

Conflict Update # 175

September 7th, 2022

Conflict Assessment

Russian losses – 50,610 (+460) soldiers killed, 2,097 (+20) enemy tanks, 4,520 (+36) armored combat vehicles, 1,194 (+15) artillery systems, 300 (+4) MLRS systems, 156 (+0) air defense systems, 237 (+1) warplanes, 208 (+1) helicopters, 880 (+4) UAVs of the operational-tactical level, 214 (+5) cruise missiles, 15 (+0) warships/cutters, 3,320 (+15) trucks and tankers, 76 fuel bowsers and 107 (+0) units of specialized equipment.

Key takeaways

Russian fall back near Kharkiv - Ukraine's counteroffensive seems to be making progress against Russian positions sprawled along a roughly 50-kilometer stretch southeast of Kharkiv. That's according to the Wall Street Journal's roving correspondent, Yaroslav Trofimov, who is watching the "Balakliya-Izyum front as Russian military bloggers and analysts remain in doomsday mode," he tweeted Wednesday morning.



“Lots of videos of Russian POWs (including a lieutenant-colonel) and abandoned Russian positions” coming from that region, he writes, and notes, “The speed of the Ukrainian advance seems to have stunned everyone.” Russia also appears to be losing trucks and tanks at a familiar rate, almost akin to its failed sprint to Kyiv nearly six months ago.

The UK says three main fronts are receiving the bulk of the action nationwide. That is, “in the north, near Kharkiv; in the east in the Donbas; and in the south in Kherson Oblast.” And those three pressure points are very likely posing problems for Russian officers trying to decide where to allay reserves to support an offensive in the Donbas, “or to defend against continued Ukrainian advances in the south.” And that suggests Ukraine’s recent progress appears to be pinching Russian commanders in a fairly efficient manner.

Ukraine says it’s killed dozens of Russian military contractors around Kharkiv. “Individual units count more than 40 percent seriously wounded and killed,” according to the daily report from Ukraine’s general staff, which noted that, “The bodies of many of the dead have not been identified and are counted as missing.” However, Ukraine officials say they also shot down a Russian Ka-52 helicopter.

Ukraine official promises 'great news' from Kharkiv counteroffensive - An adviser to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy's chief of staff said he expected Kyiv to announce "great news" about its counteroffensive in the eastern Kharkiv region on Tuesday evening, without giving further details.

Kharkiv region, in northeast Ukraine, is on the far end of the front line from the southern Kherson region, which Ukraine last week announced as the focus of a push to retake territory.

Several posts in social media from military bloggers and witnesses reported fighting around Balakliia, a town of 27,000 people that lies between the cities of Kharkiv and Izyum.

Control of Balakliia could facilitate a Ukrainian attempt to encircle or partially encircle the Russian-held city of Izyum, said Kyiv-based military analyst Oleh Zhdanov.

'Verifiable progress' in Ukraine counteroffensive: ISW – A map released by the Institute for the Study of War shows that Ukraine has made "verifiable progress" in its counteroffensive in the southern region of Kherson.

"The Ukrainian counteroffensive is making verifiable progress in the south and the east," the think tank tweeted late Sunday. "Ukrainian forces are advancing along several axes in western Kherson Oblast and have secured territory across the Siverskyi Donets River in Donetsk Oblast."

The map shows the progress on the Siverskyi Donets River is close to the eastern city of Kharkiv, which fell to the Russians in mid-May after three months of heavy bombardment.

"The pace of the counteroffensive will likely change dramatically from day to day as Ukrainian forces work to starve the Russians of necessary supplies, disrupt their command and control, and weaken their morale even as counteroffensive ground



assaults continue," an ISW report released with the map said.

"The Russians will occasionally counterattack and regain some lost ground and will of course conduct likely fierce artillery and air attacks against liberated settlements and advancing Ukrainian troops. Ukrainian forces have made substantial enough progress to begin evoking more realistic commentary from the Russian milbloggers, who had been hewing very closely to the Kremlin's optimistic rhetoric until today," it added.

Russian 'hard points' are falling in Kherson, Kharkiv, and near Izyum - Over the month of August, something changed in Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Ukraine's military has been consistently hitting Russian command, control, and supply depots well behind the front lines. How much of that change was directly attributable to HIMARS is debatable. But whatever the source of those shots, the Ukrainian military is reporting a total of 200 Russian military facilities destroyed, including supply depots, repair centers, and command posts.

Ukrainian troops have doubled back across a Russian-built pontoon bridge to capture Blahodativka, and also pressed on to take Bezimenne, considered part of Russia's "second line."

Ukrainian troops are in Russia's backfield at this point, and where they go next will be informative.

The Russian push to take the remainder of the Donbas seems to have collapsed when it failed to capture the stubborn town of Bohorodychne, south of Izyum. Unable to pressure Slovyansk from two sides, Ukraine has been able to put the brakes on that advance from the east.

In the area south of Izyum, Ukraine seems to be comfortably holding existing positions and pressing Russia along a wide front, including both pushing through the heavily-mined rubble that was Dovhen'ke and from the west along highway P79. The area in the woods west of Izyum proper has more or less reverted to Russian control, but that seems to be because Ukraine is simply no longer staging the kind of hit-and-run raids it was conducting against Russian forces parked in this area.

Instead, Ukraine has launched a more serious push to the north, liberating the village of Verbivka and moving into the long-held Russian position at Balakliya. As in Vysokopillya in the Kherson area, this town has been an important Russian outpost for launching attacks to the west, as well as a fortified defensive position locking in Russia's control over this geographic location. Reports are coming in indicating that Ukrainian forces have already taken most of the town, whilst other reports detail that Russian forces are departing a whole series of villages and towns along that stretch of the Siverskyi Donets River.

Russian forces in the area appear to be panicking. This move seems to have caught them totally by surprise.

Ukraine military chief claims responsibility for strikes in Crimea - Ukraine's top military chief claimed responsibility on Wednesday for a series of strikes on Russian air bases on the annexed peninsula of Crimea, including one that caused devastation at the Saky military facility last month.

In an article co-authored by lawmaker Mykhailo Zabrotskyi and published on state news agency Ukrinform, Valeriy Zaluzhnyi, the Ukrainian army's commander in chief, said the strikes had been carried out by missiles or rockets, without elaborating.

Ukraine has until now only hinted at its involvement in the Crimea strikes, with one senior official anonymously telling Reuters that the air base explosions were the work of Ukrainian saboteurs on the ground.

Writing about Ukraine's response to what the op-ed said was Moscow's strategy of "distancing" the war from Russian citizens, Zaluzhnyi and Zaborodskyi wrote of "the successful efforts of the Armed Forces of Ukraine to physically transfer hostilities to... Crimea."

We are talking about a series of successful rocket strikes against the enemy's Crimean air bases, first of all, the Saky airfield," the article said. A footnote clarified that the Saky attack was a "combined strike" that took place on Aug. 9 and took ten Russian warplanes "out of action."

Russian base is blown up after Ukrainian hacker sets up fake social media profiles of attractive women and tricks Putin's troops into giving position away.

A Russian base was blown up after a Ukrainian hacker set up fake social media profiles of attractive women and tricked Putin's troops into giving their position away.

Speaking to the Financial Times, Nikita Knysh, from Kharkiv, who is an IT professional, explained that he wanted to use his hacking skills to help his country win against Russia and founded group Hackyourmom.

Nikita, 30, and his group of 30 hackers, tricked Russian soldiers stationed in Melitopol, using fake social media accounts, and got soldiers to send them photographs of them on the front.

Russian colonel killed - One of Putin's top colonels has been killed in a suspected car bomb in Ukraine, as the net tightens around Vlad and his inner circle.

Bardin Artem Igorevich, appointed by the Kremlin to oversee the Ukrainian city of Berdyansk, was reportedly killed in the explosion that sent smoke pouring into the sky.

Russian POW's – Reports are coming in of a large number of Russians captured by Ukrainian forces. As yet, these are unsubstantiated.

Putin

The latest sign Putin's war isn't going very well - Russia's war in Ukraine, which began with a disastrous attempted invasion of the entire country, settled months ago into a grinding slog centered in the country's south and east. But now Ukraine is on the march, having launched an offensive in the south to retake territory captured by Russia.

As Putin resists a national war mobilization, his army continues to suffer grievous numbers of casualties, struggles to maintain a supply of qualified soldiers, and contends with shortages in equipment and artillery — a problem exacerbated by poor manufacturing and punishing western sanctions.

Russia is now cut off from western components needed to produce some of the matériel it needs for the war, forcing Putin to source new weaponry from a small menu of authoritarian states who need money and don't care about breaking western rules. Last month, it was Iran; this month, it's North Korea.

The New York Times reported yesterday that Kim Jong-un is supplying Putin with millions of rockets and artillery shells from his extensive arsenal. This development may not mean that Russia is in dire straits, militarily speaking. But it isn't a great sign, either.

"In terms of its logistics and sustainment capabilities as it relates to Ukraine," said Pentagon spokesman Pat Ryder, "we assess that things are not going well on that front for Russia." An anonymous U.S. official told the AP, "The Russian military continues to suffer from severe supply shortages in Ukraine, due in part to export controls and sanctions."

In some ways, the economic measures imposed against Russia by Western Europe and the U.S. have been ineffective so far. Countries like India, China, and Brazil have been more than happy to snap up the Russian oil that ex-customers like Germany once bought, leading to record profits in that sector. And Russian society has yet to feel much of a bite from the west's isolation tactics, even if Muscovites can't visit the Apple Store or get French fries at a real McDonald's. Russia

has also been able to use its oil-and-gas leverage against Europe to ensure some of its adversaries experience a precarious and expensive winter.

But arms sales are a different matter. China, the country that would be most useful to Russia in this regard, hasn't condemned Putin for his invasion — but has also shown no enthusiasm for shipping him weapons. Doing so would straightforwardly violate American sanctions and mean that the U.S. could refuse to supply Chinese weapons manufacturers with essential U.S. technology.

Other non-European countries have remained officially neutral and are not eager to cross the U.S. economically. That leaves heavily armed, rogue, or quasi-rogue regimes. But so far, this strategy has run into problems; the drones that Russia purchased from Iran have reportedly been plagued with technical problems. North Korea surely has plenty of ammo to spare, since it has the world's fourth-largest military — but experts believe it mostly relies on outdated equipment (including Soviet-era stockpiles). Meanwhile, the U.S. continues to arm Ukraine with high-end anti-tank missiles and other artillery, having sent about \$10 billion in security assistance thus far.

Russia's military still dwarfs Ukraine's. It is certainly still capable of engaging in a grinding war of attrition for years, and of inflicting massive destruction on Ukraine, with nuclear weapons as its trump card. Still, none of this has gone the way Putin wanted it to.

Putin sensationally claims Russia has 'lost nothing' during invasion of Ukraine - Putin has reportedly claimed Russia has lost "nothing" during its "special military operation" in Ukraine.

"We have lost nothing and are not going to lose anything. Our main gain is the strengthening of our sovereignty. We didn't start anything, in terms of military action, but are only trying to finish it," he said in Vladivostok according to CNN.

Putin says sanctions are a 'danger' to the world - Putin slammed the West again on Wednesday, saying sanctions imposed on Russia for its invasion of Ukraine are a "danger" to the world.

Speaking at an economic forum in Russia's far east, Putin said Western countries have aggressively tried to impose their way of life on other countries and to make them "submit to their will."

Comment – Again, sanctions seems to be a growing concern for Putin.

Why Putin still has widespread support in Russia - During the early stages of Putin's "special military operation" in Ukraine, there was speculation in the western media that his days as Russian leader were numbered.

As Ukrainians fought fiercely against Russian forces, many commentators claimed that unprecedented western sanctions would soon bring the Russian economy to its knees.

Russian oligarchs were supposedly going to shed their loyalty to Putin's regime as their assets and yachts were seized in the West. The wider Russian population would soon feel the economic pain of sanctions and be unwilling to accept the growing death toll for Russian forces in Ukraine.

Increase in popularity

This scenario has yet to take place, and there aren't any meaningful signs that it will in the near future.

In fact, Russian public opinion polls have suggested an increase in Putin's popularity after the invasion. Support for the war itself is not as high as Putin's overall approval rating — but he can still count on majority support for the invasion.

Additionally, the Russian economy has remained surprisingly robust — to a considerable extent helped by the sanctions meant to damage it. By denying themselves Russian oil and to a lesser extent gas, European countries contributed to an increase in oil and gas prices that has buoyed the Russian coffers.

Western commentators have also suggested that, simmering beneath the opinion poll numbers, there is latent opposition to Putin that isn't being expressed because of fear. Simultaneously have been arguments that the Russian population is subject to a barrage of pro-Kremlin propaganda and therefore unable to really question the status quo.

This alternative to Putin's world view is almost nowhere to be found in Russian media.

There's no question the Russian population is subject to a Russian media largely loyal to the Kremlin — and speaking out publicly against the war will certainly get you into trouble in Russia. But that doesn't mean Putin lacks genuine supporters.

Most of Russia's population is, at worst, willing to quietly acquiesce in Putin's regime.

There are good reasons for this beyond fear. First of all, many Russian oligarchs and political leaders are closely bound to Putin through a system of patronage that is deeply entrenched. Without Putin, they are likely to lose much of their wealth and status.

At the same time, some of those in the upper echelons of Russian society support Putin's nationalist agenda. Many Russian nationalists believe Russia has been reborn under Putin.

In some ways, that's true after the widespread misery of the 1990s.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 was a major blow to Russian prestige. The economic and political turmoil of the 1990s that followed under President Boris Yeltsin is not looked back upon with nostalgia by many Russians.

During the Yeltsin era, Russia seemed to be joining the western liberal fold, but for many, that brought only economic pain and disorder. Not only was Russia a second-class power on the world stage, but the benefits of economic and political liberalization seemed to lack substance.

During the 1990s, older Russians saw their savings wiped out not once but twice within a decade.

Putin the strongman had brought a degree of order after the Yeltsin chaos, and many Russians welcomed it even though a number of democratic elements of the Yeltsin regime disappeared. Western-style liberalism had not offered most Russians the sort of life promised to them by proponents of reform as the Soviet Union collapsed.

Even today, evidence suggests many Russians — including those born after the Soviet Union's collapse — value many things before democracy and western political liberalism. The relative economic stability and order provided under the Putin regime has had widespread appeal.

Western sanctions have undoubtedly hit many Russians. However, the blanket and unprecedented nature of western sanctions — and western hypocrisy in its treatment of Russia — feed into Putin's narrative that the West wants to keep Russia down. (The Conversation).

Impact

Russia's neighbors are close to creating a 'NATO sea' that could deter Russia and help Ukraine, Estonia's defense minister says - Russia's Western neighbors are close to forming a "NATO sea" that could allow them to make collective defense decisions and deter Russia, Estonia's defense minister told Insider.

Hanno Pevkur said the prospect of Sweden and Finland joining NATO would make the Baltic Sea "an inner sea of NATO" — with all countries bordering it, with the exception of Russia, being members of the military alliance.

Russia has used the sea's Gulf of Finland, where St. Petersburg lies, for naval exercises since it invaded Ukraine, including as a response to Sweden and Finland applying to join NATO.

But if the region were surrounded by NATO countries, Russia could be deterred from carrying out attacks, Pevkur said.

Being part of NATO would allow the regional neighbors to work as "one unified operational space," which could upgrade their "land, air, sea, intelligence, cyber and all other capabilities," he said.

It could result in new agreements over joint control of the airspace around or over parts of the Baltic Sea, including the ability to close it; and joint surveillance of the sea, including deciding to limit who can sail on it, Pevkur said.

Russia's invasion prompted Sweden and Finland to join NATO, and most current NATO members have ratified their membership. The two nations are currently holding talks with Turkey over its concerns, and a solution is expected.

Pevkur noted that parts of the Baltic Sea are international waters, but said that with Sweden and Finland as members, he would consider it a "NATO sea."

Biden says no to appeals to designate Russia a state sponsor of terror - President Joe Biden has made a final decision to not designate Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism, the White House said Tuesday, saying that such a move could backfire and have unintended consequences for U.S. support of Ukraine amid Russia's invasion.

Biden's one-word response "no," he said, when reporters asked him on Monday, "should Russia be designated a state sponsor of terrorism?" ends months of serious, fervent discussions on Capitol Hill and in foreign capitals over whether to add Russia to the short, grim list that currently includes Cuba, Iran, North Korea and Syria.

Nations earn this label when the U.S. secretary of state deems that a foreign government is "repeatedly providing support for acts of international terrorism." The designation effectively renders the target a pariah, by imposing restrictions on U.S. assistance; a ban on defense exports and sales; controls over items that can be used for both military and non-military purposes, and a raft of other restrictions.

GeoPolitics

Why Xi is going to central Asia - Chinese leader Xi Jinping – who hasn't left the country since the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic – will head to Kazakhstan and then on to Uzbekistan next week to attend a summit for the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

His trip is deeply symbolic, but also grounded in pragmatic policy.



Kazakhstan, where he will step out beyond China's border for the first time in more than two years, has been a long-term partner for Beijing. The September 14 visit involves a meeting with Kazakh President Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev, in which they will sign a number of bilateral documents, according to Kazakh Foreign Ministry spokesman Aibek Smadiyarov.

The Central Asian country is a major supplier of minerals, metals, and energy to China and is also an important transit country, bringing Chinese goods to Europe along the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – and Kazakhstan was also where Xi first announced the overland portion of the BRI back in 2013.

After the visit to Nur-Sultan, the Chinese leader will then go to Samarkand in Uzbekistan, where he will co-chair an SCO summit from September 15-16.

It's an important opportunity to reaffirm Beijing's growing leadership across Eurasia, especially following the economic and political upheaval brought by Moscow's invasion of Ukraine to Central Asia. As the war grinds on, many Central Asian governments have been looking to distance themselves from the Kremlin and are searching for ways to fill the vacuum left by Russia's retreating economy. This has left China with an even greater opportunity to accelerate the pace of its growing influence in the region.

At the summit, Xi will also meet with Putin for the first time since they declared a "no limits" partnership in early February in Beijing.

Containment

Blinken speaks to Polish counterpart on additional ways to support Ukraine - Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke with his Polish counterpart Foreign Minister Zbigniew Rau on ways to continue coordinating support for Ukraine.

"The Secretary thanked Poland for its sustained security assistance and humanitarian support to Ukraine and its generosity in hosting millions of refugees from Ukraine," according to a readout of the call from State Department spokesman Ned Price.

"The Secretary also discussed strengthening bilateral cooperation on civil nuclear power generation in Poland to advance shared energy security, climate change, and national security objectives," Price added.

How the U.S. rushed Harpoon anti-ship missiles to Ukraine - The Pentagon's top weapons buyer shed some new light Wednesday on how the U.S. provided Ukraine RGM-84 Harpoon anti-ship missile systems he said were used to sink two Russian vessels in June.

"There's incredible innovation going on," William LaPlante, Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment, said during the annual Defense News Conference.



LaPlante said a country, which he would not name, "had some Harpoons that were on a ship. They said we could maybe do something with them."

So working with that country and a contractor he also did not name, "we got them off the ship and put them on some flatbed trucks."



One truck contained the Harpoons and modules and another the power source.

GeoMilitary

Solomon Islands exempts Australia, NZ from US navy ship ban - Navy vessels from Australia and New Zealand will be exempt from a temporary ban on foreign ships entering the ports of the Solomon Islands, the Pacific island nation's prime minister told parliament on Monday.

Foreign military vessels responding to a request for assistance from the Solomon Islands government would also be exempt, Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare said.

The Solomon Islands signed a security pact with China in April, which a leaked draft said allows the Chinese navy to replenish in Honiara, prompting concern from the United States, Australia and New Zealand about China's growing influence.

Last week, Sogavare announced a moratorium on foreign navy vessels entering port following incidents in which a U.S. coast guard vessel and a British navy vessel on patrol for illegal fishing were unable to refuel in Honiara. [Read full story](#)

Questioned by opposition members of parliament about the moratorium, Sogavare said military vessels deployed under the auspices of the Solomon Islands International Assistance Force (SIIAF), a treaty under which Australia, New Zealand and Fiji work with the Solomon Islands police, would be exempt.

"Military vessels deployed under SIIAF are therefore exempted during the period of the moratorium," he said.

The United States, which plans to open an embassy in Honiara, said it was informed on Aug. 29 of a moratorium on all foreign navy vessels.

A month earlier, the United States pledged to boost aid and increase illegal fishing surveillance in the Pacific in an attempt to counter China's growing presence.

The cabinet had decided to impose the moratorium on military vessels as it reviewed "the benefits and risks to Solomon Islands of any visits by any military vessels," Sogavare said, though adding the moratorium was not aimed at the United States.

"We are not targeting the United States of America," he said.

The United States, Australia, New Zealand and Britain had become involved in the illegal fishing patrols and his office needed to know more about the vessels arriving, he said.

The Forum Fisheries Agency, which is based in Honiara and represents Pacific Island nations with rich tuna stocks, would need to notify his office about which naval vessels are taking part in surveillance patrols to gain an exemption, he said.

"We don't know who the hell is coming," he added.

Sanctions

Hungary said to have dropped demand to remove three Russian oligarchs from sanctions list - Hungary will support the renewal of the European Union's sanctions regime against Russia, diplomatic sources say, after dropping a threat to derail the move if three oligarchs weren't removed from a list that takes restrictive measures against more than 1,000 people in the wake of Moscow's invasion of Ukraine in late February.

Grain

Russia Says West Is Breaking IMO Grain Deal - Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said yesterday that the West was not honoring its promise to help Russian food and fertilizer exports reach global markets, raising potential questions about Russia's commitment to a landmark grain deal struck with Ukraine.

He said the West had not relaxed sanctions to make it easier for Russia to ship its agricultural products abroad. Moscow saw the commitment as a key part of a July deal brokered by the United Nations' International Maritime Organization (IMO) and Turkey to end a blockade on Ukraine's grain exports from its southern ports and ease a looming global food crisis.

"Our Western colleagues are not doing what we were promised by the U.N. Secretary-General," Lavrov told a news conference in Moscow.

Comment – Another sign of the sanctions concern in Russia. There are increasing reports coming out of Russia and its spokespeople linking Western sanctions to various elements and demanding that sanctions are linked to ailing Russian events and factors.

It appears that they are having an effect, albeit belatedly.

Humanitarian

Ukrainian official tells UN Security Council that 2.5 million people have been forcibly deported to Russia - Ukraine denounced Russia's "filtration" scheme at a United Nations Security Council meeting Wednesday.

Deputy Ukrainian Ambassador to the UN Khrystyna Hayovyshyn said Ukrainians forced to head to Russia or Russian-controlled territory are being killed and tortured.

Hayovyshyn told the Security Council that thousands of Ukrainian citizens are being forcefully deported to "isolated and depressed regions of Siberia and the far east. The Ambassador said 2.5 million people have been deported, including 38,000 children.

Ukrainian citizens are terrorized, under the pretense of a search for "dangerous" people by Russian authorities, Hayovyshyn said. Those who have different political views or are affiliated with the Ukrainian government or media disappear into a gray area. Children are ripped from the arms of their parents, the Ukraine representative declared.