

Conflict Update # 299

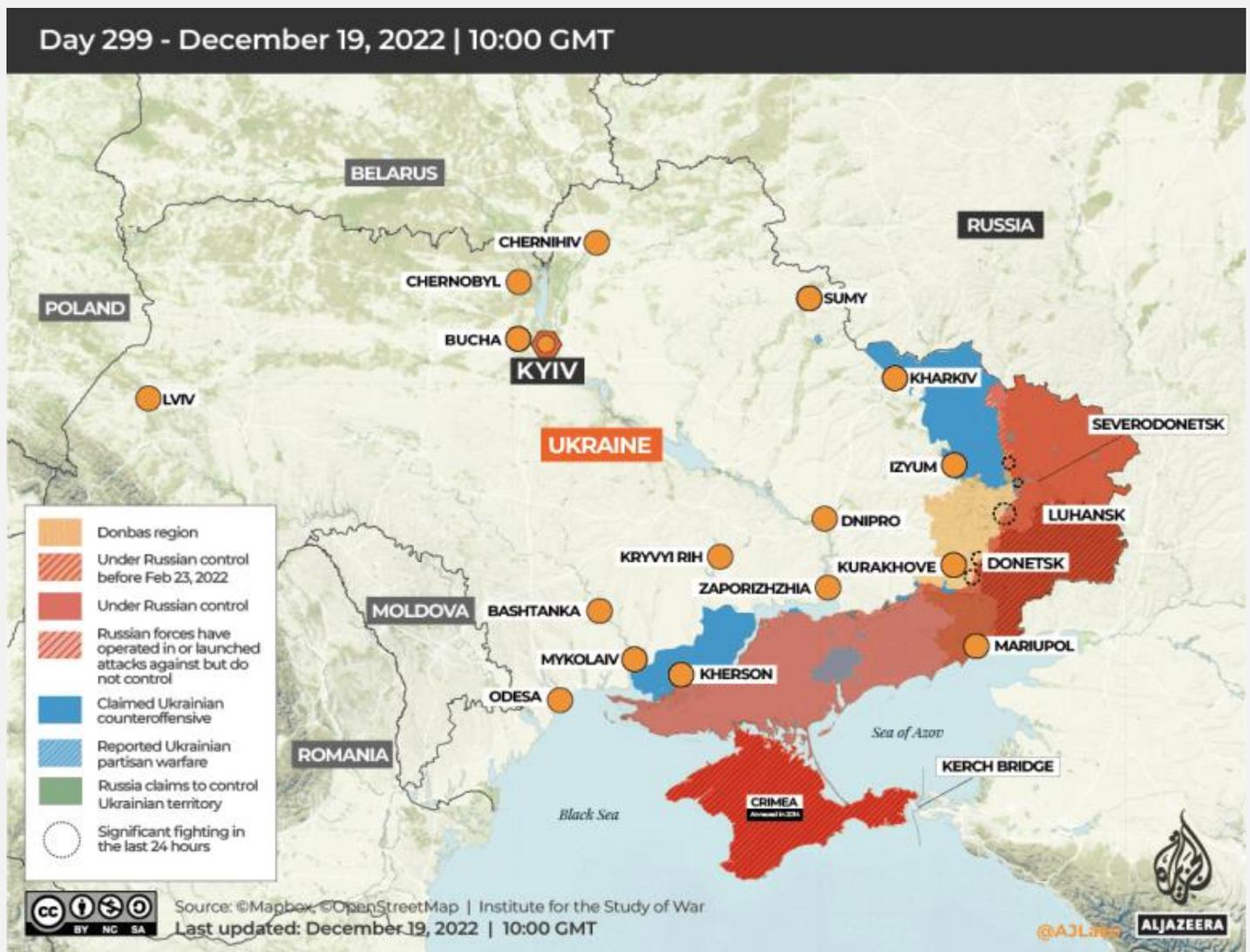
December 19th, 2022

Back issues at www.accgroupco.com

Conflict Assessment

Russian losses – 98,8000 (520) soldiers killed, 2,988 (+1) enemy tanks, 5,969 (+6) armored combat vehicles, 1,953 (+5) artillery systems, 410 (+0) MLRS systems, 212 (+1) air defense systems, 286 (+0) warplanes, 264 (+0) helicopters, 1,657 (+8) UAVs of the operational-tactical level, 653 (+0) cruise missiles, 16 (+0) warships/cutters, 4,592 (+13) trucks and tankers, 4 Iskander Missile Launchers (+0), 239 fuel bowsers (+0) and 175 (+1) units of equipment.

Key Takeaways



Ukraine strikes two Russian ammunition bases in Zaporizhzhia – wounding 150 soldiers and destroying equipment.

Time to strike deeper into Russia and Belarus? – Given Putin’s visit to Lukashenko in Belarus today, following Shoigu’s visit last week and the Russian/Belarusian military “preparation” exercises now deemed as complete, should these translate into a northern front against Ukraine being opened from within Minsk, then is it time to extend the war to these foes’ home soil?

With longer-range weaponry and newly-designed drones, should Ukraine be considering using these to target Minsk, Brest, St. Petersburg and Moscow?

To bring home the war to Main Street Russians and Belarusians?

- Brest is 55 kilometers (34 miles) from Ukraine
- Minsk 340 kilometers (210 miles) and
- Moscow 500 kilometers (310 miles)

Ukrainian troops are still holding the eastern city of Bakhmut, according to Zelenskyy. Despite some six months of persistent attacks by Russian-backed forces, including the mercenary group Wagner, which has filled its ranks with prisoners from the motherland. **Comment** – Russian sources have consistently claimed to have Bakhmut.

Russia's air force attacked Ukraine with another 34 Iranian-made drones today - including 23 aimed at Kyiv - 18 of which were shot down before hitting their target.

"These are 'Shaheds' [drones] from the new batch that Russia received from Iran," Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said in a statement Monday. Russia had been believed to be running low on the drones, which it reportedly received from Tehran over the summer. The first strikes were recorded on 13 Sept., but the pace had been easing since November. According to Zelenskyy, Russia has purchased a second batch of the drones totaling 250 more Shaheds, though the president didn't elaborate on precisely which models (-131 or -136, e.g.). "As [happened] last time, the attack UAVs were launched from the eastern coast of the Sea of Azov," Ukraine's military said Monday.

"NASAMS which have already been given to us, significantly strengthened our defense - I thank you for this!" Zelenskyy said earlier today. "I am asking you to increase the supply of such systems and missiles for them." But he also wants tanks from the Dutch; artillery from the Swedes, Latvians, Estonians, and Danes; Stinger missiles from Lithuania; counter-drone gear from the Finns; and more.

Belarus completes military preparedness drills - The Belarusian defence ministry says it has completed a series of inspections of its armed forces’ military preparedness hours before Putin’s visit to Minsk.

Weeks of military maneuvers and inspections have raised fears in Kyiv that Belarus, which acted as a staging post for Russia to launch its Feb invasion of Ukraine, could be preparing to take a more active role in the conflict once again.

Ukraine watchful of borders as Putin heads to Belarus - President Zelenskyy said Ukraine was ready for all possible defence scenarios against Moscow and its ally Belarus, as Putin headed to Belarus and Russian troops stationed there prepared to conduct exercises.

Officials in Kyiv have warned for months that neighboring Belarus could join Russian forces and serve again as a launching pad for a new attack to form a second front in the months-long war.

“Protecting our border, both with Russia and Belarus – is our constant priority,” Zelenskyy said after a meeting yesterday of Ukraine’s top military command. “We are preparing for all possible defence scenarios.”

Putin heads to Belarus today for his first visit in 3-1/2 years with the Kremlin describing it as a broad “working visit” with Belarusian President Lukashenko.

Belarus – one of Russia’s closest allies- allowed its territory to be used as a launchpad for Moscow’s 24 February invasion of Ukraine but has not joined the fighting directly and has said repeatedly he has no intention of sending his country’s troops into Ukraine.

Whatever Lukashenko might be persuaded to do for Russia “this will not help them, just like all the other sick ideas in this war against Ukraine and Ukrainians,” Zelenskyy said.

Belarus leader says situation ‘escalating’ ahead of rare Putin visit - Lukashenko is striking a defiant tone ahead of a rare meeting with Putin amid growing concerns that Belarus could be pulled into Russia’s war in Ukraine.

Lukashenko, emphasizing his country’s sovereignty at a Friday meeting in Minsk on Russia-Belarus cooperation, said the situation was “escalating” as he prepares to talk with Putin today.

He refuted the “whispering” in his country that “Russians are already walking and running the country.”

“I would like to emphasize this feature once again: no one, except us, governs Belarus,” Lukashenko said, according to remarks published by the presidential press service. “We must always proceed from the fact that we are a sovereign state and independent.”

Lukashenko last week said the main topic would be economics but added he and Putin will also discuss defense and security in the region, according to the Belarusian presidential press service.

The Russian military has announced battalion tactical exercises of its “regional grouping” of forces in neighboring Belarus, Interfax reported Monday.

Russia’s Defense Ministry, which did not specify when and where the drills in Belarus will take place, said it would give a “final assessment of the units’ combat capability and combat readiness” after the exercises.

Around 9,000 Russian troops were moved to Belarus in October to form a regional unit to protect its borders.

Putin will not push Belarus to join conflict - As the Russian president travels to Belarus to meet his counterpart, the Kremlin dismisses any ideas that Putin will be pushing for Minsk to take a more active role in the war, the RIA Novosti news agency reported.

Kremlin spokesman Peskov said such reports were “groundless” and “stupid.”

Putin will visit Minsk for the first time in more than three years.

Comment – Believing anything the Kremlin and Putin say is what is actually “stupid,” to coin a phrase.

Russia's military needed up to 72 hours to approve a strike — making soldiers hit Ukrainian targets too late - After Russia invaded Ukraine in February, Moscow felt confident in its scores of military fighter jets and planes to help complete their mission as the country sought to overwhelm Ukrainian forces.

But while Russia had significantly more fighter jets than Ukraine, Russian soldiers found themselves hamstrung by their own military's rigidity when seeking to attack new targets, according to a New York Times investigation published Saturday detailing the country's failures throughout the conflict.

The effectiveness of the Ukrainian air defense system gave the country a critical advantage early on, allowing them to blunt any perceived advantages that Russia may have brought to the table purely from the scope of their weaponry.

Per The Times, Ukraine's fighter jets "were outnumbered 15 to one in some early air battles" and Russia boasted "thousands of cruise and ballistic missiles" that American and Ukrainian intelligence officials thought would overwhelm the smaller military force.

But Ukraine came up with a plan, moving some of their defenses — including Buk and S-300 missile launchers and their control center — to different locations before the conflict, as per senior Ukrainian officials who spoke with the Times.

Instead of attacking the new targets, Russia largely bombarded the old locations no longer being used by Ukraine.

Per US officials who spoke with The Times, up to "60 percent of Russian cruise missiles missed their intended targets."

Russia was also slow to launch blitzes on new targets, according to the report.

The country's "rigid and centralized" military generally required 48 to 72 hours to amend its intelligence and obtain approval to attack new targets, giving Ukrainian forces up to three days to move to different locations, per The Times.

This rigidity also hurt Russian forces, as their pilots struggled to cripple Ukraine's defenses and flew without backup from additional fighter jets.

A Ukrainian pilot, Oleksii, who spoke with The Times, said the Russian pilots "flew straight without any cover."

"Maybe the Russian Army didn't read the Soviet books," Oleksii told the newspaper. "They had bombs, they had rockets, but they didn't cover their attack aircraft."

Comment – We reported in the early stages of the war the Ukrainian tactic of using public countryside roads as landing strips for their jet fighters. They would plan a public road, locate the fuel bowser and maintenance staff, bring the pilot in to land, replenish its fuel and munitions and send it out again. And then locate to another and different location.

This way they kept changing where they landed and operated from, completely confounding Russian planners.

Prime for the picking – Russian troops are suffering horrendous levels of attrition and death, upwards of 500 to 600 per day. Mobilized troops, sans proper training, equipment and even basic food requirements, use their cell phones to call home and families to seek assistance and complain.

Ukrainian listening posts track all social traffic and pinpoint locations for relay back to the command posts, as laid out in yesterday's Update.

They are then targeted and eliminated. Prime for the picking because they just keep calling home.

Russian soldiers drafted to Ukraine were told they wouldn't have to actually fight anyone, report says. Many of them were swiftly killed - Russian commanders told soldiers drafted to Ukraine that they would "never see combat," only for them to be killed in battle shortly after, according to a new investigation by The New York Times.

In September, about seven months into the war in Ukraine, Putin announced partial mobilization, calling some 300,000 into action and gave them the same status as regular soldiers, Insider reported previously.

Drafted members of Russia's 155th Naval Infantry Brigade told The Times that their unit consisted of factory workers, truck drivers, and a former barista, some of whom had shockingly little experience with firearms.

They severely lacked food and equipment and had no maps, medical kits, working walkie-talkies, or enough bullets.

However, they said they were not afraid because their commanders reassured them that they wouldn't be in actual combat, according to The Times. A drafted Russian soldier identified only as Mikhail told the paper about a day in October when he witnessed many of his fellow soldiers dying near the eastern Ukrainian town of Pavlivka.

Out of the 60 members of his platoon, he said about 40 were killed, with only eight escaping serious injuries.

"This isn't war," he told the paper from a military hospital outside Moscow. "It's the destruction of the Russian people by their own commanders."

After the chaotic call-up of Russian conscripts, there were widespread reports of minimal training for the new soldiers, and many were reported to have died within weeks of arriving in Ukraine.

The Times investigation detailed Russia's failures throughout the ongoing conflict based on interviews with Russian soldiers and Kremlin insiders, obtained documents, and intercepts.

The investigation painted a bleak picture of the inner workings of Putin's botched invasion, from the battlefield, through the Russian command structure, to its most senior leaders.

The latest revelations about commanders misleading drafted soldiers echo previous reporting on Russian soldiers being duped about the invasion.

Let's not forget – A war brought about the fall of the Romanovs.

Russia using 'poorly-trained convicts' As Ukraine assault continues - Russia is using "poorly-trained convicts" to bolster its armed forces as Moscow's assault on Ukraine continues, according to UK intelligence.

The former inmates have been enlisted by the Wagner Group, a Kremlin-linked mercenary group.

According to the latest intelligence report posted on Twitter by the Ministry of Defence (MoD), they are seen as "expendable" and threatened with "summary execution" if they fail to follow orders.

'We have a common enemy': Georgian soldier says Ukraine's fight against Russia is his country's, too - Georgian Vadim Chkhetiani lies in a hospital bed in Ukraine, recovering from a serious wound suffered there in September while fighting with his countrymen, other foreigners, and Ukrainians against invading Russian forces.

"There is this village called Yampil.... We were attacked by the occupiers. A shell exploded and shrapnel hit my head. I was taken to the hospital and my wound was stitched up and I returned to the front line," Chkhetiani recently told RFE/RL's Georgian Service, referring to a village in the eastern Donetsk region of Ukraine.

His return to the battlefield was cut short, he said, when his health suddenly deteriorated, forcing him to "undergo rehabilitation" in a hospital, where his recuperation continues.

Chkhetiani, 45, is a member of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, a soldier serving in a unit of the 128th Assault Brigade.

Hundreds of ethnic Georgians are believed to be fighting in Ukraine with Kyiv's forces, most notably with the Georgian Legion, a force of fighters that has been active for years in Ukraine and comprises not only ethnic Georgians but other foreigners, as well.

A Russian tank unit deliberately attacked another Russian position in Ukraine, report says, illustrating vicious rivalries within Putin's army - A Russian tank commander deliberately attacked another Russian position in the Zaporizhzhia region of Ukraine this summer following a battlefield argument, a major new report said.

The incident, part of a sweeping investigation by The New York Times, is one of the clearest examples of the vicious infighting that has plagued President Vladimir Putin's military throughout the war.

A Russian drone operator who said he witnessed the episode told the paper that a Russian tank commander drove his T-90 tank toward a group of Russian national guard troops, fired at their checkpoint and blew it up.

Ukraine's super-upgraded m-55s tanks have equipped a new kind of brigade - We finally know which Ukrainian army unit took ownership of those very old super-upgraded, M-55S tanks that Slovenia donated to Ukraine - the 47th Assault Brigade. A new kind of unit with a very special leader in famous veteran and author Valery Markus.

The M-55S is a deeply modernized Soviet T-55, a tank type that first entered service in the late 1950s. In the 1990s, the Slovenian army paid Israeli firm Elbit and STO RAVNE in Slovenia to modify 30 of its 36-ton T-55s.

Among other enhancements—including reactive armor, an uprated engine and a new fire-control system—the M-55S has a stabilized, British-made L7 105-millimeter main gun in place of the original Soviet 100-millimeter gun.

The gun is what makes the M-55S valuable to Ukraine. The British gun is compatible with a wide range of modern ammunition, including armor-piercing sabot rounds that can penetrate the armor of a modern T-72.

Russia, China to conduct military drills in East China Sea

Russian warships will participate in joint naval drills with China, showcasing increasingly close defence ties between the two countries as they face tensions with the US.

The Russian defence ministry said the Varyag missile cruiser, the Marshal Shaposhnikov destroyer and two corvettes of Russia's Pacific Fleet would take part in maneuvers in the East China Sea starting Wednesday.

The ministry said the Chinese navy planned to deploy several surface warships and a submarine for the exercise.

Russian and Chinese aircraft will also take part in the drills, according to the ministry.

Peace Negotiations

Kissinger calls for negotiations - Putin casts what he calls Russia's "special military operation" as a watershed moment when Moscow finally stood up to a Western bloc, led by the United States, seeking to capitalize on the 1991 fall of the Soviet Union by destroying Russia.

Kyiv and the West say Putin has no justification for what they have decried as an imperial-style war of occupation that has resulted in Russia now controlling around a fifth of Ukraine.

Henry Kissinger, architect of the Cold War policy of detente towards the Soviet Union as secretary of state in the 1970s, said the time was approaching for a negotiated peace.

"The time is approaching to build on the strategic changes which have already been accomplished and to integrate them into a new structure towards achieving peace through negotiation," Kissinger wrote in The Spectator magazine.

Ukraine rejected the proposal, saying it amounted to appeasing the aggressor by sacrificing parts of Ukraine.

"All supporters of simple solutions should remember the obvious: any agreement with the devil – a bad peace at the expense of Ukrainian territories – will be a victory for Putin and a recipe for success for autocrats around the world," Ukrainian presidential aide Mykhailo Podolyak said on Telegram.

'For all its propensity to violence, Russia has made decisive contributions to the global equilibrium' said Kissinger previously. "The preferred outcome for some is a Russia rendered impotent by the war. I disagree," Kissinger continued.

"Mr. Kissinger still has not understood anything ... neither the nature of this war, nor its impact on the world order," Ukrainian presidential aide Mykhailo Podolyak said on Telegram.

“The prescription that the ex-Secretary of State calls for, but is afraid to say out loud, is simple: appease the aggressor by sacrificing parts of Ukraine with guarantees of non-aggression against the other states of Eastern Europe,” he said.

Comment – One should remember “Kissinger Politik” and other forms of expedient international “peace deals” and settlements have mostly led to present-day conflicts such as the Middle East, Balkans and Central Asia, never mind “expedient” solutions in Zimbabwe, South Africa, India and the Congo.

It may be expedient for the proposer, but not for generations of those directly affected.

In 1918 after the Paris Accords, Balkan countries, territories and ethnic issues were addressed with “pressured settlement(s)” – and today we are still suffering territorial, ethnic and geopolitical tensions these “settlements” brought about. But it was then OK – “expedient” - for Paris power participants.

The Sykes-Picot Agreement, a UK-French Treaty created and designed to partition the Ottoman Empire after its WWI defeat, demarcated the Levante into different (Colonial) strategic interests and fermented and then cemented in place decades of hostility, betrayal, distrust and warfare.

UK and French claims were agreed, also that exact governance of the Holy Places be left for later settlement.

And now?

Try selling this kicking the bucket down the road policy to parties in and around Jerusalem today. But it was “expedient” back in those days for global players.

Anatolian parts of the agreement were assigned by the August 1920 Treaty of Sèvres, thwarted by the 1919–23 Turkish War of Independence and the subsequent Treaty of Lausanne, leading to modern-day Turkey.

There were myriad “Agreements” during this period in history but suffice the Turkish example to illustrate the folly of “Peace Agreements” a la the then powers.

Constantinople – today called Istanbul – was destined to go to Russia – until the 1917 Russian Revolution, and the Kurds were left stateless and today are “citizens” of Iraq, Turkey, Armenia, Iran and Syria in the main. Fighting for their independence has seen Turkey post-9/11 label them “terrorists” – prime for elimination and attack.

See further down under “**Geopolitics**” for the modern-day Turkish approach to this challenge.

The chickens are coming home to roost.

And Kissinger should be followed “*sine interrogazione?*”

I do not believe so.

'Peace in Europe will only be guaranteed after the 'deputinization' of Russia' - The war in Ukraine and the atrocious crimes committed by the Russian army against Ukrainians have exposed the brutal face of the regime of Russian President Vladimir Putin to the whole world. This face, which Russian activists and opponents have known and confronted for over 20 years, is now threatening all of Europe.

Today, it is clear that Ukrainians and all Europeans will only find peace and security after the Russian army withdraws from Ukraine, which would free the country. But this needs to be followed by a discussion to organize the post-war period. Such a discussion will only take place with a new, post-Putinian regime.

"War equals Putin and Putin equals war," Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya once said about the war in Chechnya before she was assassinated in Moscow on October 7, 2006. These words resonate even more tragically today, as we uncover every week the atrocities committed by the Russian army in Ukraine, following Mr. Putin's decision to attack

once again this sovereign, and deeply European, country. Tens of thousands of victims, bombings targeting Ukrainian civilians as well as vital infrastructures, accounts of torture, rapes... The regime has shown its true face and all its brutality in Ukraine.

Ukrainian Nuclear power plants

Ukraine's atomic agency says a Russian drone flew over a part of the South Ukraine nuclear power plant just after midnight on Monday. "This is an absolutely unacceptable violation of nuclear and radiation safety," Energoatom said on Telegram.

"We appeal to the IAEA and the entire world nuclear community, informing about the fact of the flight of an attack drone over the site of the nuclear plant.

"We call once again to prevent nuclear facilities from being exposed to the risk of attack by the Russian army and posing a threat to the nuclear and radiation safety of Ukraine and the world," they said.



Containment

Zelensky asks Western powers for more weapon systems - Ukraine's President Zelensky asked Western leaders meeting in Latvia to supply a wide range of weapon systems. "I ask you to increase the possibility of supplying air defence systems to our country, and to help speed up the relevant decisions to be taken by our partners," Zelensky

asked Sunak during his speech on a video link, addressing a meeting in Riga of leaders of countries in the Joint Expeditionary Force.

The UK-led grouping, configured to respond rapidly to crises in Northern Europe, comprises Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden.

While Western allies, led by the United States, have supported Ukraine with funding, military training and deliveries of air defence systems and other weaponry, Kyiv has said still more was needed to sustain its campaign against Russia.

British PM to announce \$304m military package for Ukraine - British PM Sunak will announce a new artillery package for Ukraine during a meeting with his Nordic, Baltic and Dutch counterparts in Riga, Latvia.

He arrived in Latvia for the meeting to discuss ongoing efforts to counter Russian aggression in the Nordic and Baltic region with fellow members of the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF).

A statement issued by the prime minister's office said he will announce that the UK will supply "hundreds of thousands of rounds of artillery ammunition next year under a £250 million [\$304m] contract that will ensure a constant flow of critical artillery ammunition to Ukraine throughout 2023".

The UK had led the way in "providing defensive aid to Ukraine including sending Multiple Launch Rocket Systems and recently 125 anti-aircraft guns", it said.

Send the ground-launched small diameter bomb to Ukraine - With the White House expected to announce the release of a Patriot battery for Ukraine's use, there is once again a debate raging in Washington about what new equipment can, or should, be sent to Kyiv's aid.

One way to coerce Putin to accept a peace deal which includes withdrawal from all occupied territories in Ukraine which he has rejected, is sending Kyiv the Ground-Launched Small Diameter Bomb (GLSDB). This is reportedly now under consideration by the US.

This system, which integrates an existing munition and rocket at a relatively low cost, would enable the Ukrainian military to strike high-value Russian targets well beyond the range of current Western-supplied munitions. That would help Ukrainian forces further degrade Russian logistics and command and control and ultimately retake more territory. For this reason, the Pentagon should move without delay to provide Kyiv with the GLSDB.



A joint project by Saab and Boeing, the GLSDB marries two affordable, combat-proven systems: the GBU-39 Small Diameter Bomb, a 113 kg precision-guided munition that is relatively cheap at around \$40,000 each, and the M26, a low-cost, formerly demilitarized rocket. The system could include a multi-purpose warhead tailored for fixed, hardened, low collateral damage, and moving targets.

The GLSDB would allow Ukrainian forces to strike Russian military targets up to 150 km away with an accuracy of around one meter. With integration, the GLSDB can be fired by the M142 HIMARS and M270 MLRS rocket artillery systems already supplied to Ukraine by the United States and United Kingdom, respectively.

Design and features of GLSDB

The GLSDB offers high-lethality, increased range and high-maneuvrability. It has the ability to defeat soft and hard skin threats, targets behind the launcher, as well as hard-to-reach targets.

The GLSDB has a length of 154in, diameter of 9.5in and weighs approximately 600lb. It has terrain avoidance, cave breaching and reverse slope engagement capabilities.

The bomb can be launched from hidden or protected rocket-launching sites to avoid detection by the enemy forces, engage targets in 360° and is accurate to strike targets within 1m.

The 285lb small diameter bomb is 71in-long, 7.75in-high and 7.5in-wide and has a wing span of 63.3in when open and 7.5in when packed. It is fitted with two foldable wings and four tail fins.

Guidance section

The inertial navigation system (INS) / global positioning system (GPS) provides guidance, navigation and position data for the bomb.

The guidance section also comprises a GPS receiver with anti-jam capability, selective availability and an anti-spoofing module (SAASM) and an Advanced Core Processor Two (ACP 2) module.

Warhead

The GLSDB is equipped with an ultra-low fragmentation, carbon fiber case warhead with 57.6kg Insensitive Munition-certified explosive fill and warhead case assembly of carbon fiber materials and is integrated with conical steel nose.

The weapon uses an integrated electronic safe or arm fuse system (ESAF) with two function settings, impact and delay, to provide deep penetration or accurate proximity height-of-burst.

Slovenia receives German lorries as part of Ukraine swap deal - Slovenia has received forty tactical lorries produced by Rheinmetall MAN from Germany for which it sent 28 M55S tanks to Ukraine as part of a swap deal agreed to earlier this year.

The delivery marks the completion of the deal agreed upon between both countries in September after months of negotiations. "What we have here is the start of a medium-sized battalion battlegroup," Defence Minister Marjan Šarec said.

The eight-wheeled lorries will form the battlegroup's core equipment, along with Oshkosh light tactical vehicles agreed to as part of the state-to-state agreement with the US. Slovenia has so far received 38 light tactical vehicles and is expected to receive another 84.

Moscow warns Athens about sending S-300 missile system to Ukraine - Russia's permanent representative to Crimea Georgy Muratov warned Greece not to transfer Russia-made anti-aircraft missile systems S-300 to Ukraine, saying it would be an 'irrational display of hostility towards Russia'.

Speaking to the Russian state news agency RIA Novosti, Muratov said: "Such a move by Athens would not only be an irrational display of hostility towards Russia, but also a dangerous step towards its own national interests, as the Greek public opinion is already resoundingly emphasizing."

Previously, Defense Minister Panagiotopoulos admitted that the Greek government is ready to send S-300 air defence systems from Crete to Ukraine if the US “installs Patriot systems in their place.”

Impacts

Drones, sats and rockets: As Sweden looks to boost spending, it’s taking lessons from Ukraine - Drones, space-based surveillance capabilities and munitions could get increased attention from Sweden as the Nordic nation attempts to boost spending for modernization in the coming years, according to its new defense minister.

Since coming into power this fall, Sweden’s new government has laid out three defense priorities. The first is joining NATO, and the second is increasing military support for Ukraine “including the transfer of more advanced military weapons systems,” Pål Jonson, who became Sweden’s top defense official in October, told Breaking Defense.

The third priority involves increasing Sweden’s defense budget over time. In November, Sweden’s armed forces put forward a proposal to increase military spending to 2 percent of its gross domestic product — the long-held goal for NATO members — by 2026 instead of its previous declaration to do so by 2028.

Geopolitics

Russia’s loss is Turkey’s gain in Syria – “The return of Crimea to Ukraine, of which it is an inseparable part, is essentially a requirement of international law.” In itself, that striking comment from Turkish President Erdogan, delivered via a video link at the Crimea Platform Summit last month, would not have surprised anyone who follows Turkish-Russian relations closely.

Yet it was evidence of more than Erdogan’s complex juggle between his support for Ukrainian sovereignty and his refusal to join sanctions against Russia. It was a pointer to opportunities that Turkey is eyeing to push the envelope in its ties with Russia, at a time when the Kremlin is bogged down in Ukraine.

Whether in Syria or South Caucasus, Ankara is getting ready to fill the gap as Moscow’s influence is poised to decline.

Following Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, Turkey has played the role of an intermediary, as demonstrated in the deal it brokered in July, with help from the United Nations, for Ukrainian grain ships to set sail from Odesa. Its trade ties with Russia are booming. Yet Erdogan has remained consistent in backing Kyiv, including in Crimea, the historic home of Crimean Tatars (a community that sees Turkey as a kin state). Turkey’s supply of Bayraktar drones to the Ukrainian armed forces remains Ankara’s most potent symbol of military support to Kyiv.

Turkey has felt threatened by Russian expansion into the Black Sea since the war in Georgia in 2008. Step by step, Moscow has asserted control over buffer states whose emergence in the early 1990s had facilitated an unprecedented rapprochement between Russia and Turkey.

Ankara’s own sense of vulnerability, combined with a deep-seated distrust of Western allies has made it seek conciliation with its giant imperialist-minded neighbour, instead of a face-off. At the same time, though, Turkey has cultivated alliances with other Black Sea states fearful of Russian revanchism such as Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Romania and Moldova.

It is important to recognise that the country now appears set to go a step further.

View Syria where, since May, Erdogan has been calling for an operation to clear the People’s Protection Units (YPG) from the areas of Tal Rifaat and Manbij. Turkish forces and their allies from the Syrian National Army have increased the pressure on Kurdish fighters along the contact line west of the Euphrates as well as around Kobani, Ain Issa and Tal Tamer to the east. In tandem, Erdogan is carrying out a vigorous diplomatic effort to get Russia as well as Iran on board.

Syria was the focus of his three-way summit with Putin and Iranian President Raisi in Tehran on July 21, as well as with Putin in Sochi on August 5. To get Russia and Iran to sign off on his plans for an all-out offensive, he is dangling the prospect of restoring ties with the government of Syria's Bashar al-Assad as a quid pro quo. However, should Putin refuse to endorse a new operation, it is not inconceivable that Turkish forces will make a unilateral move.



Another scenario where Turkey is making headway, at Russia's expense, is the South Caucasus. In July, Ankara and Yerevan agreed to open their border, sealed off to third-country nationals since the early 1990s, and allow cargo flights to use each other's airfields. Turkish and Armenian diplomats are negotiating the establishment of diplomatic ties.

Fear of Turkey has been a key reason for Armenia's alignment with Russia in terms of foreign and security policy. But after Azerbaijan defeated the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh back in November 2020 with Turkish help, the value of that alliance with Russia receded.

After all, Moscow stayed neutral and let Armenian forces fend for themselves. Now, the Armenian leadership is pragmatically exploring an opening with Turkey which may deliver economic and strategic benefits.

The common thread across Syria and Armenia is that Turkey is methodically turfing out Russia from its neighborhood and regions where Moscow has held a strategic edge over its geopolitical rivals in recent years.

Of course, Moscow is capable of spoiling such efforts. Distracted though they are, the Russians still have friends in the Iranians and Assad in Syria as well as a partnership of convenience with the YPG.

Russia also retains a 2,000-strong peacekeeping contingent in Karabakh that could play a critical role in shaping the conflict there. Moscow has some economic leverage over Yerevan too: Bilateral trade has soared as Armenia has become a backdoor route for Russia to bypass Western sanctions. On Monday, fresh clashes broke out between Azerbaijan and Armenia, though a ceasefire was subsequently announced.

Anyone thinking the war in Ukraine is, at the end of the day, a conflict involving Moscow, Kyiv and Western capitals would do well to look further afield. If Russia's expansion is stopped, another is ready to spread diplomatic influence.

Comment – Turkey recognizing the Bashir government in Syria is effectively widening its sphere of geopolitical influence. There is a good book to read – “The Next 100 Years”

Another face-off between Indian and Chinese troops on border - Indian and Chinese troops again clashed in the Tawang sector of the north-eastern Arunachal Pradesh state last week. Dozens of Chinese soldiers made an incursion before being confronted by Indian soldiers who pushed them back across the Line of Actual Control, or LAC.

The clashes marked the most serious incident along their contested mountainous border since soldiers from the two giant nations were killed and captured in Ladakh's Galwan Valley of June 2020, which plunged bilateral relations to their lowest level in decades.

Unlike Galwan, where 20 Indian soldiers and an unspecified number of Chinese troops died, the Yangtse clash led only to broken limbs and not blood, said military officials. At least 9 Indian soldiers have been hospitalized at a military hospital in Guwahati, Assam, after the face-off.

"On 9 December, PLA troops attempted to unilaterally change the status quo by encroaching the LAC, in the Yangtse area of Tawang sector," India's defence minister Rajnath Singh told parliament, referring to the Chinese People's Liberation Army and the de facto border.

Russian oligarchs believe Putin tricked them into appearing to support the war in Ukraine and got them all sanctioned - As the cracks in Russia's war on Ukraine deepen, Russian oligarchs sanctioned by the West are now saying Putin tricked them into appearing to support his invasion of Ukraine, according to an extensive investigation published Saturday by The NYT.

Many of Putin's top advisors didn't know the full extent of his plans to invade Ukraine until they were underway. Senior aides at the Kremlin were trying to read his body language, telling some that Putin had "this warlike twinkle in his eyes," the paper reported.

"If everyone around you is telling you for 22 years that you are a super-genius, then you will start to believe that this is who you are," Oleg Tinkov, a former Russian banking mogul who turned on Putin this year, said. "Russian businesspeople, Russian officials, the Russian people — they saw a czar in him. He just went nuts."

But as the "special military operation" has dragged on, some Russian oligarchs have expressed doubt and frustration after they were heavily sanctioned by Western nations as a result of their allyship with Putin, the Times reported.

Andrey Melnichenko, a coal and fertilizer billionaire, woke up on February 24 to "madness" in Ukraine, but he and other businessmen already had a meeting scheduled with Putin for that day where he joined rows of other business moguls who were equally surprised by Putin's invasion. When Putin finally entered the room, he told those assembled and the cameras set up behind them that he didn't have a choice about invading, per the outlet.

Melnichenko told The Times he felt the entire situation was "irrational" and felt "shock," but the damage was already done. Another business mogul at the meeting, who remained anonymous, told the paper they had all been gathered before the cameras in an unknowing show of support for Putin's decision to invade — even if they disagreed with it.

The goal of the stunt, the anonymous businessman told The Times, was "specifically to tar everyone there" and "to get everyone sanctioned."

Putin's plan to force his followers to have some skin in the game worked. The Times reported that dozens of business tycoons, including Melnichenko and the anonymous businessman, were hit with heavy sanctions from western nations. In the weeks and months that followed, Russian oligarchs had their assets frozen and were banned from traveling to some countries as the Ruble fell into freefall.

A battle for the Arctic is underway - In January, when an undersea telecommunications cable connecting this far-flung Arctic archipelago to mainland Norway and the rest of Europe was damaged, Norwegian officials called to port the only

fishing vessel for miles, a Russian trawler. Police in the northern city of Tromsø interviewed the crew and carried out an investigation into the incident, which was seen as a major threat to the security of Norway and other nations, including the United States. Had there not been a back-up cable, the damage would have severed internet to the world's largest satellite relay, one that connects the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), NASA and other government agencies from around the world to real-time space surveillance.

The investigation's findings were inconclusive, if worrisome. Something "man-made" had damaged the cable, but Norwegian police could not prove the Russian fishing vessel was responsible, authorities told me. The police allowed the fishing boat crew to return to their ship and set back out to sea.

When I sat down in October with the governor of Svalbard, Lars Fause, he told me people here in the high north accept this sort of geopolitical intrigue as part of life. (He also stressed that nothing of value was lost when the cable was cut and the damage was repaired quickly.) Several Norwegian analysts and local journalists covering the Arctic told me they believed the Russians were behind the damage, and that they had damaged the cable as payback for Norway's continued tracking of Russia's newly upgraded nuclear submarine fleet that patrols this region. The Russian embassy in Oslo did not respond to a request for comment.

A new zone of competition

Norway and Svalbard are finding themselves at the center of a new battle to control the Arctic.



Claudine Hellmuth / POLITICO

"Everything we do is to keep good order at sea," Rear Admiral Rune Andersen, the head of the Norwegian Navy and Coast Guard told me, weeks later. He said he's seen an increase of both international commercial and specifically Russian naval maritime activity in the Barents Sea and Norwegian Sea over the last five years. Andersen says the Norwegian fleet has devoted new resources to underwater monitoring, aerial shipping lane surveillance and intelligence sharing with other Arctic nations like Sweden. "We've been improving to make sure we've control over the North Atlantic. What happens now in the North is important. It has a direct effect on security elsewhere."

Since the end of the Cold War, the Arctic has largely been free of visible geopolitical conflict. In 1996, the eight countries with Arctic territory formed the Arctic Council, where they agreed to environmental protection standards and pooled technology and money for joint natural resources extraction in the region.

Svalbard, Europe's northernmost inhabited settlement, just 700 miles south of the North Pole, perfectly represents this spirit of cooperation. While a territory of Norway, it is also a kind of international Arctic station. It hosts the KSAT

Satellite Station, relied on by everyone from the U.S. to China; a constellation of some dozen nations' research laboratories; and the world's doomsday Seed Vault (where seeds from around the world are stored in case of a global loss in crop diversity, whether due to climate change or nuclear fallout). Svalbard, where polar bears outnumber people, is considered a demilitarized, visa-free zone by 42 nations.

But today, this Arctic desert is rapidly becoming the center of a new conflict. The vast sea ice that covers the Arctic Ocean is melting rapidly due to climate change, losing 13 percent per decade — a rate that experts say could make the Arctic ice-free in the summer as soon as 2035. Already, the thaw has created new shipping lanes, opened existing seasonal lanes for more of the year and provided more opportunities for natural resource extraction. Nations are now vying for military and commercial control over this newly accessible territory — competition that has only gotten more intense since Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

For the past two decades, Russia has been dominating this fight for the Arctic, building up its fleet of nuclear-capable icebreakers, ships and submarines, developing more mining and oil well operations along its 15,000 miles of Arctic coastline, racing to capture control of the new "Northern Sea Route" or "Transpolar Sea Route" which could begin to open up by 2035, and courting non-Arctic nations to help fund those endeavors. (**Comment** – We have been monitoring the Arctic for years and watching as Russia lays keels and commissions new nuclear-powered icebreakers on an ongoing pattern and now has more nuclear icebreaker keels in the water than all other participating countries **combined**.)

At the same time, America is playing catch-up in a climate where it has little experience and capabilities. The U.S. government and military seems to be awakening to the threats of climate change and Russian dominance of the Arctic — recently issuing a National Strategy for the Arctic Region and a report on how climate change impacts American military bases, opening a consulate in Nuuk, Greenland, and appointing this year an ambassador-at-large for the Arctic region within the State Department and a deputy assistant secretary of defense for Arctic and Global Resilience. America's European allies, too, have been rethinking homeland security, increasing national defense budgets and security around critical energy infrastructure in the Arctic as they aim to boost their defense capabilities and rely less on American assistance.

But 17 Arctic watchers — including Norwegian diplomats, State Department analysts and national security experts focusing on the Arctic — said they fear that the U.S. and Europe won't be able to maintain a grip on the region's energy resources and diplomacy as Russia places more civilian and military infrastructure across the Arctic, threatening the economic development and national security of the seven other nations whose sovereign land sits within the Arctic Circle.

There have been moments of tensions in the Arctic over the past few decades, but Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February has sent the competition to new highs. Right after the invasion, the seven other Arctic Council members said they would boycott upcoming talks in Russia.

Norway, considered NATO's northern listening post, curbed access to its ports for Russian fishing trawlers, but still allowed for Russian fishing in the Barents Sea. In May, Russia declared a militarization of its fishing fleet and maritime vessels. Norway moved to heighten alertness at military installations and critical liquid gas and energy infrastructure across the country, much of which sits in the Arctic and sub-Arctic. Europe, which severed ties with Russian gas exports, has come to rely on that Arctic energy.

In mid-November, U.S. Special Forces demonstrated the use of an experimental guided weapons system deployed by parachute over Norwegian territory. "We're trying to deter Russian aggression, expansionist behavior, by showing enhanced capabilities of the allies," Lieutenant Colonel Lawrence Melnicoff told the military newspaper Stars and Stripes. In Norway's High North, a term used to describe the Norwegian Arctic territories, no fewer than seven Russian citizens have been detained over the last few months for flying drones, prohibited under the same bans for Russian airlines in European airspace.

The drones were discovered flying near areas of critical infrastructure. One of those arrested in October was Andrey Yakunin, 47, the son of Vladimir Yakunin, the former president of Russian Railways and an ally of Putin who was sanctioned by the State Department after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014.

Meanwhile, Svalbard — equidistant to the northernmost American and Russian military installations, standing directly along a sea route which would bring the Russian Navy's Second Fleet skirting past on its way to any number of East Coast metropolises — navigates a tightrope of rivalry and cooperation with Russia. After most nations shuttered diplomatic channels after the invasion, Norway is perhaps the only nation with a direct link, through Skype, to the Russian military.

Sanctions

Canada to start process to seize Abramovich's assets - The Canadian government says it will start the process to seize and pursue the forfeiture of \$26 million from Granite Capital Holdings Ltd, a company owned by the Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich.

Russian oligarchs are complicit in the "illegal and barbaric invasion of Ukraine," and Canada "will not be a haven for their ill-gotten gains," Canadian Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland said in a statement.