

Conflict Update Day 396

March 26th, 2023

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Conflict Assessment

Russian losses – **170,050** (+620) soldiers killed, 3,595 (+15) enemy tanks, 6,947 (+15) armored combat vehicles, 2,631 (+8) artillery systems, 522 (2) MLRS systems, 277 (+1) air defense systems, 305 (+0) warplanes, 291 (+0) helicopters, 2,216 (+2) UAVs of the operational-tactical level, 911 (+0) cruise missiles, 18 (+0) warships/cutters, 5,486 (+3) trucks and tankers, 4 Iskander Missile Launchers (+0), 239 fuel bowsers (+0) and 282 (+3) units of equipment.

Death Toll



Key events

Russian losses in futile advance efforts around Avdiivka – Russian forces attempted to advance further west in and around the eastern Ukrainian town of Avdiivka, but were outfoxed and forced back, actually losing ground. In the process they lost numbers of tanks and armored kit.

I was watching geofootage of the battle late last night and Kremlin forces really made little military impression on Kievan defenses.

Of note though is that this is where their (Russian) forces have relocated to after failing to Bakhmut.

Russia's Bakhmut offensive stalls due to 'extreme attrition' of forces in battle - Russia's Bakhmut offensive in eastern Ukraine has "largely stalled" due to the sheer number of troops lost in months of grinding battles.

That's the latest intelligence assessment from the British MoD, which says the impasse "is likely primarily a result of extreme attrition of the Russian force," but notes that "Ukraine has also suffered heavy casualties during its defence."

The MoD says that the situation on the ground around Bakhmut has "likely been made worse by tensions between the Russian Ministry of Defence and Wagner group", which both contributed troops to the area.

Over several weeks the head of Wagner's infamous mercenary force has found himself kept at arms-length by Russia's military brass, as Wagner committed forces to the battle of Bakhmut, and sustained heavy losses.

Wagner boss Prigozhin took his most outspoken stand against the Kremlin's Ukraine narrative this week, contradicting Russian claims that NATO is fighting in Ukraine, and questioning whether there are actually Nazis in Ukraine either.

The Kremlin has repeatedly justified its invasion of its neighbour as necessary to purge Kyiv of neo-Nazis, who threaten the peace and security of Russia, despite there being little evidence of this.

In parallel, it has increasingly pitched the war as an existential struggle against NATO, which they claim is butting up against Russia's borders.

Prigozhin said Moscow is fighting "exclusively with Ukrainians" equipped with NATO-provided equipment and some "Russophobic" mercenaries who voluntarily support Ukraine - but not NATO itself, according to ISW.

Russia shifting the focus of operations

The British MoD says that Russia is shifting the focus of its operations to the town of Avdiivka, south of Bakhmut, and north of the city to the Kreminna-Svatove area where Russia hopes to establish its front line presence.

"This suggests an overall return to a more defensive operational design after inconclusive results from its attempts to conduct a general offensive since January 2023," Saturday's intelligence report concludes.

Note our article above regarding this Kremlin tactical shift and the consequent Russian losses being incurred.

Russia struggling to make ground - Russia is struggling to make any tactical gains and Ukraine is well positioned to regain the initiative and launch counteroffensives in critical sectors of the current frontline, says ISW, adding that ongoing Russian offensives along the Svatove-Kreminna line, around Bakhmut, and along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City and Vuhledar frontlines have failed to make more than incremental tactical gains in 2023.

Comments, Updates, Developments and Reports

Putin wanted 'total cleansing' of Ukraine with 'house-to-house terror,' leaked spy docs reveal - Putin planned a "total cleansing" of Ukraine with "house-to-house terror" to subdue its people, leaked spy documents reportedly show.

Chilling emails from within Russia's FSB intelligence service talk about orders "from the very top" for civilians to be taken to concentration camps in a bid to conquer Ukraine. The emails were leaked by a source within the FSB to Russian human rights activist Vladimir Osechkin, who founded Gulagu, a website that highlights the conditions in the country's prison system, the US Sun reported.

The leak comes a week after the International Criminal Court charged Putin with war crimes on charges related to an alleged scheme to deport Ukrainian children to Russia. Ukrainian president Zelenskyy said that there have been over 16,000 forced deportations carried out by Russia.

Comment - This points to a Russian accountability in toto, for every Russian commander, soldier and representative, proving it is not just a "Putin War." This is genocide in the planning and execution and relates to another story in an

earlier Update this week surrounding the 45,000 black body bags purchased by Moscow – for murdered and purged Ukrainian officials, politicians, teachers and all other individuals deemed expendable by the Kremlin.

This is a murderous regime and people that fully deserves the title “**State Sponsor of Terrorism.**” It is more than that – **Russia is a Terrorist State**, pure and simple.

Ukraine calls for urgent Security Council meeting over Russian nuclear deployment in Belarus - The Ukrainian Foreign Ministry on Sunday formally requested the convening of a special session of the United Nations Security Council to discuss the announcement made by Russian President Vladimir Putin on the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus.

"The latest announcement by the Russian Federation on the intention to deploy tactical nuclear weapons on the territory of Belarus is another provocative step by Putin's criminal regime, which undermines the principles of nuclear non-proliferation treaties, the disarmament architecture on nuclear weapons and the international security systems in general," the Ministry has made known.

Is Hungary shifting the focus of its nuclear sector from Russia to France? - Hungary is in talks with France about the possibility of enlarging the French role in refurbishing its nuclear programme. This could eventually lead to the replacement of Russia at Hungary's only atomic power plant, marking a shift in Prime Minister Viktor Orban's pro-Moscow stance. Despite pressure from other EU states anxious to target Russia's nuclear exports with sanctions because of the war in Ukraine, Orban has maintained his cooperation with Russia.

According to a report in The Financial Times, the €12bn expansion of Hungary's Paks nuclear power plant, led by Moscow's state-owned Rosatom and financed mostly from a Russian state loan, is a flagship project in Hungary's economic cooperation with Russia.

This month Hungarian news agency MTI reported that Hungary would increase French involvement in the project.

It quoted Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto as saying "the Paks expansion cannot be successful without French cooperation, since the control technology system, which is considered the 'soul of the power plant', was developed by the Franco-German consortium".

The expansion plans for the Paks plant date back to 2014 when Orban signed a deal with Putin.

However, the ongoing war in Ukraine, which Orban (**Comment** – As did Putin!) had expected to be over quickly, has raised questions over the Paks timeline and the feasibility of long-term cooperation with Moscow. This has forced Hungary to look for potential alternatives.

Increased pressure

While Hungary and France have blocked efforts by other EU member states to directly sanction Rosatom, there is increasing pressure on the bloc to find ways of restricting the Russian company's future business.

The longer the war in Ukraine drags on and the sanctions regime lasts, the more likely it becomes that Russian participation in the project may have to be phased out altogether. Whether that means replacing Rosatom with another main partner or building an entirely new power plant is not clear.

Hungary is under a time constraint as it has banked on nuclear energy to complete its green transition, alongside renewable and other sources.

Paks is Hungary's only operating nuclear power plant, whose four Soviet-era reactors have been upgraded and equipped with western control systems, extending their lifespan into the 2030s.

Budapest wants to rely on nuclear power for most of the rest of the century, according to the government's energy strategy.

Franco-German tensions threaten to trouble EU leaders summit - Disputes between France and Germany over the future of nuclear energy and the long-term acceptability of fossil fuel engines risk spilling over into a gathering of the 27 European Union leaders in Brussels on Thursday.

There are two bones of contention between the EU's largest economies: petrol engines and nuclear power plants.

Earlier this month, Berlin blocked a European deal which would have banned the sale of vehicles with combustion engines from 2035.

The ban is key to Brussels' plan to become a climate neutral economy by 2050, with net-zero greenhouse gas emissions.

Germany intervened after the car ban had been approved under the EU legislative process. Berlin demanded that Brussels agree that the law would allow the sales of new cars with combustion engines that run on synthetic fuels.

Comment – This is part and parcel of a larger German fear in the EU – that it is losing its leadership role in the Union. This explains in part its less-than-100% ostracism of Moscow, realizing that in the long-term it will need as much help as it can obtain. France is seeking a larger role in Union affairs, and Macron is seen to be leading the country in such a geopolitical direction. The “Great Game” continues.

Territorial dispute between China and Russia risks clouding friendly future - Despite the public image of cordiality presented by China and Russia, some observers suggest the friendship is on fragile foundations. Xi Jinping visited Moscow last week in a show of solidarity with Putin. However, a background dispute over territory in east Siberia could dangerously undo the comprehensive strategic partnership.

On 14 February, the Chinese Ministry of Natural Resources (CMNR) issued a decree on the use of names on maps. Some cities in Russia, the decree rules, must now carry Chinese names, replacing their Russian ones.

According to the 10-page document, maps covering Russia's east Siberia must carry the original Chinese names of eight large cities. The best known, Vladivostok, the administrative capital of the region, is now to be officially called "Haishenwai."

Vladivostok was once a Chinese city known as Haishenwai and was part of China's Qing dynasty. It was annexed by Russia in 1860 after China's defeat by the British and French forces in the Second Opium War. The area has been administered by Russia ever since.

A rocky relationship

On the eve of the Xi visit to Moscow, Putin published a long letter eulogizing the "partnership" between Moscow and Beijing, which, he said, "has always been built on mutual trust, respect for each other's sovereignty and interests." But does this reflect reality.?

"Today, Beijing emphasizes that this relationship is one with no limits, that they've always been friends," Michael Dillon, a scholar with the Lao China Institute of King's College in London told RFI.

"But if you look back at the relationship, it was never very easy." He points to Mao Zedong's difficult relationship with Stalin (**Comment** – and Khrushchev), the Sino-Soviet rift in the 1960s, which resulted in a border war in which "Chinese and Russian lives were lost."

CMNR's announcement adds fuel to a long-simmering fire that flared up in 2020 after Russia's embassy in Beijing clumsily posted a message on Weibo, China's Twitter, about the 160th anniversary of the founding of Vladivostok.

Outraged bloggers fumed about the thousands of kilometres of land "taken" by Russia, who they said, had jumped on the bandwagon of the colonial powers hungry for Chinese territory.

The stretch of land in question became part of the Qing empire in 1689, under the Treaty of Nerchinsk, the first-ever treaty between Tsarist Russia and the Qing.

But due to corruption, foreign invasion and lackluster government, the weakened empire was forced to sign the 1858 and 1860 Aigun and Peking Treaties which reversed the Nerchinsk document and granted the area to Russia.

After Stalin's death, relations between China and Russia deteriorated quickly. Mao hated Moscow's de-Stalinization - which he saw as a direct attack on his own personality cult - and the Soviets did not understand why China focused on the peasantry instead of the urban proletariat to advance socialism.

The result was a massive ideological rift that led to deadly border skirmishes which were resolved only after the fall of the Berlin Wall, lengthy border negotiations and a series of demarcation treaties.

The relationship improved after the start of China's Open-Door policy in 1978 and the visit of Soviet leader Michael Gorbachev in 1989.

But in that same year, the ultimate demise of European communism started, leading to the fall of the Soviet Union itself, something for which Beijing blamed Gorbachev.

Today, the two countries find common ground in their shared regret of the fall of the USSR, their dislike of the US, and the eastward expansion of NATO.

After Hong Kong, what about east Siberia?

According to historian Neville Maxwell, China had good reasons to stick to the 1860 Beijing treaty with Russia, no matter how humiliating.

For one, respecting the documents implied that the United Kingdom would honor its treaties with China, including that on the fate of London's Crown colony, Hong Kong, destined to be handed back to China in 1997.

Sino-Russian border talks begun in 1964 dragged on for decades and finally resulted in a treaty signed in 2005, ironically in Vladivostok, that, according to China's Foreign Ministry, "resolved all border disputes" between Beijing and Moscow.

But that latest border deal merely confirmed the lines set by the 1858-1860 treaties and there was no mention at all of the enormous territory north of Heilongjiang Province that had been Chinese in the preceding centuries.

Reorganizing the map?

For the time being, China is not likely to stir up complications in the region as a result of its global diplomatic ambitions.

On 21 February, the Foreign Ministry issued the Global Security Initiative Concept Paper (GSI), reflecting Xi's grand plan for China as an international peacemaker, possibly hoping to replace the US as the world's major powerbroker.

Beijing helped secure a deal between Iran and Saudi Arabia in early March with the two arch-enemies agreeing to re-open their respective embassies.

Xi's visit to Moscow and a proposal to end the war in Ukraine fit into this trend. The ultimate goal is to create stability along Beijing's multi-billion dollar "Belt and Road Initiative".

The Chinese president, during this week's meeting with Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin, described Beijing and Moscow as "great neighboring powers" and "strategic partners," saying China would "prioritise" ties with Russia.

Xi said Chinese Premier Li Qiang would "continue to prioritise the all-round strategic partnership between China and Russia," adding that: "we are great neighboring powers and comprehensive strategic partners."

A public friendship

However, much of the Beijing-Moscow show of friendship is a public facade.

In fact, "relations between China and Russia are on a knife's edge," Michael Dillon told RFI, adding that Putin "did not notify the Chinese in advance" of his planned invasion of Ukraine, when he met Xi just two weeks before Russian troops stormed across the border.

That may have stirred up memories of the Korean War (1950-53) where China "seems to have been dragged in against its own best interest" and witnessed hundreds of its nationals killed in action.

Although China is not directly involved in the Ukraine war, "there is a conflict within the Chinese leadership as to how far they should be supporting Putin," according to Dillon.

If the Ukraine war goes badly for Russia, China may not hesitate to dust off old territorial claims.

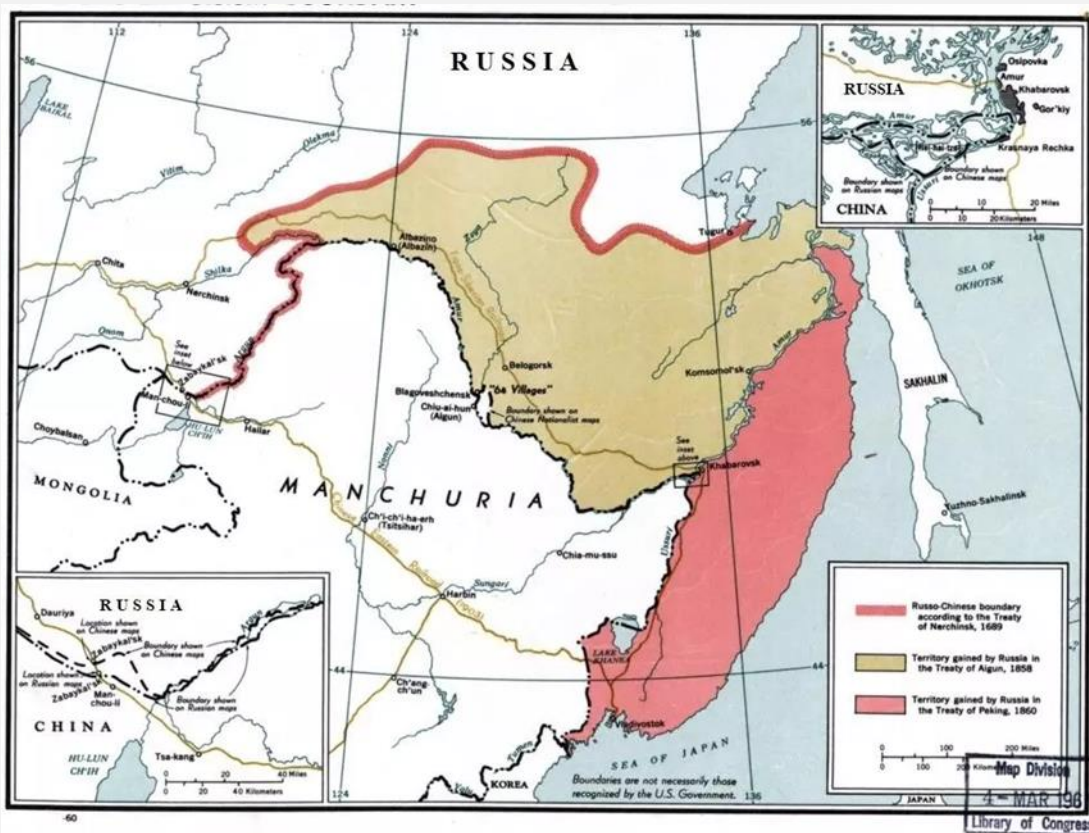
By insisting on giving Chinese names to cities in certain Russian territories, Beijing is letting Moscow know that it has not forgotten the vast territories it regards as historically Chinese.

Comment – We have frequently commented on this and other territorial issues between Moscow and Beijing. Timing is of the essence for China, and Beijing is notoriously and famously patient.

Geopolitics

How Russia and China are trying to drive France out of Africa - Fueled by the Kremlin, anti-French sentiment in Africa has been spreading for years. Meanwhile, China is also increasing its influence on the continent as Africa's focus shifts from west to east.

Russia and France are fighting it out in Africa. They are not physically fighting, but for influence in a region which many have begun calling the "continent of the future." After practically having been declared an outcast by the US-led western world, Russia has of late been aggressively pursuing its strategic interests across the remainder of the world



with renewed vigor. The African continent occupies a significant position towards that endeavour. French President Macron, on his part, seeks to assume control over the EU after German Chancellor Angela Merkel's retirement.

Germany is the de facto EU leader. However, France is increasingly eyeing that position. To secure it, Paris' influence must not remain contained to the EU alone. That, coupled with the fact that Macron is trying to relieve France of its past baggage is playing a big role in it increasingly turning its eyes towards Africa. Russia is trying to economically get involved with Africa – and even in security terms, is playing a growing geostrategic role in the continent.

In the fight for influence loser has revealed itself. The a massive hit by heightened interests in Africa is China. facing a lot of stress due to countries are not toeing its the paper dragon walk all sovereignty. What's worse, paying up debts to China – leading to the Middle Kingdom cutting down on investments and loans to the African continent.



between France and Russia – the one country which is taking Russian and French Already, China has been the fact that African line and not letting over their they are not even

France is approaching Africa with repentance. French colonial past continues to haunt African countries, and Paris' political establishment to this day. Most French leaders have always sidestepped the issue. Macron is different. He is taking the challenge head on and addressing France's gory past in relation to the African continent. For instance, in Rwanda recently, Emmanuel Macron took a historic step towards strengthening ties with Africa.

By acknowledging France's role in the 1994 Rwandan genocide, the French president sought to turn the page on 27 years of diplomatic tensions. 800,000 people were killed during the Rwandan genocide. Macron said, "I come to acknowledge our responsibility." Macron is pursuing this policy of recognition on multiple fronts.

During a visit to Burkina Faso in November 2017, he pledged to return African artefacts and art stolen during the colonial conquest. And, during a visit to Algeria, Macron had referred to colonization as a "crime against humanity."

Macron also acknowledged that Algerian nationalist Ali Boumendjel was tortured and killed by the French army. This acceptance marked a turning point in relations between the two countries. In 2020, France promised to return 26 artefacts to Benin as well as a historic sword to Senegal.

In the former colony of Ivory Coast, France is investing €69m over the next five years to boost cotton production.

It is taking proactive steps to boost the confidence of African countries, to help them trust Paris. France knows that without repenting for its past mistakes in the continent, it will not be able to make much headway in the region. Emmanuel Macron is a courageous leader who is not shying away from accepting responsibility for his country's historical blunders, and the African countries are noticing the same.

On its part, Russia is getting heavily involved in Africa. Whether it be Mali – where Russia is said to be supporting the military junta which recently carried out a second coup in a span of one year, or in the Central African Republic – where Russian forces are ensuring people remain safe from the vicious attacks of warlords and militia groups. Interestingly, the public in both countries seems to be supporting Russia overwhelmingly.

In Sudan, where there were reports of the government asking Russia to leave the Sudan Port after a unilateral annulment of a bilateral agreement on military-technical cooperation with Russia, it has now come to light that Russian involvement in the port will continue, showing Russian-African ties are stronger than believed by many in the media.

Head of African Union Strategic Partnerships Madueke remarked how the African Union places great importance on its ties with Russia and believes Moscow will play a key role in ensuring stability in the continent and facilitate the industrial development of Africa. Contrast this with Africa's view of China, and one will realise how Beijing has lost favor with most African nations.

China, meanwhile, is losing Africa by a long shot. Yet, it is desperate to retain whatever little influence it has remaining in the continent, grabbing more business interests in the Ivory Coast. According to The NYT, China financed the construction of a \$30 million Museum of Black Civilizations in Senegal that will house African art that was plundered by European colonial powers and is slowly being restituted.

It also opened its first overseas military base in Djibouti and has invested heavily in the nation's infrastructure. It is no coincidence that France and Russia are also stepping up activity in countries having business interests with China, and subsequently turning such nations against Beijing. China's plan for a fishing harbour in Sierra Leone has, meanwhile, been termed a "catastrophic human and ecological disaster" by stakeholders.

Within Africa, the anti-China sentiment has been rising for quite some time now. Not only is Chinese debt in Africa turning sour, but Chinese people too are being forced to leave the continent as locals cite fears of the paper dragon swallowing a tremendous quantum of jobs in the host countries.

China is slowly and steadily being made to realise that its African safari has no takers. What started as an ambitious expedition to colonize the African continent is turning into a bad-debt nightmare for Beijing. To make matters worse, it is now having to counter the growing influence of France and Russia in Africa, and it is losing embarrassingly in that battle.

Article from TFIGlobal written by Sanbeer Singh Ranhotra in June 2021.

Comment – The Wagner Group has announced this week it is returning its focus to African excursions and withdrawing from Ukraine to a degree. China lost 9 of its expatriate citizens in the CAR, ostensibly shot by Wagner mercenaries, a fact still to be determined and confirmed.

Watch this space.

Sanctions

Beijing and Moscow develop rail trade with new route and river bridge - Russia's rail operators have stepped up efforts to find new markets to offset crippling sanctions imposed by the west after the invasion of Ukraine.

A new RZD Logistics service links Moscow, India and the UAE, using the 7,200km International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) through Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Iran from the city's Agrohubs terminal.

And approval has been given for a China-Russia bridge that will save 2,000km on some routes.

RZD Logistics CEO Dmitriy Murev said: "We have been successfully cooperating with this terminal [Agrohubs] for several years. It has proved a reliable and effective platform for enhancing exports from Moscow, and in the reverse direction. We have no doubts regarding the prospects of a new route via the INSTC, because of the increasing role of this corridor." The INSTC was formed following an agreement between India, Iran, and Russia more than two decades ago.

Russian rail companies struggle with volume collapse as sanctions bite – An eastern turn appears to have helped Russian intermodal operator TransContainer mitigate a collapse in Russian rail volumes this year.

Full-year 2022 figures from the Delo Group subsidiary indicate volume growth of 5.1%, to 1.8m teu, driven by spikes in imports (up 9.5%, to 400,000 teu) and exports (up 11.3%, to 700,000) – more than enough to offset a 200,000 teu shortfall in transit operations.

Data analyst for Odessa-based cargo consultant Informall Daniil Melnychenko told The Loadstar: “TransContainer’s intermodal traffic is heading mainly to and from Asia. Largely, the markets appear to be China, Japan, and Korea.

“It is also likely that it increased its volumes of total loaded container traffic on account of ocean containers that were moving from Far East ports to Central Russia by rail.”

It would appear the operator managed to increase its market share in the total loaded container traffic on the Russian rail network by 1.7% over the 12-month period, to 37.7% from 36% before the invasion of Ukraine.



Putin & Russia

Russia's population crisis is making Putin more dangerous - Russia is in a demographic death spiral. In the long term, that's bad news for Russia. But in the short term, it's bad news for Russia's neighbours, because Putin may be seeking military solutions to demographic problems.

Deaths have outpaced births almost every year since the end of communism. Russia's population peaked in 1993 at 148.6 million. At the start of 2022, it was estimated at 145.6 million. That's a decline of only two per cent but, by way of comparison, the U.S. population grew 33 per cent from 1990 to 2020. The World Bank calculates that Russian life expectancy is only 71 years compared with 77 in the United States.

The disparity is even more dramatic among men: In the United States, it's 75 and in Russia, 66. That's lower than in North Korea, Syria or Bangladesh. Russia has the world's 11th-largest economy but ranks 96th in life expectancy.

Nicholas Eberstadt, a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, detailed this deadly discrepancy in a fascinating report last year. The main problem is that Russia's birth rate is only 1.5 children per woman — well below replacement level (two children per woman).

That rate isn't especially low compared with other industrialized countries. But Russia stands out for its extraordinarily high death rate, particularly among men, from cardiovascular diseases (heart attacks, strokes, etc.) and injuries (homicides, suicides, accidents). This can be explained by Russia's terrible health-care system, its environmental pollution, and its high levels of binge drinking and drug addiction — which, in turn, are a sign of despair. **(Comment – Russia has the highest rate of alcoholism and death from alcohol-related causes in the world).**

In the past year, Russia has suffered over 179,000 combat fatalities in Ukraine — more than in all its other wars since 1945 combined. And since the start of the war, up to one million Russians have fled the country. In Moscow, there is a visible shortage of men.

Russia's population loss is expected to continue — down to 135 million people by 2050 and 126 million by 2100. Currently the world's ninth-most populous country, it is projected to fall to No. 22 by century's end. Demographics is, to some extent, destiny. Russia's days as a great power are numbered.

Putin is acutely conscious of the problem. In September 2021, he lamented that Russia now would have a population of 500 million were it not for the loss of the Russian empire after the 1917 revolution and the 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union, which he has called “the largest geopolitical catastrophe of the century.”

He has tried in vain to reverse the trend, from offering financial incentives for citizens to have more children to trying to lure immigrants from Central Asia. His invasion of Ukraine can be seen as a desperate gambit to increase the population at gunpoint.

Russia occupies Ukrainian territories once inhabited by eight million people — many of whom have died, fled or been deported to Russia. That the Russians have kidnapped at least 11,000 Ukrainian children looks especially sinister in light of Russia’s baby deficit.

Stephen Sestanovich, a former U.S. ambassador at large to the Soviet republics who is now a colleague at the Council on Foreign Relations, said Putin is motivated by a “fever dream of decline.” The depopulation of Russia, he said, “feeds Putin’s apocalyptic sense of his own grand responsibilities. If you’re worried about a shrinking population, maybe conquering the 40 million people next door will solve your problem.”

Of course, in trying to address Russia’s manpower deficit, Putin only exacerbates it. But, alas, there is no evidence that Russia is running out of cannon fodder to send to Ukraine. An estimated 7.2 million Russian men are between the ages of 18 and 26. Putin was able to mobilize an additional 300,000 soldiers last year with little difficulty, and another draft may be in the offing.

In the short term, the loss of so many emigrants may help Putin by solidifying his control. “The problematic people are gone, and those who remain are the ones the regime needs to sustain itself and the war,” said Alina Polyakova, president of the Center for European Policy Analysis.

So there’s little hope that Russia’s demographic woes will curtail the threat it poses anytime soon. If anything, Putin’s awareness of the “demographic doom loop” makes him more desperate and more dangerous.

Comment – Our Updates have included this Russian dilemma as a subject in multiple issues. Putin seeks a White Slavic dominant Russian Federation population, but unfortunately for the new federal republic, the opposite has taken place since the Soviet Union implosion in the 1990’s.

The predominantly White Slavic countries left the Union at the first opportunity, seeking independence from Russian control, aggressive and murderous as it has been over them for centuries. Thus they exacerbated an already alarming Russian demographic trend, further diluting this White Slavic number each time a Slav country left the fold.

This is a primary reason Putin and the Kremlin abduct young Ukrainian children, calling them “orphans” after killing their parents, and sending them into adoptive families all around Russia – to boost the White Slavic population number.

And they call Ukrainians “Nazi.” But of course we know why Putin emphasizes this slander.

With no guardrails, Putin’s war needs ‘a golden bridge to retreat’ - In the spring of 1864, Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant mounted an overland campaign intended to capture Richmond, Va., and, in so doing, to end the American Civil War. But Grant instead suffered a series of defeats and horrific battlefield losses, leading him to abandon doctrines of strategic finesse and limited warfare.

He then opted for what was in essence a “military smackdown” — or, in our contemporary parlance, a “war of attrition” — in which he would accept immense losses of soldiers, equipment and materiel in the knowledge that his losses were replenishable, whereas Gen. Robert E. Lee’s were not.

So, for roughly the next year, Grant pounded away at his adversary, suffering a string of battlefield defeats, until the Confederacy, not only exhausted but militarily and economically depleted, finally surrendered.

Particularly in recent years, we have developed checks-and-balances to safeguard against unfettered military actions. In part, this is aimed at preventing programmed slaughter and indiscriminate destruction, in which soldiers become fodder and the civilian infrastructure is regarded as a legitimate military target.

Faced with significant battlefield losses, today's Congress likely would require an accounting of its military leadership; the populace would recoil at the mounting casualties; the media would decry violations of international humanitarian law; our society would resist a military operation aimed at a land grab from another sovereign nation; and our political leadership would need to concurrently produce battlefield results and preserve the economic welfare of the voting public or face electoral defeat.

Yet, none of these limitations to state military action seems to apply to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which apparently enjoys around a 70 percent approval rating within Russian society. To a large extent, this is attributable to the disengagement of the Russian public from the war and, more generally, state politics. Whereas in the West, there likely would be widespread demonstrations and protests, Russians tend to engage in political make-believe characterized by external loyalty to the state, combined with internal and suppressed cynicism.

In addition, the Russian public continues to be largely insulated from the economic challenges arising from the Western sanctions. Putin remains generally popular for having provided security and relative economic stability, particularly in contrast to the meltdown in Russia following the fall of communism. There is a largely complacent middle class, food items are accessible, pension checks are paid, the housing shortage is slowly dissipating, the ruble is stable, and there has been no economic implosion. All these factors have resulted in a continuation of the social contract in which Russians trade security, stability and economic comfort for disengagement from politics, including the war in Ukraine, however bungled it has turned out to be.

There are other social and cultural elements that contribute to popular disengagement from a scorched-earth campaign involving immense loss of Russian life, extraordinary financial cost, international isolation, and a blatant assault on Ukrainian non-combatants and its civilian infrastructure. These factors include:

- **Collective over the individual:** From tsarist times through the Soviet period and now in Russia, the rights of the individual have been subjugated to the needs of the state. Whereas the United States was formed under the Enlightenment concepts of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," the Russian state historically has consolidated power in its political leader to resist threats — real and imagined — from external sources.
- **The Russian state controls the internal narrative:** The state can weave a story justifying its invasion, given its near-total control of the media and marginalization of the few and disparate voices of dissent. In the Russian narrative, the invasion is being waged to protect the rights of a Russian diasporic population against a takeover by a Nazi cabal — and here, it should be noted that roughly 70 percent of Crimea's population are Russian nationals and sizable Russian communities live in eastern Ukraine

(Comment – Post-2014 Moscow transferred some 600,000 Russians into Crimea, so this statement is slightly off in that the "Russian majority" is a manufactured one)— and to reclaim territory historically belonging to Russia. But beyond this liberation justification, Moscow has depicted its current military action in apocalyptic terms as a brutal fight to the finish against NATO and a struggle to preserve Russian culture.

- **Resurgence of Russian nationalism:** For most of the 20th century, the Soviet Union was an acknowledged global power. But with the fall of communism and the dismemberment of the Soviet state, Russia went from a global power to a marginalized, regional actor. The invasion of Ukraine is, in large measure, a reassertion of Russia's return as an impactful global power, a stance that is embraced by the Russian population. **(Comment** – Maybe so, but at the same time, as per our discussion in yesterday's Update, Russia has shown a soft underbelly in this regard and suffered a huge dilution of this assumption, which at some stage will become known on Russian Main Street).

- **Leadership consolidation of power:** Russia today is a highly controlled state in which the likelihood of regime change is quite low, particularly given Putin’s continued protection by the Federal Security Service, or FSB (formerly the KGB) and its brazen crackdown on political dissent.
- **Russia is managing through sanctions:** Russia over the years has become progressively more economically isolated from the West, being forced by sanctions to adopt an economic policy of self-containment. Particularly over this past year, it has opened up new trading partners with countries in Asia and Africa, allowing it to maintain a modicum of economic and currency stability and to blunt to an unexpected degree the effects of the Western sanctions. (**Comment** – At this moment it is attempting to change the export guard, but predominantly in energy and grain, otherwise other products will shortly start seeing contraction in volume, as is happening at present with Russian arms exports).
- **The entire basis of Putin’s legitimacy is the myth of his infallibility:** This tracks a time-honored approach of a long line of Soviet and Russian leaders, thereby playing into the Russian public’s expectation of a strong and infallible leader. This basic theory of leadership legitimacy, in combination with the absence of meaningful checks within Russian society on his ability to wage an extended “war of attrition,” suggests strongly that Russia has the resolve to pursue its conflict until the bitter end.

(**Comment** – Until the body bags start arriving en mass. Putin’s “infallibility” can only stretch so far, beyond which we will more than likely read a formal statement from the Kremlin a la that of Khrushchev and Lenin).

Unquestionably, Moscow miscalculated the valor of the Ukrainians and the resolve of the Western alliance when it launched its invasion a year ago. The Russian military has committed significant blunders, has suffered far greater-than-expected losses, and has revealed its ineptitude in strategic and operational management of an offensive war.

But even so, in the absence of internal resistance, Russia retains considerable latitude to pursue a brutal, open-ended war of attrition that has resulted in the loss of thousands of Russian lives, the country’s international isolation, putative commission of international war crimes, and economic retardation.

Just as with Grant, Putin is unlikely to seek a negotiated end to the war that involves making a rational assessment of Russia’s costs, human and otherwise. Instead, a negotiated end to the conflict may require a new paradigm suggesting a victorious outcome as articulated by the medieval Chinese military leader and theorist, Sun Tzu: the building of a “golden bridge to retreat.”

Article by Robert Aronson, immediate past chair of HIAS, in The Hill earlier today.

6 ways Putin’s invasion changed your world forever - A year of war in Ukraine has reshaped the world in ways few had predicted. Far beyond the front lines, the ripple effects of Russia’s invasion have reordered lives and upended economies.

Here is a look at the war’s consequences in six key areas.

1. **Food** - The war helped push global grain prices to record highs, given the importance of Russia and Ukraine as exporters of food crops including wheat. The United Nations warned that millions of people, especially in parts of Africa and the Middle East, were threatened with famine. In July, Moscow and Kyiv signed an agreement to release millions of tons of grain stuck in Ukraine’s Black Sea ports because of a de facto Russian naval blockade. Although Russia briefly suspended its participation in the deal in October, the agreement has largely held, and global grain prices have returned to prewar levels.
2. **Energy** - The war unleashed the worst global energy crisis since the 1970s. Energy prices soared in many parts of the world as nations reduced or cut off their purchases of Russian fossil fuels. In Europe, gas bills nearly doubled and electricity costs spiked about 70 percent in the first six months of the war. European Union diplomats in December agreed on a \$60-per-barrel limit on the price at which Russian oil can be traded outside the bloc in

- another bid to deprive Moscow of revenue for the war. But with global supplies tight, Russia has remained a dominant exporter, selling more oil and gas to China and India over the last year.
3. **Inflation** - The global economy was just emerging from the pandemic, and the energy crisis and slower growth contributed to higher inflation. Soaring prices ate away at people's savings and paychecks, causing real wages to fall in many countries and slashing purchasing power. High inflation has become a political headache for leaders in countries including the United States, France and Britain, with governments raising spending to ease the pain for families and businesses using price caps, subsidies and reduced taxes.
 4. **NATO** - President Biden said this week in Warsaw that "NATO is stronger than it's ever been." President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia may have hoped his invasion would exacerbate divisions in NATO, but the alliance has been galvanized. Finland, which shares a border with Russia, abandoned its policy of neutrality and applied to join the alliance, as did Sweden. NATO leaders have said they expect that both will win approval, although Turkey has raised objections over Sweden's treatment of Kurdish groups that Ankara regards as terrorists. In September, Ukraine applied to join, although its bid is considered a long shot.
 5. **Europe** - More than eight million Ukrainians fled as refugees to other parts of Europe, particularly in the early stages of the war, according to the United Nations refugee agency. Another five million are estimated to be displaced inside Ukraine. The highest number of refugees, more than 1.5 million, are registered in Poland. At the same time, the war has enhanced the influence on the continent of Poland and the Baltic States, which have embraced stout defense of Ukraine and pushed for greater and faster supplies of military aid. Europe's traditional leaders, France and Germany, struggled early on with the delicate task of reorienting their longstanding policies of a European security structure that included cooperation with Russia.
 6. **China** - China has walked a fine line during the war, calling for peace while refraining from criticizing Russia, an increasingly important partner. China's top diplomat, Wang Yi, on a tour of Europe this week, told his Ukrainian counterpart that he did not want to see the war "prolonged and escalated." At the same time, China is holding joint military drills with Russia and South Africa, and China's leader, Xi Jinping, is expected to pay a state visit to Moscow in the spring. The Biden administration is watching closely for signs that China may cross the line into providing direct military support to Russia and has warned it against doing so, but Beijing has pushed back strongly against the U.S. accusations.
 7. **Comment** – I would add a few further consequences, namely, (i) as laid out in yesterday's Update, the demise of the Russian myth of grandeur, (ii) the dilution of the Sino/Russo pursuit of a new global bi-polar world order, (iii) the negative effect on China's global BRI program, (iv) the rise of Poland and Turkey as key growing states in Central Europe and Asia, and (v) a re-aligning world order, not for Beijing's BRI and Russian desires, but because the geopolitical genie is coming out of the power zone bottle. There are others as well but these suffice for the moment.

Article by Matthew Mpoke Bigg in the NYT published Feb. 24, 2023 and updated Feb. 27, 2023