

# Conflict Update # 269

November 21<sup>st</sup>, 2022

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## Conflict Assessment

**Russian losses** – 84,600 (390) soldiers killed, 2,892 (+6) enemy tanks, 5,822 (5) armored combat vehicles, 1,870 (+2) artillery systems, 393 (+0) MLRS systems, 209 (+0) air defense systems, 278 (+0) warplanes, 261 (+0) helicopters, 1,537 (+1) UAVs of the operational-tactical level, 480 (+0) cruise missiles, 15 (+0) warships/cutters, 4,378 (+7) trucks and tankers, 4 Iskander Missile Launchers (+0), 76 fuel bowsers (+0) and 161 (+1) units of specialized equipment.

## Key Takeaways



**Key weapons in Ukraine’s resilience: Ingenuity and improvisation** - Russia's missile barrages on Ukraine are having much less impact than Putin might have wanted, thanks to Ukrainian improvisation and ingenuity.

The Russian military targeted Ukraine's power grid last week, firing an estimated billion-euros worth of missiles at the country's energy infrastructure — but for all that money the net result was to cause blackouts only for a day.

“We are very well prepared, and we think out of the box to coordinate after missile attacks,” Volodymyr Kudrytskyi, chairman of Ukrenergo, Ukraine's state-owned electricity company, told POLITICO in an exclusive interview.

Engineers game-plan possible scenarios to be ready with “re-routing schemes” to compensate for the loss of a transmission station or — even worse — damage to a generating station. “So even with catastrophic damage, even during these hard times, we are still able to reconnect and deliver energy. Of course, we must curtail consumption to maintain the system's stability,” he added.

He said Ukrainians have shaken off a debilitating Soviet mentality, one that says nothing is possible when a problem emerges. “We have discovered we're coded to be ingenious, to improvise, to come up with solutions, to use what's available and what's at hand,” he said.

**Belarus to conduct multiple joint live-fire drills with Russia** - The Belarusian MoD has confirmed that the military forces of Belarus and Russia are set to conduct a series of live-fire exercises.

Citing a report by Russian news agency Interfax, a Reuters report has claimed the bilateral exercises will be conducted as part of a joint grouping pact between the two countries. The participating forces will also carry out several ‘anti-aircraft guided missile launches’ during the exercises, which will take place in Belarus.

The country is a close Russian ally and has extended political and logistical support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Interfax quoted an undisclosed Minsk defence official saying: “Military units from the formations are planned to be deployed at four training ranges of the Republic of Belarus in the eastern and the central part of the country, after which they will start conducting combat training activities.”

**Polish military chief says Russia is escalating on NATO's border** - Russia's war on Ukraine is becoming more dangerous for Poland and other NATO allies on Ukraine's border, said Polish military chief Gen. Rajmund Andrzejczak, after falling debris killed two people in his country this week.

“The conclusion [is] that Russia is escalating,” Andrzejczak said. “It is going closer and closer to the NATO borders. I would say winter is coming, not necessarily only in the season, but in much wider meaning: winter is coming to the borders.”

Russia fired nearly 100 missiles into Ukraine on Wednesday, knocking out key portions of the electricity grid. President Joe Biden, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, and Polish officials have said that the debris that fell was likely the result of Ukrainian defenses attempting to intercept Russian missiles.

Ukrainian leaders have yet to accept that conclusion but are using the incident to call for a more advanced air defense system that is integrated with those of other European countries. Andrii Yermak, chief of staff to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, said on Saturday that Ukraine was consulting with “allies” on an air-defense agreement but gave few other details.

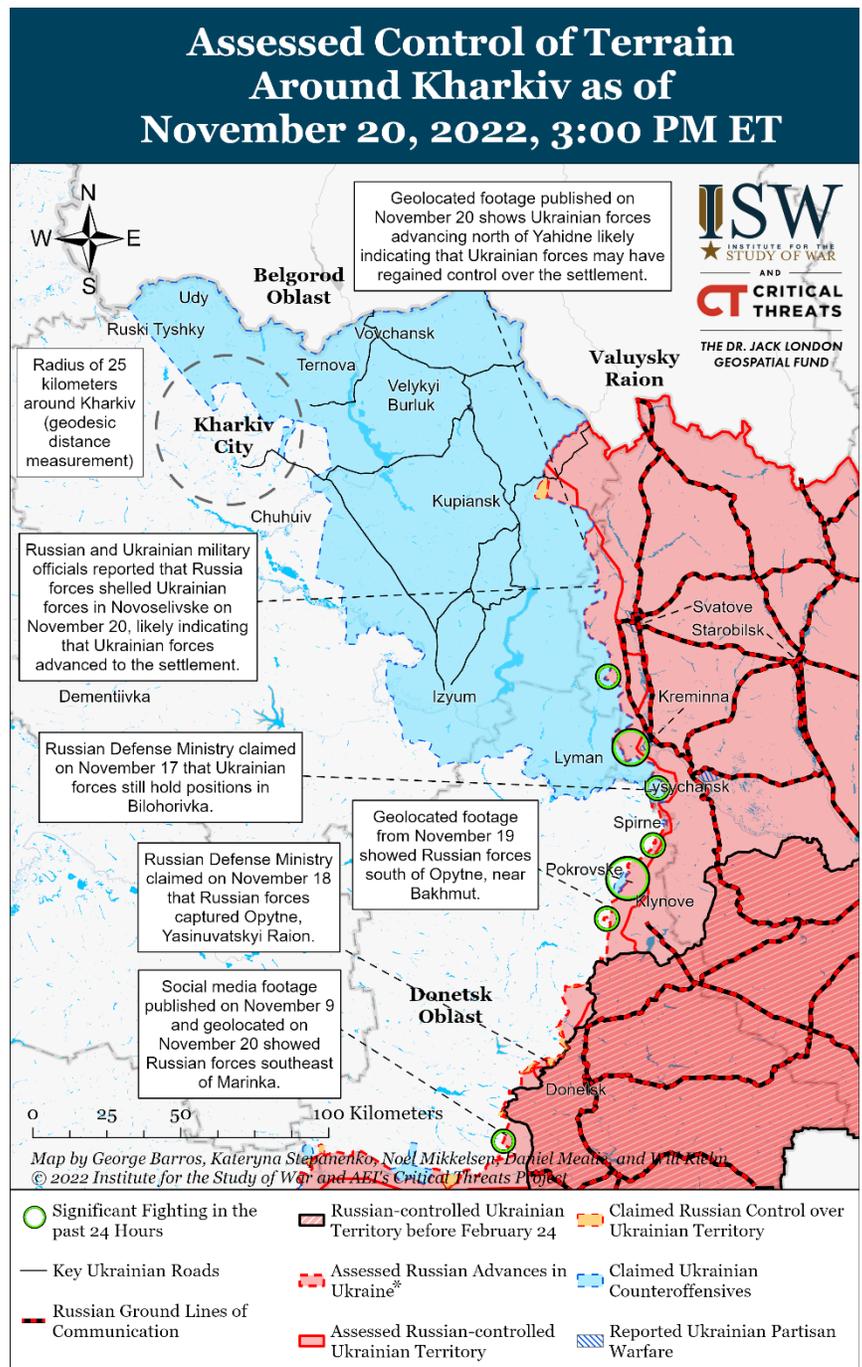
**The Kremlin has allowed the ever-growing informal milblogger community to gain a quasi-official** but independent position despite otherwise increasing domestic repression and censorship. The Kremlin has historically promulgated its state narrative via Russian federal outlets, TV, and print media, but has allowed the highly individualistic and often critical milblogger community to put forth its own narratives regarding this war. The milblogger community is composed of a wide range of characters ranging from those who support the Kremlin while criticizing the Russian military command to some who have directly blamed Russian President Vladimir Putin for Russia's consistent

military failures in Ukraine. That the Kremlin tolerates the milblogger community is astonishing given its censorship of other more traditional outlets including opposition and foreign media.

**Russian milbloggers** are not merely cheerleaders for the war – they are emerging as a group with a distinct voice within Russia. Milbloggers offer a highly informal platform that differs dramatically from the Russian MoD’s structured presentation of the war. Milbloggers largely publish self-authored content on Russian social media platforms such as Telegram, VK, and RuTube in a casual and approachable manner. Most prominent milbloggers either operate on the frontlines or have sources within Russian military structures, which allows them to form assessments based on first-hand accounts independent of MoD information and censorship.

### Select milbloggers are now holding official positions within the Kremlin.

Putin has promoted some prominent milbloggers with large numbers of followers in order to reach the nationalist constituency to which they speak and most importantly to prevent this group from turning against Putinism. Putin appointed a prominent Russian milblogger and correspondent for Komsomolskaya Pravda, Alexander (Sasha) Kots as a member of the Russian Human Rights Council on November 20, for example, as ISW has previously reported. Putin has met individually with some Russian milbloggers and invited them to attend his annexation speech on September 30. Putin’s engagements with these milbloggers have not softened their commentary on the war, however. They continue to criticize the Russian war effort and especially the Russian MoD even as Putin defends and promotes them.



**The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR)** reported on November 20 that Russian special services are planning false flag attacks on Belarusian critical infrastructure facilities to pressure the Belarusian military to enter the war in Ukraine. UGS added that Ukrainian officials have not observed the formation of any Belarusian assault groups. ISW continues to assess that it is unlikely that Belarusian forces will invade Ukraine.

**Kharkiv** - Russian and Ukrainian sources reported ongoing fighting along the Svatove-Kreminna line on November 20. Russian sources noted that deteriorating weather conditions are impacting hostilities.

**Luhansk** - A Ukrainian military official stated that Ukrainian forces have liberated 12 settlements in Luhansk Oblast since the start of the eastern counteroffensive.

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed to strike a Ukrainian troop concentration in the area of Novoselivske, Luhansk Oblast. The Russian MoD previously claimed to repel Ukrainian attacks on the settlement, and this claim might indicate that Ukrainian forces advanced to the settlement.

**Bakhmut** - Russian forces continued offensive operations in the Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and western Donetsk directions.

**Kherson** - Ukrainian officials reported Russian forces continued to transfer some forces from the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River to other operational directions, but still maintain a significant force presence in southern Kherson Oblast.

**Zaporizhzhia** - Ukrainian and Russian sources reported that shelling damaged the infrastructure of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP). One Russian milblogger claimed that the shelling came from Russian-controlled territory south of the plant, but most Russian sources accused Ukraine.

Russian occupation officials may have purged the occupation Mayor of Enerhodar Alexander Volga. Some Russian sources claimed that Volga received a promotion within the occupation administration.

Russian military officials continued mobilization measures amid reports of ongoing resistance and poor conditions.

## Peace Talks

**Global security leaders, activists say it's time to fight, not talk, in Ukraine** - The way to protect global democracy right now is with weapons and support for Ukraine's battle against Russia, not talks.

That was the message from US and Western diplomats, officials and military leaders at the Halifax International Security Forum, an annual national security conference for democracy advocates from around the world.

The support for that fight flew in the face of a growing narrative around the need for peace negotiations between Ukraine and Russia. "Democracy without weapons is 'blah blah blah,'" said Ukrainian democracy activist and former parliamentarian Hanna Hopko on Sunday, summing up the atmosphere at the three-day conference.

Even the Biden administration, which has senior leaders disagreeing in public about when diplomacy should start, made one of the strongest cases for continued and uninterrupted aid to Kyiv.

"The outcome of the war in Ukraine will help determine the course of global security in this young century, and those of us in North America don't have the option of sitting this one out," Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said during a well-received address on Saturday before jetting to Asia. "Stability and prosperity on both sides of the Atlantic are at stake."

The forum has long served to galvanize U.S. and Western leaders around issues of global importance with an eye toward promoting democracy worldwide. Ukraine's fight against Russian President Vladimir Putin's aggression was the central focus of this year's session.

"We cannot let Russia and Putin get away with this kind of aggression," Dutch defense minister Kaja Ollongren said on the sidelines of the meeting.

"The Ukrainians are fighting this war, but it's also our war," she said. "If Russia would win, it would have a direct impact on our security."

Attendees did address the growing debate about when and how to start talks during three days of public and private sessions, but the main message from the conference was to double down on supporting Ukraine. And Ukrainian

officials who traveled thousands of miles in the midst of war to Halifax said they felt buoyed by the support. "I feel a strong bond, especially being here," Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister Olga Stefanishyna told reporters during a pull-aside roundtable.

## Sanctions

**Russian economy shrinks 4% in Q3 - Statistics Agency** - Russia's economy shrank 4% year-on-year in the third quarter of 2022, data from the Rosstat federal statistics service showed on Wednesday, as the consequences of the country's military actions in Ukraine continued to weigh on the economy.

That was a slight improvement from the second quarter, when gross domestic product (GDP) fell by 4.1% year-on-year as Western sanctions began to take a toll on Russia's finances and wider economy.

Russia deployed tens of thousands of troops to Ukraine on Feb. 24 in what Moscow calls a "special military operation." Before the full effects of sanctions had been felt, the Russian economy grew 3.5% in annual terms in the first quarter.

Russia's economy ministry sees GDP falling by 2.9% this year, while the central bank expects a 3-3.5% drop before a return to growth in the second half of 2023.

**Polish PM: "Use frozen Russian assets to help Ukraine"** - Polish PM Mateusz Morawiecki met with Finnish PM Sanna Marin (SDP) during a visit to Helsinki yesterday.

Speaking at a press event following their meeting, Morawiecki said Finland should use frozen Russian assets in the country, such as those seized from oligarchs, to aid Ukraine.

"I hope the EU Commission finds a judicial solution for carrying this out," Marin said in response to Morawiecki's suggestion.

The premiers also discussed Finland's future Nato membership, topical EU matters as well as bilateral relations between Finland and Poland.

Poland, a Nato member, ratified Finland and Sweden's applications to join the alliance last summer. Morawiecki said it was important that both Nordic countries—which are still awaiting ratification by Hungary and Turkey— join Nato as soon as possible.

**Russia is in sanctions hell thanks to Putin's war in Ukraine** - The Russian invasion of Ukraine has brought an unprecedented, for modern times, backlash from the international community. A coalition of more than 37 countries, led by the United States, has imposed heavy sanctions on pretty much all aspects of the Russian way of life.

From the defense and aerospace industry to major financial institutions to oligarchs and individual family members of Russian President Vladimir Putin, the Western sanctions have restricted the Russian military and population in several ways.

For example, Russian commercial planes are prohibited from flying through the airspace of almost all of Europe.

The U.S. State Department came out with a report on the impact of sanctions and export controls on Russia. Since the war started on February 24, the U.S. alone has imposed approximately 2,250 sanctions (1,500 new and 750 amended) on Russia.

Some of the Western sanctions have targeted the Russian oil and natural gas industry by denying exports and/or transfer of oil refining products to Russia or Belarus, which is essentially a Russian proxy. Others have focused on luxury

goods, imposing license requirements that prohibit the sale of those items in Russia, a measure intended to target the Russian oligarchs.

### **But what exactly has been the impact of the Western sanctions on Russia?**

We should probably start by saying that some of the sanctions will take a long time to be effective.

For example, it is hard to judge the impact of a restriction on the travel of Russian citizens to Europe and to the U.S. Maybe the lack of movement and the opportunities, such as professional, personal, or academic, that often accompany travel will push more Russians against Putin and his authoritarian regime. Or maybe they will steer a nationalistic response by the Russian people and push them toward Putin.

Perhaps the Russian economy is the easiest target to gauge the effectiveness of sanctions and export controls.

According to the IMF, the Russian economy is set to contract by approximately three percent this year. Moreover, a lot of the measures, especially those targeting the economy and financial sector, against Russia will mature over time. Foreign capital will be hard to come by as the prospects of doing business in Russia are unappealing, to say the least.

The U.S. and the West have also frozen more than \$300 billion worth of assets owned by the Russian Central Bank, thus denying those funds from directly or indirectly supporting the war effort in Ukraine.

Here are some of the effects on the Russian economy and industry, according to the State Department assessment:

- “Major supply shortages for Russian forces in Ukraine are forcing Russia to turn to less technologically advanced countries such as Iran and North Korea for supplies and equipment.
- Russia is struggling to import semiconductors and other key components. Export controls have forced Russia to cannibalize existing airline parts they can no longer access abroad.
- Russia’s military aviation program has been cut off from resupply provided by global aviation trade.
- Russia has reverted to Soviet-era defense stocks because our measures have interrupted Russian companies’ abilities to replenish domestic supply chains.
- Exports on certain goods and services, including dollar-denominated banknotes, accounting, management consulting, quantum computing, and trust and corporate formation services to persons located in the Russian Federation are now prohibited.”
- The looming oil cap is set to reduce Russian foreign exchange revenue dramatically
- The looming maritime insurance ban will drastically reduce Russian oil exports

## **Putin**

**Secret signs show Putin’s own henchmen are turning on him** – Nearly nine months into Russia’s war against Ukraine, it seems some of Vladimir Putin’s strongmen are laying the groundwork to abandon ship.

A human rights group that works closely with Russian inmates and investigates abuses by the security services has reportedly received a flood of calls from members of those same security services desperately trying to flee.

Gulagu.net, founded by Vladimir Osechkin, reports that the final straw appears to have been the brutal sledgehammer-execution video released by Russia’s private army last week—a stomach-churning extrajudicial killing that the Kremlin politely averted its eyes from while the Putin-linked businessman thought to be behind it uses it for his own PR campaign.

“The reprisal with the use of a sledgehammer and the cruelty of Prigozhin, with the tacit consent of Putin, had an unexpected effect: for the third day, there is a steady stream of messages to the Gulagu.net hotline from employees of

the Interior Ministry, the [Investigative Committee], the FSB and the [Federal Protective Service], the Federal Bailiff Service, etc., who want to leave the territory of lawlessness and cruelty,” Gulagu.net reported.

While rumblings of discontent among the Russian security services have been reported throughout the war, frustrations have reportedly boiled over as Putin is increasingly seen as losing all control.

In less than two weeks, there was Russia’s humiliating retreat from Kherson—the Ukrainian territory that Putin and so many of his mouthpieces had vowed would be part of Russia “forever.” Then came the brutal execution video by members of the Wagner Group, the same private army that, by all accounts, has been entrusted with bringing victory to Putin by any means necessary.

(Despite mounting calls for an investigation into the execution, the Kremlin has dismissed it as “not our business,” leaving it to Wagner Group overlord Yevgeny Prigozhin to offer a flurry of fantastical explanations for the murder clearly aimed at trolling.)

And then came the Russian-made missile that landed in Poland this week, killing two farmers there shortly after similar missiles fired by Russia cut down Ukrainian civilians in the latest bombardment. While Western officials have since walked back their claims that the Polish farmers were killed by a missile fired by Russia, the incident initially seemed likely to trigger a direct confrontation between Russia’s military and NATO forces.

And that reportedly left some within the Russian security services so shaken they were prepared to remove Putin from power entirely. That’s according to unconfirmed reporting by the Telegram channel General SVR, an anonymous channel that claims to be run by a former member of the security services.

“The incident with a missile hitting Poland on Tuesday almost became a prologue to the seizure of power in Russia,” the channel reported Thursday, claiming that high-ranking security officials had gathered in the immediate aftermath of the strike for “informal consultations.”

“Knowing Putin's penchant for raising the stakes through escalation... this group of security officials quickly became convinced that in response to a Russian strike on a country included in NATO there could be both a retaliatory strike and an ultimatum.”

So, according to the channel, they decided that “if the U.S. leadership and the adjoining countries show readiness for a harsh response, then the best way out would be to remove the current Russian president, Vladimir Putin, from power and create a collegial council of security officials to ‘temporarily’ take control of the country into their own hands ... blaming all the problems on either a seriously ill or law-breaking president.”

Noting that Putin has brought tension “to almost the limit,” the channel warned: “This time, the critical situation turned out to be illusory and it made no sense for the security forces to take risks, but next time, and there will be a next time, Putin may not have a chance.”

**Comment** – It is once again interesting to note that dissent is limited to Russian war failures and personal risk, and not to any semblance of resentment of their Ukrainian invasion. Only when it starts affecting them personally does it seem to register anything on the social media scale. Until then they are quite OK with the invasion. Joint guilt and accountability.

## Impacts

**'Black Swan' in Russia may help Ukraine retake Crimea, Minister predicts** - An unexpected event inside Russia involving President Putin or his inner circle could enable Ukraine to take back Crimea by the end of the year, the country's deputy defense minister Havrylov has said.

During a trip to the U.K. to see how Britain is supporting the Ukrainian armed forces, Havrylov was asked by Sky News whether it was "realistic" to retake by January the peninsula Russia illegally annexed in 2014.

He referred to the "Black Swan" theory in which an unexpected event upends previous calculations. "I think Russia can face a 'Black Swan' in their country, inside Russia and it can contribute to the success of us with Crimea," he said.

"We can step in Crimea for example by the end of December," Havrylov said, which was "possible" and "not excluded."

When asked what that unforeseen event could be, Havrylov replied, "Putin disappeared for example due to some reason," which was "physical or political."

"Or somebody from his circle, something happens, or maybe a combination of a very disillusioned society in terms of their losses," he added.

Following Ukraine's liberation of the southern city Kherson, there has been speculation over which areas might be the next focus for Kyiv's forces.

**Why Africa is critical to China's electric vehicle race with the West** - Chinese companies are leaders in the refining of critical metals for EV batteries and manufacture of electric cars. As demand soars, future success in the industry rests on the supply of these resources.

As the US and its allies try to reinforce their mineral supply chains to cut dependence on China, Africa will help bridge the supply deficit for minerals essential to the green energy transition, observers say.

In a bid to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, countries are encouraging development and use of electric vehicles (EVs).

China is a major player in the industry, from dominating the processing of critical minerals used to make EV batteries to being the top producer and seller of electric cars.

But a sustainable future in the industry depends on access to a steady supply of essential metals, particularly lithium.

Australia, Chile and Argentina remain the key source markets for lithium, but Africa is likely to supply a high proportion of the necessary minerals needed for EV rechargeable batteries.

Currently, Chinese companies dominate the exploration and extraction of battery metals from Africa, especially in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Zimbabwe. China sources more than 60 per cent of its cobalt – another EV battery material – from the DRC and since last year, Chinese companies have made acquisitions in Zimbabwe for lithium. China also has interests in other resource-rich African countries, including Zambia, Namibia and South Africa.

Demand for lithium has risen sharply, sending the lithium industry into overdrive.

According to Benchmark Mineral Intelligence, the lithium price index is up 140.6 per cent so far this year. A tonne of lithium hydroxide, which is used in batteries with high nickel content, was on Friday trading at US\$83,200 at the London Metal Exchange.

Chris Berry, president of commodities advisory firm House Mountain Partners in New York, said the rapid rise in lithium prices was the result of a number of events.

He said these factors included government policies such as subsidies to buy electric vehicles; the environment, social and governance movement; and "that most importantly, the legacy automotive manufacturers have finally woken from their slumber and realised that security of supply of battery metals including lithium is vital to their EV sales goals."

"Without adequate supplies of battery raw materials including lithium, cobalt, and nickel, [manufacturers] will have a difficult time maintaining and growing market share in an increasingly competitive EV sector," Berry said.

He said global lithium demand should increase by close to a factor of five by 2030 and this was all due to the growth of the lithium-ion battery business.

China is the dominant player in global lithium refining and processing, accounting for about 59 per cent of the world's total. Meanwhile, the US refines just 3 per cent and Canada 3.5 per cent, according to Benchmark's Lithium Forecast.

But the United States and some other Western nations are not letting China go unchallenged. The US wants to build its own critical metals supply chain and has promised to provide massive tax incentives to make "new and used EVs more affordable" using minerals and battery components from the US and its allies.

That includes US\$2.8 billion allocated in October by the US Department of Energy to expand domestic manufacturing of batteries for electric vehicles and the electrical grid.

Britain also plans to have its first lithium refinery in two years. Green Lithium, which is backed by commodity trader Trafigura, announced plans to build a £600 million (US\$710 million) refinery to produce around 50,000 tonnes of battery-grade lithium hydroxide starting in 2025. This will be enough for around 1 million electric vehicles.

Defense Metals president Luisa Moreno said that in the short to medium term it might be difficult for the West to build a fully integrated supply chain for critical materials.

"With continuous investments and collaborations between companies and governments in North America, Australia and Europe, we may start seeing integrated supply chains from mine to technology, in relevant amounts in the next 8-15 years," Moreno said.

She said this was likely to start with base metals such as copper and battery-grade nickel, and then the more critical ones like cobalt, graphite, lithium, manganese and then rare earths.

"Mining is just one aspect of the supply chain. Producing advanced chemical compounds and metals and then the downstream devices, parts and machines, involves new skill sets that would have to be developed and it takes time," Moreno said.

Berry agreed that long lead times were needed to establish supply chains.

He said the US' Inflation Reduction Act was meant to kick-start a more localized supply chain through tax credits, subsidies and grants.

"While this is all good news, it will still take 10 years to build any sort of a sufficient supply chain given the huge lead times needed for mining permitting in particular," Berry said.

Zayn Kalyan, CEO and director at Infinity Stone Corp, an EV metals supplier, said Africa's critical minerals would help address the EV revolution and many of the other technologies needed to tackle climate change.

"The high-grade deposits found in Africa are the most economical in the world, as well as presenting the least impact to the climate and lowest greenhouse gas emissions," Kalyan said.

Moreno of Defense Metals, agreed, saying she did not think "we can develop hundreds of mines of critical minerals – as projected by the International Energy Agency – and produce a large volume of these materials without a significant contribution from Africa."

Moreno said many Western countries had set out targets of between three and 13 years to phase out internal combustion engine vehicles, and many believe that it was an aggressive target, so some companies might be stockpiling.

“High lithium prices promote mining exploration and development, which is important but current prices are likely not sustainable in the long term,” Moreno said.

**Comment** – There is a rapidly growing awareness of the fallacies of globalization, particularly in strategic materials and minerals together with outsourced processing and manufacturing capabilities.

This has been brutally and quickly brought to the fore by three factors - one “Black Swan” event - COVID-19 and two geopolitical events - Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and the chronic situation of China’s pursuit of Taiwan.

Aside from lithium, as discussed above, there are a plethora of other risks, such as neon and microchip production, albeit connected at the hip.

According to reports, Ukraine alone produces three quarters of the world's neon, which are important components in the production of electronic chips. Some 45% to 54% of the world's semiconductor-grade neon, critical for the lasers used to make chips, comes from two Ukrainian companies, Ingas and Cryoin, both now shuttered.

About 70% of global neon supply is produced in Ukraine as a by-product of steel production in Russia.

COVID-19, China’s threatening of Taiwan and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine all create a complete re-think of global risk, globalization and linked economic systems tying it all together.

## Geopolitics

**US works to reset ties with the Philippines** - US Vice President Harris arrives in the Philippines for talks aimed at reviving ties with Washington’s oldest ally in Asia and one that is central to U.S efforts to counter China’s increasingly assertive policies towards Taiwan.

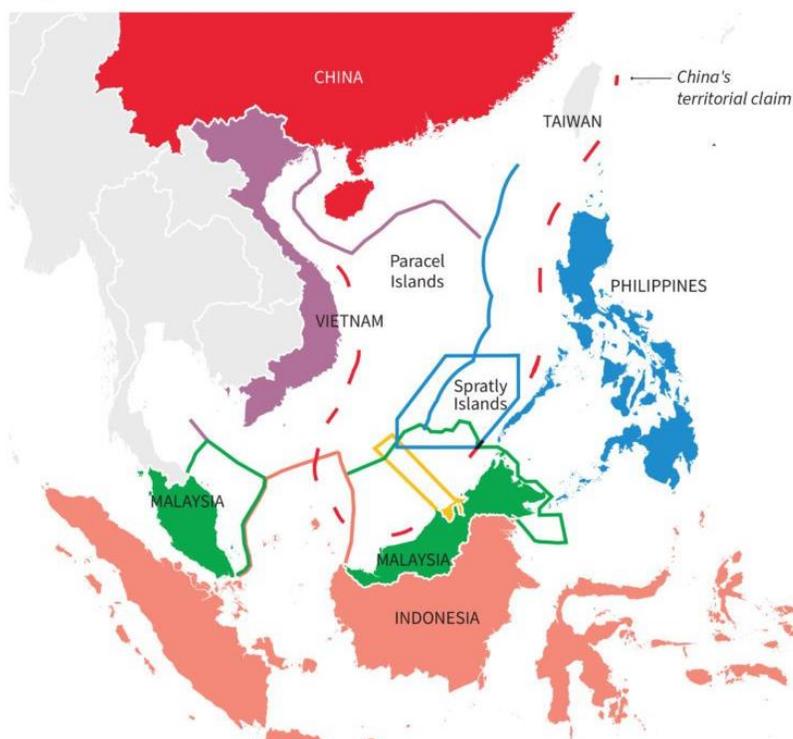
Harris, who will meet President Marcos Jr., comes to the region as the Biden administration seeks to shore up relations with allies worried about growing Chinese influence in Southeast Asia and possible conflict over Taiwan, the self-governing island China regards as its own.

The Philippines is an important part of this diplomatic push. Military access to the country, just 120 miles (193 km) from Taiwan and adjacent to the South China Sea, would greatly complicate any attempt by China to invade Taiwan, according to military analysts.

Marcos’ predecessor, Rodrigo Duterte, frustrated Washington with a strongman approach, perceived closeness to Beijing and a bellicose tone that included appearing to call Obama a “son of a bitch.”

### Overlapping claims in the South China Sea

Security issues will top the agenda when U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris visits the Philippines this week. Of the five U.S. treaty allies in the Indo-Pacific - Australia, South Korea, Japan, the Philippines and Thailand - the Philippines is closest to Taiwan, its northernmost land mass of Luzon just 200 km (120 miles) away, making it an important option for stationing weapons and supplies that could be used to defend Taiwan from any Chinese attack. Harris also plans to visit the Philippine islands of Palawan in the contested South China Sea to show U.S. support for its ally in the face of military pressure from China.



With Marcos in office, the Biden administration is attempting a reset.

In Asia, the United States faces challenges in building a coalition to deter Chinese action against Taiwan. Many countries in the region are reluctant to antagonize their giant neighbor, which is not just a military power but also a key trading partner and source of investment.

While Washington is integrated with Japan's and South Korea's militaries and economies, it faces more skepticism of its China strategy among Southeast Asia's diverse voices.

In response, the Biden administration has taken a range of steps, including hosting ASEAN leaders at the White House for the first time ever in May, and asking Congress for \$800 million in 2023 spending in the region.

**Comment** – The Philippines is an instrumental element of the First Island Chain policy.

## Containment

**Ukraine working with Allies on 'integrated' air defence system** - Ukrainian Defence Minister Reznikov said Kyiv was working with international allies on an "integrated and echeloned" air defence system.

Reznikov gave no further details in a tweet written a day after Russia carried out air strikes across Ukraine, but he said that "protecting the Ukrainian sky" would be a priority at a planned meeting with allies in Germany.

**Netanyahu to 'consider' supplying air defense systems to Ukraine — report** - Ukrainian President Zelenskyy said Wednesday that Israel's prime minister-elect Benjamin Netanyahu agreed to look at supplying Ukraine with much-needed air defense systems as it battles to fend off Russia's invasion.

He told reporters that Netanyahu assured him he will "consider" supplying Ukraine with Israeli systems.

The president said he raised the matter when he recently spoke with Netanyahu following Israel's recent elections and stressed that air defense systems were a top priority for his country, Israeli daily Maariv reported on Wednesday.

According to the report, Netanyahu responded that he would deliberate over how he can help and get back to the Ukrainian leader.

Zelenskyy said his country doesn't need Israeli weapons to attack enemies but rather seeks its air defense systems to protect against Russian missiles.

**Ukraine is getting nervous about Elon Musk (again)** - Starlink's satellite-based internet hotspots have been the "signal of life" for beleaguered Ukrainians, but the unpredictable behavior of CEO Elon Musk has the Ukrainian government looking for alternatives, a deputy prime minister said.

As well, Musk's drastic changes at Twitter have Kyiv worried that the social-media platform will become a "major source" of media manipulation, Olha Stefanishyna, Ukraine's deputy prime minister for European and Euro-Atlantic integration told reporters at the Halifax International Security Forum here.

Stefanishyna said the Ukrainian government had begun procuring "some elements of equipment"—mostly European, but she also said she was working with American partners. These Starlink alternatives are "not as sophisticated" but are "something that would allow us to substitute and to make sure that at least at the level of the government communications and government connection, we preserve the sustainability."

Still, she said, "Starlink has been the signal of life for Ukraine."

**Russian jets make "unsafe" low-altitude pass over NATO task force** - NATO's has accused Russian air forces of making an "unsafe, unprofessional" low-altitude overflight past NATO warships in the Baltic Sea.

On Thursday morning, the warships of Standing NATO Maritime Group 1 were carrying out an exercise in the Baltic Sea. Two Russian fighters approached at an altitude of 300 feet and overflew the force at a distance of just 80 yards, according to the command. They refused to respond to communications, NATO said.

At the time of the encounter, the naval force was conducting air-defense training in a designated danger area, and the flyover at low altitude and close range could have ended poorly. "The interaction increased the risk of miscalculations, mistakes, and accidents," the Allied command warned. "NATO deemed the interaction unsafe and unprofessional."

After the sabotage attack on the Nord Stream gas pipeline system on September 26, NATO nations increased their naval presence in the Baltic and the North Sea to over 30 ships - twice the previous level, according to Foreign Policy.

**Where are the fleets?** – With heightening tensions in the Ukrainian/Russian conflict it appears that both Russia and Ukrainian Allies' fleets are on the move.

This may be a reaction to Putin's consistent threatening of some type of drastic action in light of ongoing Russian force losses and land recovery by Ukrainian forces.

Of late, the US has been "surfacing" very secretive nuclear submarines in conspicuous locations. This is highly unusual for American naval command and seems to indicate warnings to Russia of repercussions should they decide to use any format of nuclear device.

There are also a number of US naval battle groups in and around the Russian perimeter, from the Bering Strait to the Baltic Sea, the Mediterranean Sea and off the Strait of Gibraltar, hanging around northwest Africa.

### **Russian fleets**

Russia has of late a very limited fleet in the Black Sea with damages to existing craft reducing the efficacy of this force.

They also need to rotate vessels for maintenance purposes and with their primary repair facilities located in the Black Sea, this presents a major challenge in that Turkey, door keeper of admission to the Sea, has declared access to the Black Sea a "no-go" area for warships.

Turkey's ban on the passage of Russian warships through the Dardanelles and Bosphorus Straits - including the passage of Black Sea Fleet ships to their home bases in the Black Sea - and Turkey's closure of the airspace for Russian military and civilian aircraft heading to Syria, the Russian squadron in the Mediterranean is "stuck."

The impossibility of repairing and servicing Russian ships in the European ports of the Mediterranean countries against the backdrop of a weak repair base at the Russian Navy's base in the Syrian port of Tartus will force it to return ships of the Northern, Baltic, and Pacific fleets to their bases for repairs. Black Sea Fleet ships, which have been in the Mediterranean Sea for a long time, may also have to be redeployed to the Baltic Sea.

After 24 February 2022, the supply of the Mediterranean group of the Russian Navy by means of major amphibious ships from Russia's ports on the Black Sea (the so-called "Syrian express"), as it traditionally happened, became impossible. Now civilian vessels - oil tankers and ro-ro ferries - are used for this purpose.

Its Mediterranean fleet has been identified in an extremely compact and almost fully-fledged formation off the coast of Syria. It could head towards the Black Sea, in support of the invasion of Ukraine, or remain in the Med as a form of deterrence against NATO naval forces.

One of its Kilo-class nuclear submarines has been withdrawn from the Mediterranean area and is presumed to be heading to the Baltic for maintenance. Simultaneously one of its Baltic nuclear subs has “gone missing” – location-wise that is. It departed its base and has not been tracked since – or at least as far as having been declared as tracked.

In late summer of 2022, Russia began the rotation of part of its warships in the Mediterranean Sea, with 2 missile ships, a Black Sea reconnaissance ship and 2 tankers withdrawn from the area - a total of 5 ships.

Russia deployed 13 landing ships to the Black Sea pre-February 2022 in anticipation of an amphibious assault around Odesa, together with support ships and the taking of Snake Island. Ukraine has since attacked these vessels, both in port and at sea with anti-ship missiles against warships, supply vessels and tugs. Ukraine also reoccupied Snake Island, opening channels for grain exports and limiting Russian naval aggression ability in this zone.

Russia was forced to pull back its fleet and abandon any amphibious intentions west of Sevastopol.

Whilst subsequently in the naval port of Sevastopol, they were once again attacked, this time with drone craft, suffering further – but to date undisclosed - damage.

Thus the Russian Black Sea fleet has been operationally all but invisible. Except for the launch of sea-borne missile attacks on Ukrainian infrastructural targets. The risk of course is that every time they launch missiles they further deplete an already short supply of stocks and reveal their location.

### **NATO fleet**

As above, NATO has been fairly active of late, deploying vast assets around Russia in various formats and “surfacing’s.”

In conjunction with its sea assets, NATO also has a huge fleet of radar planes used to guard against Russian jets and missiles, with 14 Boeing 707 early warning aircraft based in Geilenkirchen Airbase in western Germany alone.

Amusingly, these jets are officially registered to Luxembourg—a tiny country without any air force. Indeed, the Boeings belong to no one country’s air force, though they are usually commanded in turns by a German and U.S. general.

These are on constant rotational flight paths not only acting as a deterrent force, but also in gathering tactical data on Russian force strengths and locations.

### **Summary**

Russia’s fleet in the Black Sea is relatively benched aside from launching missiles against Ukrainian cities.

NATO fleets are increasingly active in and around all Russian coasts and zones, supported by large numbers of data gathering support air fleets.

Aside from a naval deterrent factor, NATO’s presence and its tactical revealing of normally secret locations of nuclear submarines, sends Russia a clear message to practice circumspection when threatening funny business against Ukraine.

In diplomatic terms, what NATO is accomplishing with these signals is clearly understood. Power blocs regularly resort to “signaling” warnings via deployment of assets.

**Brenthurst survey shows vast majority of South Africans condemn Russia** - The government appears to be at odds with the vast majority of South Africans when it comes to a range of issues, from the Russian invasion of Ukraine to the country’s global alignment, a new survey of voters has found.

A survey conducted on behalf of The Brenthurst Foundation has found that 74.3% of South Africans believe that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is “an act of aggression that must be condemned” while only 12.7% believe it is “an acceptable use of force.”

This suggests that the South African government, which has refused to condemn the invasion and has even embarked on joint military exercises with Russia, is hopelessly out of touch with its voters, who believe that the country should be offering moral, diplomatic and even military support to democracies that are invaded by their neighbours.

The survey also showed that three-quarters of ANC voters — around 74% — agreed that the Russian invasion was “an act of aggression that must be condemned” while only 14% of ANC voters said it was “an acceptable use of force.”

In November, South Africa concluded arrangements for a joint naval exercise with Russia and China set for February.

But South Africa’s flirtation with Russia and China also appears to be at odds with the views of ordinary South Africans on these countries.

The survey showed that South Africans identify with western countries and countries on the African continent far more than they admire Russia and China. Asked “If you were to leave South Africa, which country would you choose to go to?” 51.9% cited Western countries, 16.6% said other African countries while only 4.1% said Russia, 3.6% said China and 2.4% fellow BRICS partner India.