

Conflict Update # 349

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Conflict Assessment

Russian losses – 133,190 (1,030) soldiers killed, 3,245 (+14) enemy tanks, 6,443 (+28) armored combat vehicles, 2,232 (+1) artillery systems, 461 (+0) MLRS systems, 227 (+0) air defense systems, 294 (+0) warplanes, 284 (+0) helicopters, 1,958 (+0) UAVs of the operational-tactical level, 796 (+0) cruise missiles, 18 (+0) warships/cutters, 5,107 (+3) trucks and tankers, 4 Iskander Missile Launchers (+0), 239 fuel bowsers (+0) and 208 (+5) units of equipment.

Key Takeaways



Highest Russian daily death toll to date – Russia yesterday lost 1,030 soldiers killed and approximately 3,000 injured, totaling 4,030 casualties in a single day's fighting. This loss equates to nearly half a percent of the entire Russian military force lost in one day!

Hell on earth - Inside Ukraine's bloodiest battle where soldiers have just 4 HOUR life expectancy in fighting with 'drugged up' Russians.

Soldiers fighting in Ukraine's bloodiest battle have a life expectancy of just four hours as they fight "drugged up" Russians. Ukrainian troops in the battle for Bakhmut are fighting against what they've alleged is a zombie-like army that often outnumbers them ten to one.

Putin has not won a major battlefield victory since the summer. But continuing the fighting regardless in a bid to break Ukrainian spirits is a key part of Russia's plan.

A Ukrainian reporter - who had spoken to soldiers fighting on the frontlines in the city - said they told her: "The average lifespan for mobilised fighters in Bakhmut is four hours".

Russia has the luxury of sheer manpower bolstered by the Wagner Group, whose front wing is made up of largely poorly-trained and badly-equipped convict recruits.

Ukrainian officials have referred to their role on the battlefield as "cannon fodder" - expendable soldiers to be sacrificed in the front waves, whilst the private militia's specialist troops hang back.

If they survive six months at the front, they have secured their freedom. But many don't.

Ukrainian soldier Andriy told CNN: "We were fighting for about 10 hours in a row.

"And it wasn't like just waves, it was uninterrupted. So it was just like they didn't stop coming. "It was about 20 soldiers on our side. And let's say 200 from their side."

He described fighting the convict army as a scene from a zombie movie, adding: "They're climbing above the corpse of their friends, stepping on them."

A machine gunner was stunned to find that when he would shoot at them, they kept moving until bleeding out.

"It looks like it's very, very likely that they are getting some drugs before they attack," he claimed.

Describing the fighting, Ukrainian soldier Petro Voloschenko told AP: "It's hell on earth right now; I can't find enough words to describe it."

Voloschenko, 44, is originally from Kyiv has spent many months in the city that he says is a "symbol of Ukrainian invincibility".

"Bakhmut is the heart of Ukraine, and the future peace of those cities that are no longer under occupation depends on the rhythm with which it beats."

In a rare admission of truth, Wagner boss and Putin lapdog Yevgeny Prigozhin sought to put to bed Russian media reports that Ukrainian soldiers were leaving the city.

Instead, he confirmed in a statement on Telegram that: "The Ukrainian armed forces are not retreating.

"They are fighting up to the last ditch... there are fierce battles for every street, every house, every stairwell".

But military analysts say Bakhmut is nearing tipping point and Britain's defence ministry confirmed today that Russia has made "small advances" in its pursuit of encircling the city.

Utter Russian scorched earth destruction - A once popular tourist destination, Bakhmut is now reduced to ruin.

The area is hollowed out by artillery fire and levelled by carpet bombing - with its frozen ground carved up by craters and trenches. Its pre-war population of 80,000 has dwindled to around 7,000 brave - mostly elderly - residents who stayed behind.

They are now trapped under a barrage of gunfire and explosions as Ukraine defends its stronghold against a fierce Russian onslaught.

Nadiya Burdinska, born in Bakhmut and resolute in her decision to stay, told France24 that: “Only a dummy wouldn’t be afraid.” “Everything is possible... if God wants it, I’ll stay alive,” she added.

There’s no phone signal, most cars have been burnt, and Russia has ceaselessly targeted their energy and service infrastructure.

Most residents have been without running water for the most part of a year.

500 Ukrainian churches and religious sites damaged by Russian military - The Russian military has disproportionately attacked evangelical Christians and “destroyed, damaged, or looted” at least 494 religious buildings, theological institutions, and sacred sites in Ukraine since invading the neighboring nation almost a year ago, according to the Kyiv-based Institute for Religious Freedom (IRF).

The independent research institute presented its latest report this week during the third international religious freedom summit in Washington.

The IRF aims to catalog evidence of Russian war crimes against Ukrainian religious communities. The destruction of religious sites is often intentional and happening in tandem with attacks on civilian believers and pastors, said executive director Maksym Vasin.

Russian soldiers have repeatedly threatened to destroy evangelical Christians in Ukraine, calling them “American spies,”



“sectarians,” and “enemies of the Russian Orthodox people,” said Valentyn Siniy, rector of the Kherson-based Tavriski Christian Institute—one of scores of damaged sites belonging to evangelical groups.

The IRF also tallied damage at 94 Jehovah’s Witness, 29 Catholic, 12 Jewish, 8 Muslim, and 4 Mormon religious sites. The institute expects the pace of destruction to soon increase in eastern and southern Ukraine amid ongoing hostilities.

Germany finds evidence of war crimes in Ukraine in ‘three-digit range,’ prosecutors say - ‘We are preparing ourselves for a possible later court case – be it with us in Germany, be it with our foreign partners, be it before an international court,’ state’s prosecutor general announces.

Without supplying evidence, Russia says it's investigating alleged Ukrainian use of chemical weapons – Russia's state Investigative Committee said on Monday it was examining the alleged use of chemical weapons by Ukrainian forces near the towns of Soledar and Bakhmut.

Here we go again with the Kremlin attempting to instigate an indictment of Ukraine as using chemical weapons of war.

This is pure Russian projection and a false flag exercise. More than likely to justify its own use of such weapons in the months ahead.

Comments, Developments and Reports

Ex-U.S. general casts doubt over size of Putin's newly mobilized army - Former US Army Lieutenant General Hodges said today he is "skeptical" over the size of Putin's newly mobilized infantry.

In September, Putin demanded a partial mobilization to bolster his troops by 300,000 after Ukraine launched a strong counteroffensive attack in response to the Kremlin's "special military operation." Since then, progress has been limited on both sides during the harsh winter months. As the weather warms and Ukraine readies to receive various new and modern types of equipment from NATO allies, Russia is also preparing for more fighting. Ukrainian officials have grown increasingly worried that Russia will launch a second mobilization, adding up to 500,000 new soldiers to the front lines.

In a video interview with the Kyiv Post, Hodges said he doubts that Putin's newly mobilized soldiers will reach the 500,000 number.

"No doubt Russia is out looking for new bodies to replace the tens of thousands that have already been killed the last few months," Hodges said. "I would be quite surprised if they were able to get even half of 500,000."

Hodges added that more bodies doesn't guarantee a stronger infantry. He explained that even if Russia was able to equip its new soldiers and have the resources to feed and accommodate them, training is a different story.

However, Hodges said he expects Russia is reporting such high numbers to cause worry about a large offensive in Ukraine from the north. He said the numbers could be inflated as part of a strategy to distract Ukraine to divert its resources to prepare for a newly bolstered offensive as the war nears its one-year anniversary later this month.

In his interview with the newspaper, Hodges also voiced support for the U.S. sending F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine to aid in the war against Russia. However, President Joe Biden said that he won't be sending the highly-coveted jets to the war-torn country.

Hodges said Russia's only advantage in the war is its "mass number" of infantry and artillery systems. With access to F-16s, Ukrainian troops could decimate Russian infrastructure, transportation, ammunition and headquarters, effectively negating the effect of the new troops. F-16s could be used to ensure ammunition never reaches the artillery systems or the troops.

"If you can negate those things, it doesn't matter how many troops that the Russians may mobilize or put out there if the ammunition can't get to them," Hodges said.

Comment – I tend to agree with Gen. Hodges, who has shown a keen and proven eye for strategic and tactical developments and trends since the illegal invasion commenced a year ago.

Putin & Russia

Putin's ex-speechwriter to i24NEWS: Elites will try to convince him to step down - Abbas Galyamov, political consultant and former speechwriter for Russia's Putin, told i24NEWS that Russian elites will try to convince the leader to step down amid concerns over the worsening situation related to the Ukraine war. According to Galyamov, Russian elites "are dissatisfied with Putin but are still afraid of him."

"The Western world didn't offer them any exit strategies. They see that they are being sanctioned there and they are afraid of Putin's KGB here, so they are lost. I think this year they will try to convince him to step down and find a successor, who will correct the situation," he told i24NEWS, stressing that Putin "cannot stop the war already."

Galyamov believes that after nearly a year of deadly fighting in Ukraine the Russian president is "at a loss."

"Strategically he doesn't know where to move. That's why he's being active but he doesn't know how to use his activities, so he's changing things, changing people, like promoting one general and demoting others," Galyamov said. He added that Putin's circle is "too afraid to tell him the truth" about the real situation at the frontlines.

"That's why they are giving him the truth with such awful crazy interpretations that the reality becomes distorted, but no one would dare to tell outright lies to him so it's not like they are lying to him and he doesn't get the information, he gets it but the way he views these objective facts are distorted," he said.

The expert believes that Putin's rhetoric regarding the West didn't change drastically this year as "he was moving in this direction already" because he has been losing popularity since 2018. "He needs to bring the attention back to Ukraine, to the USA, to NATO. That's why he needs to escalate, this is the only way he can save legitimacy," said Galyamov.

"Mentally Putin has not become a politician, he is still a KGB spy. And you know spies, they are creating special operations to deceive people because for them, unlike for politicians, if any outsider guesses what they intend, what they really think, it is a failure for them," he added.

Estonian colonel claims war will be the end of Putin's regime - Colonel Andrus Merilo slammed the Russian army as "corrupt" and lacking "the will" to fight.

The top soldier was speaking to our reporter embedded on Nato winter war games in Eastern Estonia as he said there is "no alternative" except for victory for Ukraine.

Speaking to The Sun Online as his forces carried out intense trench warfare exercises, Colonel Merilo described the herculean effort by the Ukrainians against Putin as a "miracle".

Russia is just a stone's throw away from the training ground, and the Estonian troops are constantly aware of the possible threat posed by an increasingly belligerent Putin.

Speaking directly about Putin, Merilo simply described Vlad's war as a "massive miscalculation".

"It will be the end of his regime," he said.

Prosecutor General's Office asks to recognize Freedom of Russia Legion as a terrorist organization -

Russia's Prosecutor General's Office has requested that the Freedom of Russia Legion be recognised as a terrorist organisation and its work be banned in the territory of Russia, as per the office's official Telegram channel.

"The legion was created in Ukraine with the purpose of undermining the constitutional order of the Russian Federation, overthrowing the government, among other ways via committing terrorist attacks, all of which poses a threat to public safety and national security," the office's statement reads.

The Freedom of Russia Legion is a military unit of Ukraine's Armed Forces composed of, as per Ukrainian authorities' statements, captive Russian servicemen and volunteers with a Russian passport.

The legion's badge depicts a white-blue-white flag, which is usually used by Russian activists as a symbol of protesting the war in Ukraine. One of the legion's goals is liberation of the Ukrainian regions occupied by Russia.

Comment – The good news here by deduction is that Moscow recognizing the effect of declaring someone or some agency as a terrorist organization means they recognize the label and declaration, so should not object when Russia is similarly labeled a State Sponsor of Terrorism, as is surely going to transpire in the near future. One should be careful what one wishes for.

The Putin and Wagner Group clash is coming to a head

- He was once reduced to selling hot dogs after serving a prison sentence for robbery and fraud. Since then, Yevgeny Prigozhin has enjoyed a rapid ascent in Russian society, amassing a huge fortune and emerging last year as a key player in the war started by his close ally Vladimir Putin.

The 61-year-old Russian businessman, who earned the nickname "Putin's chef" through his catering contracts with the Kremlin, has given himself credit for the January capture of Soledar. The small salt-mining town Ukraine's eastern Donetsk region was Russia's first battlefield gain in Ukraine since the summer of 2022.

Now, however, months after declaring himself as the mastermind behind the notorious paramilitary outfit the Wagner Group, Prigozhin seems to be losing his influence in the war. As his appetite has grown in the political sphere, cracks are beginning to show in his relationship with the Kremlin.

Rifts over battlefield failures in Ukraine are becoming increasingly frequent. He has also been lauding his fighters as the most effective units in the war despite their failure to make significant advances in the embattled city of Bakhmut, into which he has poured his fighters—largely Russian convicts—for the past six months.

The Wagner Group, which has been heavily involved in the current fighting in Ukraine and assisted the Russian military in the annexation of Crimea in 2014, now seems to be playing a less prominent role in operations around Bakhmut. Putin is gradually replacing Wagner fighters, favoring instead professional military personnel and government officials.

In doing so, the Kremlin appears to be sending a very public message to Prigozhin—that the Russian defense ministry is running the conflict and can finish the war without him.

Ever since Prigozhin stepped out of the shadows in September 2022, his potential political ambitions have been the topic of intense speculation. Born in St. Petersburg and who himself served years behind bars, quickly made a name for himself in the war after he was seen in a leaked video recruiting soldiers from Russia's extensive penitentiary system, amid reports that the country was facing personnel shortages in Ukraine.

For months he has been spearheading a recruitment drive, offering male prisoners commuted sentences and cash incentives in return for six months of military service in Ukraine. To do this, he has had to push Putin to secretly pardon convicts recruited to fight in Ukraine. Joana de Deus Pereira, senior research fellow at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), a British think tank, said that at the beginning of the war, a largely commercial relationship existed

between the Kremlin and Wagner Group. The paramilitary outfit was initially seen as a "very useful tool" and as "an instrument of war," she said.

When Prigozhin finally admitted he was the financial sponsor of the Wagner Group, "in his speech, you can see a clear building of a political character," she told Newsweek.

"Now, Prigozhin has become much more dangerous in terms of the political persona he wants to be," she said.

The relationship between Prigozhin and the Kremlin began to disintegrate when the businessman began presenting himself as both a military solution for the conflict and a political solution.

Russian propagandist shot in the head could be 'warning' to Wagner leader – A Russian propagandist/mercenary was the target of an execution attempt in Ukraine over the weekend when he was shot in the head, according to reports.

One analyst speculated that the shooting could have been a "warning" directed toward Yevgeny Prigozhin, the leader of the Wagner Group of Russian mercenaries who have played a prominent role in the war.

Igor Mangushev was taken to a hospital on Saturday in the Russian-occupied town of Stakhanov, which is located in Ukraine's Luhansk region. Mangushev—who has claimed to be the originator of the "Z" sign that indicates support for Russia's war in Ukraine—was known for spouting pro-Kremlin views during appearances on Russian state TV before enlisting in the Russian army using the call name of Bereg.

"I think we can safely describe this as a hit," Mark Galeotti, a political scientist and author of the recent book *Putin's Wars: From Chechnya to Ukraine*, tweeted about the incident.

Galeotti noted that while Mangushev is alive, he is "unlikely to survive." He also said the Russian was not thought to be an official member of the notorious Wagner Group of mercenaries, but Mangushev is said to have connections to Wagner leader Yevgeny Prigozhin.

China

How India's Belt-Road Initiative snub proved prophetic - While China has invested nearly a trillion dollars into the initiative to leverage its financial and political clout with 150 countries, the economic situation of low-income recipient countries is dire and has taken a turn for the worse.

India, unlike 150 countries and 32 international organisations, stayed out of Chinese President Xi Jinping's ambitious Belt-Road Initiative (BRI), especially since signing on would have meant accepting China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects in Occupied Kashmir — a clear violation of its territorial integrity.

On May 13, 2017, the Narendra Modi government issued a formal statement on BRI; but a year before, then foreign secretary Subrahmanyam Jaishankar said in March 2016 that New Delhi would not allow Beijing to hardwire its strategic options in the name of infrastructure projects.

A decade after President Xi launched the BRI project, India's decision to protect its core interests and have the courage to stand alone has turned out to be right with other countries, including many from the West, following the lead of the Modi government.

(Comment – The US and Japan similarly opted out of any engagement in BRI, but reportedly over the format of contract relationship demanded by the Chinese government. They stipulated a bi-lateral relationship between each participating country whereas the US and Japan favored a multi-lateral relationship).

While China has invested nearly a trillion dollars into the initiative to leverage its financial and political clout with 150 countries, the economic situation of low-income recipient countries is dire and has taken a turn for the worse. The data is worrying:

- Low-income countries owe 37% of their debt to China in 2022, compared to 24% in bilateral debt to the rest of the world. The fact is that 42 countries actually owe more to China through opaque operations by major banks and state owned enterprises with loan agreements being deliberately kept out of public purview according to Indian strategic planners.
- Chinese global projects to finance road-rail-port-land infrastructure have been a major source of debt for the participating countries with Pakistan leading the pack with \$ 77.3 billion in debt followed by Angola (\$36.3b), Ethiopia (\$7.9b), Kenya (\$7.4b) and Sri Lanka (\$7b) according to Aiddata and BRI data compiled by China watchers. (**Comment** – Kenya was discussed in a previous Update where the rail project stretching from Mombasa to Rwanda and Burundi is running at a massive deficit, primarily because it runs parallel to a road system which threatened to bankrupt the Kenyan trucking sector), (**Comment 2** – Rwanda last week opted out of the rail project, citing financial risk as its motivation for exiting).
- Maldives' debt, according to data from that country's finance ministry, rose to \$6.39b by the end of the first quarter of 2022. This is 113% of the Maldivian GDP with China funding infra projects such as the Sinamale bridge and a new airport.
- Bangladesh owes 6% of total foreign debt to Beijing, around \$4b. Dhaka is now seeking a \$4.5b package from IMF.
- Djibouti, which gave a naval base to China, and Angola have the biggest repayment burdens as debt exceeds 40% of the gross national income (GNI). Both Laos and Maldives also have a debt burden of 30% of GNI to China and the new Chinese constructed railway line in Laos is already creating an economic mess in Vientiane.
- Sri Lanka has already defaulted on sovereign debt, with 9% of GNI owed to China, and Africa owes more than \$150 billion to Beijing with Zambia also defaulting on debt with the country owing some \$6 billion to Chinese banks.

The economic mayhem in the Indian subcontinent with Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh seeking relief from IMF has led to mounting public debt and public anger. Due to opaque funding operations, as many as 10 low-income countries have higher hidden debt, especially in Africa where the defaulting countries have to part with rights to port or mine or a railway line to Beijing.

Although Sri Lanka's then government seemed to be leaning towards China (over India), Beijing has refused to sign off on a 10-year moratorium on debt repayment for the island nation as suggested by both IMF and the Paris Club. The Chinese EXIM bank is only offering a two-year moratorium as a result of which Colombo's debt restructuring plan by IMF is in limbo and possibility of an eruption of public anger against the leadership is very high.

The same is the case with Pakistan as the majority of BRI contracts have been kept secret from the public so that high interest rates are not revealed in power-road-port infrastructure funding from Chinese Banks. Unless Pakistan agrees to very hard IMF conditionalities for loan, the Islamic Republic will also default very soon with iron brother China looking the other way.

Even though President Xi may be happy by inducing external levers to control as many as 150 countries through BRI, the debt crisis in recipient nations may impact China's own finances as it will have to take a serious haircut in loan repayment from defaulting countries. The collapse of the real estate market in China last year has already caused stress in the banking system.

It is a result of both that China has slowed down its non-financial direct investments in BRI countries in 2022, which was \$19.16b from January to November, a year-on-year increase of 6.5% as compared to 14.1% and 18.3% in 2021 and 2020 respectively. (**Comment** – China has been seeing a sharp rise in payment delinquencies by participating states, which is a primary reason it has scaled back its loan program).

Since 2015, China has signed 50,527 contracts at a total cost of \$1t, with an average contract value per year of \$ 127.16b. Although Beijing has invested in 150 countries, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, the UAE, Pakistan, Serbia, Thailand, Bangladesh, Laos and Cambodia have been consistent recipients. Only in 2015, was Russia, now a loose ally, listed as among the major countries receiving investments from China.

While Beijing claims to have transacted \$12t worth of trade with participants in BRI since 2015 till the end of August 2022, a serious 10-year audit of the ambitious program will reveal how recipient countries may have signed off on unfavorable terms. With a global recession looming and low-income countries hit by the never-ending Ukraine war, the Covid pandemic and food shortage, BRI is turning out to be a millstone around the neck of countries in the Indian sub-continent and in Africa, say analysts.

In truth, opinion is veering around to the stance that BRI has helped neither China nor the recipient nations. It has made China the most unpopular country among debtor nations and exposed their governments to popular political uprisings.

Comment – It has helped China in that it enjoys the right to take possession of any assets not being paid for in full by recipient states. But of higher import is the strategic Chinese gain of accessing viable and vital transportation links in and around the globe, together with management contracts giving it unbridled control of roads, rail, airports, ports and other infrastructural developments and projects.

One needs to watch where these links lead to and how they form a strategic global network for Chinese use. Unwittingly, under the guise of financial enablement for low-income countries in need of capital, China is de facto and (pseudo) de jure financially colonizing its BRI member and fellow states.

Containment

Zelensky talks to UK's Sunak about expansion of army capabilities says Kyiv - Ukraine's President Zelensky said he discussed the 'further expansion of capabilities' of Ukraine's military in a call with British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak on Saturday.

Zelensky said he also thanked Sunak for the start of training of Ukrainian crews on Challenger 2 tanks, the supply of which to Ukraine the UK announced in January.

British soldiers taking part in military training in Estonia - British forces are currently undertaking training with Estonian counterparts in freezing temperatures which are expected to drop to -12C.

Nato countries come together to train for the unexpected with tanks and helicopters, on a base just 80m from Russia.

"We can see that our Estonian counterparts are worried about what's going on with Russia. But they feel we're here to help," one British tank driver told The Sun.

Comment – Preparations? NATO troops – “At the ready” are stationed all around Ukraine and along Russian borders with NATO countries. We constantly hear and read about “training,” “highest state of readiness” and other insights into NATO battalions and support detachments.

Then we read further about US naval assets surfacing, docking and maneuvering in and around battle zones. One wonders how this intersects with NATO ballistic and nuclear preparedness – always a station of silence when it comes to developments and positioning.

Both Russia and the US monitor very closely for telling and signature signs when it comes to nuclear silos and strategic asset maneuvers. They watch one another on a constant 24/7/52 basis and perhaps it behooves the US to register

some or other “move” that sends a tactical (warning) signal/message to the Kremlin whenever they make statements or indicate a desire to engage in higher weapons of attack.

NATO role in Ukraine threatens ‘unpredictable’ escalation: Russia - Western weapons supplies to Ukraine are dragging NATO directly into the conflict and could lead to an “unpredictable” escalation, Russia’s defence minister says.

“The US and its allies are trying to prolong the conflict as much as possible,” Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu said in a conference call on Tuesday with military officials.

Sanctions

Slumping energy revenues and soaring expenditures pushed Russia's federal budget to a deficit of 1.76 trillion rubles (\$24.78 billion) in January amid Western sanctions and the cost of the war in Ukraine.