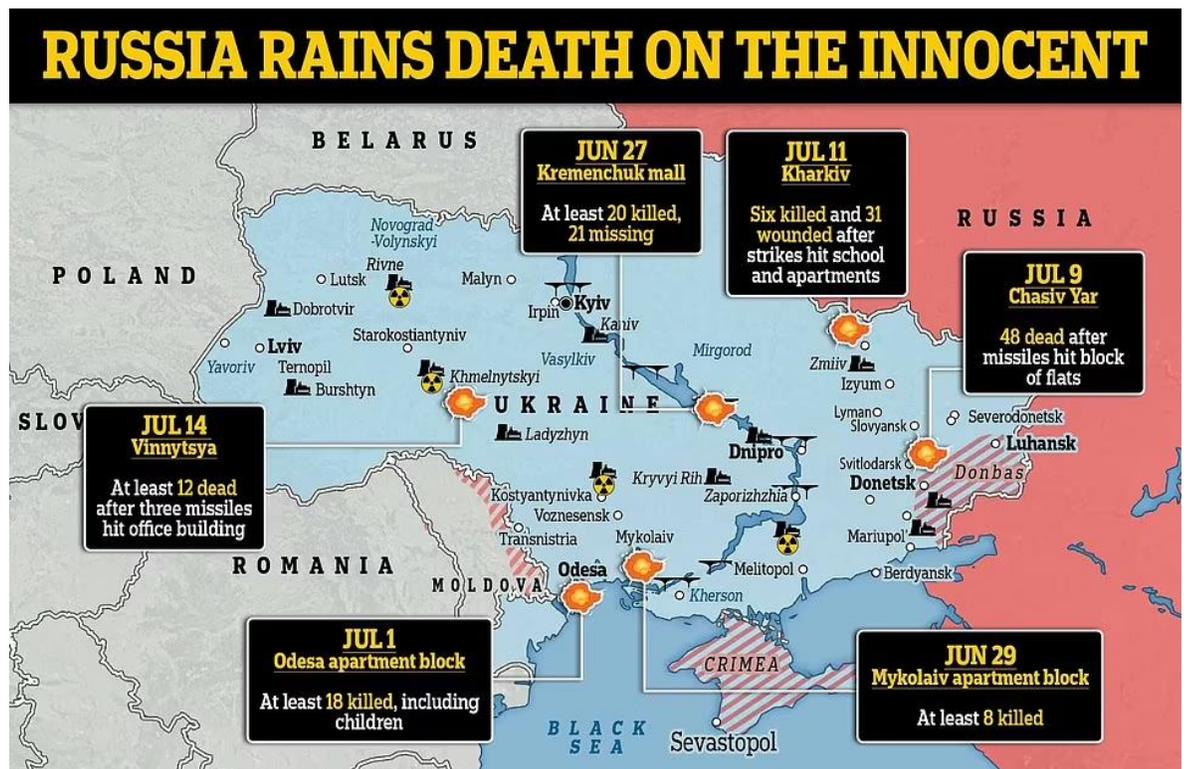
Liza Dmitrieva was accompanying mother Irina on a day out in the city of Vinnytsya - in western Ukraine, hundreds of miles from the nearest frontline - when a Russian Kalibre missile launched from a submarine in the Black Sea crashed down on top of them around 10.50am local time.

The pink pram that Liza had been filmed pushing an hour earlier was left lying on its side in the middle of the road, spattered in blood from wounds that the little girl tragically did not survive. Meanwhile Irina was rushed to hospital in critical condition, where she is now battling for her life.



Writing about the fifth birthday that little Liza will now never get to experience, she said: 'It was Covid-19 first, then the war. I have not been able to arrange a proper birthday party for Liza for two years.

'I am hoping her fifth birthday will give us a chance! I am scared to make wishes. I just dream about peace, and about things going the way we want.'



Just six hours before Liza was killed, she had posted about the progress her daughter had made despite the pandemic and war.

Posting on social media after the attack, President Zelensky wrote: 'Vinnytsya. Rocket strikes in the city centre. There are wounded and dead, among them a small child,' he wrote on Instagram.

'Every day, Russia destroys the civilian population, kills Ukrainian children, directs rockets at civilian objects where there is nothing military.

'What is this, if not an open act of terrorism? Inhumans. A killer country. A terrorist country.'

Forced removal of Ukrainian citizens - Russia has forcibly removed nearly 2 million people from Ukraine, including several hundred thousand children, since its invasion of the country, Zelenskyy said. Tens of thousands of Ukrainian are being held in filtration camps in the temporarily Russian-occupied territories, Zelenskyy said in a video address to the Asian Leadership Conference in Seoul on Wednesday.

Nations Discuss Coordinating Ukraine War Crimes Probes - The chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court has called for an international “overarching strategy” to coordinate efforts to bring perpetrators of war crimes in Ukraine to justice.

The International Criminal Court's chief prosecutor called Thursday for an “overarching strategy” to bring perpetrators of war crimes in Ukraine to justice, and representatives from dozens of countries pledged to cooperate in their investigations.

Geopolitics

Solomon Islands - Australian Prime Minister Albanese engaged in a very public and winning hug with Solomon Islands leader Manasseh Sogavere, who repeated his pledge that there would not be any Chinese military bases in his country.

And while stories circulate about the Solomon Islands accepting Chinese police gear and receiving security training from China, as well as President Manasseh Sogavere's attendance at a graduation ceremony for Royal Solomon Islands Police Force members who had received riot control training from Chinese police earlier this month, other public signals contradict the storyline of the island nation's lean towards Beijing.

Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese engaged in a very public and winning hug with Sogavere when the two men met Wednesday at the forum. The Solomons leader also met with New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern. Sogavere repeated his pledge that there would not be any Chinese military bases in his country.

Something new is developing in the U.S.-China relationship, ex-Singapore diplomat says - The U.S. strategy of applying pressure on China has not worked, and the Biden administration is now trying to do something different by holding meetings with their Chinese counterparts, says Kishore Mahbubani, a distinguished fellow at the National University of Singapore's Asia Research Institute.

US-China tensions, Kiribati's shock withdrawal overshadow Pacific leaders meeting - Tensions between China and the United States, and the withdrawal of the remote Pacific island nation of Kiribati, have overshadowed the Pacific Islands Forum as leaders arrived in Fiji on Monday (11 July) for the first in-person summit in three years.

During the four-day meeting, Pacific island leaders will discuss how to gather more international support and funding to fight the impact of rising sea levels and climate change, as well as China's ambitions for greater security ties across the region.

A bid by Beijing to sign a broader regional trade and security deal with 10 nations that recognize China, but is opposed by some forum members, was also to be discussed.

Tuvalu Foreign Minister Simon Kofe said in an interview he was saddened by news of Kiribati's withdrawal and Pacific leaders would need to "look at the concerns raised by Kiribati" when they meet this week.

Kiribati President Taneti Maamau said in a letter his country would withdraw from the forum because it did not agree with secretary-general Henry Puna continuing in the role, nor other terms of a deal brokered weeks ago to solve a rift between Micronesian states and other members. Kiribati also wanted the meeting delayed.

Kiribati has forged strong bilateral ties with Beijing in recent years, which includes drawing up plans to upgrade a remote airstrip.

Also being discussed by Pacific leaders is fisheries – tuna is a major source of revenue in the region – but the issue also risks being caught up in geopolitical tensions, Kofe said.

China operates a large fishing fleet in the Pacific and is seeking greater access to one of the world's richest fishing grounds.

The Quad group of the United States, Japan, Australia and India have offered Pacific islands increased surveillance to stop illegal fishing in exclusive economic zones.

"This geopolitical competition will continue, and it is important the Pacific focuses on the issues that are critical to the Pacific – climate change and the conservation of our resources," Kofe said.

The United States wants to expand a fisheries treaty in the Pacific to cover "other security issues," he said, and this would be discussed at the forum.

A key forum leaders retreat will be held on Thursday. China had proposed a video meeting between the Chinese Communist Party's international office and 10 Pacific islands on the same day.

Tuvalu is among four Pacific nations that have diplomatic ties with Taiwan and not Beijing.

Kofe withdrew from a recent UN Ocean conference in Lisbon after China barred the presence of Taiwanese members included in the Tuvalu delegation. He said this was "bully tactics" by China.

Nonetheless, Kofe said Tuvalu doesn't want differences between China and Taiwan to distract Pacific islands from what unifies all nations in the region this week.

"Maintaining the unity and solidarity of the Pacific family is critical for us to be able to navigate many of these issues that we are facing," he said.

China rebukes Navy operation in South China Sea as US strike group enters area - The U.S. Navy "seriously violated China's sovereignty" on Wednesday by sending a destroyer past the Paracel Islands, a disputed chain in the South China Sea, according to the Chinese military command for the area.

The USS Benfold steamed past the Paracels, 200 miles off China's southern coast, on a freedom-of-navigation operation to assert "navigational rights and freedoms," according to the U.S. 7th Fleet. China, Vietnam and Taiwan claim the islands, where China has created outposts.

Naval and air forces of China's Southern Theater Command tracked and monitored the Benfold, said command spokesman Air Force Senior Col. Tian Junli, according to the official China Military Online on Wednesday. Chinese forces warned the American destroyer away from the islands, Tian said.

That claim is false, said 7th Fleet spokesman Lt. Nicholas Lingo in an email Thursday to Stars and Stripes. The Benfold continued into international waters after passing near the Paracels, he said. Even warships have a right to "innocent passage" through territorial seas under the U.N. Convention of the Law of the Sea.

Containment

Russian Foreign Ministry Attacks West for Giving Ukrainian Forces Weapons Training - Russia's foreign ministry on Thursday attacked the United States and Britain for helping train Ukraine's armed forces, calling it part of "hybrid warfare" being waged by NATO countries against Russia.

In a media briefing, spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said Washington had provided Ukraine with instructors who were helping Kyiv's forces use advanced U.S.-made high mobility artillery rocket systems (HIMARS).

She noted the rockets, which have a longer range and are more precise than other artillery weapons, were being used "widely" by Ukrainian forces.

"Ukrainian forces are using HIMARS received from the United States everywhere," Zakharova said. She said Washington had "secretly sent instructors" to Ukraine to help its forces learn how to use and aim the new weapons, resulting in civilian targets in Russian-controlled areas being fired upon.

Both sides have denied targeting civilians and residential areas in the conflict, which has been raging for almost five months.

Israel's Iron Dome Defence System - Each Iron Dome battery can defend an area of 150 sq km. Incoming targets are detonated in mid-flight and within seconds the Interceptor is fired.

