

Conflict Update # 184

September 16th, 2022

Conflict Assessment

Russian losses – 54,050 (+200) soldiers killed, 2,199 (+6) enemy tanks, 4,690 (+8) armored combat vehicles, 1,302 (+7) artillery systems, 312 (+1) MLRS systems, 168 (+1) air defense systems, 250 (+0) warplanes, 216 (+1) helicopters, 908 (+0) UAVs of the operational-tactical level, 215 (+0) cruise missiles, 15 (+0) warships/cutters, 3,550 (+28) trucks and tankers, 76 fuel bowsers and 114 (+0) units of specialized equipment.

Key takeaways

How Russian forces were 'deceived' in Ukraine's Kharkiv counteroffensive - The speed and efficiency of Ukraine's counteroffensive in the northeastern region of Kharkiv came as a stunning surprise to the Russian military.

Ukraine went to great lengths to keep its counteroffensive secret, including deliberately deceiving Russian forces about its military maneuvers. RFE/RL spoke to some of the soldiers involved, who described their tactics.

Ukrainian front line infantry were able to explain the strategic and tactical overview of the operation. They knew what they were doing, how it fitted into the overall battle plan, what resources and support they had.

Ukraine's counteroffensive has exposed weaknesses in Russian defences and in five days they seized more land than the Russian forces have captured in Ukraine since April, according to the Institute of the Study of War.

Russia appears to have diverted its best troops to defend Kherson in the south in response to a recent Ukrainian offensive, leaving the area southeast of Kharkiv in the north lightly defended.

And Ukraine amassed forces bolstered by the best US weapons in the north in the previous week, which appears to have been missed by Russian military intelligence.

US missiles reportedly destroyed Russian air defence radars, allowing Ukrainian aircraft to support the northern counteroffensive.

The Ukrainian military encircled Balakliia, almost 70km from Kharkiv, then the rail and logistics hub of Kupiansk and cut off Izium, another key military hub, which Russia seized in late March. The loss of the supply centres left Russia's frontline troops lacking resupplies of ammunition and food.

Ukraine's sudden attack appears to have been devised by Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi, who organised Kyiv's defence after the February invasion.

Syrskyi said more cities would follow at a flag-raising ceremony, accompanied by the national anthem in the small city of Banakliia.

When the Russians amassed approximately 30,000 troops to defend Kherson, Ukraine's US-supplied missiles destroyed bridges along the River Dnipro, leaving the Russians stranded to the west of the river. The Russian forces were therefore incapable of reinforcing Kharkiv to the north.

Russian forces were therefore incapable of reinforcing Kharkiv to the north. The failure of Russian forces to react to the build-up of tanks in the north will probably be debated in the future. It has been reported that Kharkiv was being defended by "slave soldiers" forcibly conscripted and with little will to fight.

There are reports of Russian troops disguising themselves as civilians and Ukrainian forces concentrating on hunting down war criminals, rather than fighting.

There are reports of thousands of Russian prisoners of war.

Deadly explosions hit buildings of Russian occupation officials in Ukraine's Kherson, Luhansk regions -

Deadly explosions have rocked office buildings used by Russian-imposed authorities in the occupied Ukrainian regions of Kherson and Luhansk, killing two separatist prosecutors and other officials.

One explosion earlier today hit the building of the de facto Prosecutor-General's Office of the so-called "Luhansk people's republic" in Ukraine's eastern region of Luhansk, parts of which have been under the control of Kremlin-backed separatists since 2014.

Pro-Russian media reports say separatist de facto Prosecutor-General Sergei Gorenko and his deputy were killed by the blast. According to the reports, an explosive device detonated in Gorenko's office in the regional capital, Luhansk, which is located far from the front line.

In a separate attack, Kirill Stremousov, the Russia-appointed deputy governor of Ukraine's Kherson region, said the building of the region's administration was hit by a missile fired by Ukrainian armed forces on September 16. Kyiv has not commented on the statement.

Another Russian-appointed official in Kherson said the chief of the labor department was wounded and her driver killed in the attack.

Stremousov said the missile hit the building as Russia-imposed leaders of the region's districts, towns, and cities were holding a meeting.

Serhiy Khlan, deputy chief of the Kherson regional council in exile, told RFE/RL that the building was a "decision-making center" for the occupation administration.

He also said a meeting was taking place at the time of the attack, and as a result of the explosion, "many Russian soldiers and collaborators died." He said, however, that there was no official data on the victims.

Kherson has been under Russian armed forces' control since March, just weeks after the Kremlin launched its invasion of Ukraine.

In another attack in southern Ukraine, Russian-installed officials said two local officials had been killed overnight in a "double murder" that they also blamed on Ukraine.

Oleg Boyko, the de facto deputy head of the administration of the port town of Berdyansk, and his wife, Lyudmila, who headed a commission preparing a referendum on whether the Zaporizhzhya region should join Russia, were killed in their garage, the city administration said.

There were no further details on the circumstances of the deaths, which could not be independently verified.

Elite Russian unit 'severely weakened': In its daily intelligence update, the British Defense Ministry says that among the Russian troops who were routed in the Kharkiv region were elements of the elite 1st Guards Tank Army, "one of the most prestigious of Russia's armies, allocated for the defense of Moscow, and intended to lead counter-attacks in the case of a war with NATO."

"1 GTA suffered heavy casualties in the initial phase of the invasion and had not been fully reconstituted prior to the Ukrainian counter-offensive in Kharkiv," the ministry tweeted. "With 1 GTA and other [Western Military District]

formations severely degraded, Russia's conventional force designed to counter NATO is severely weakened. It will likely take years for Russia to rebuild this capability."

The Associated Press reported that Russian troops were "surrendering en masse," citing Ukrainian military intelligence and a Ukrainian presidential adviser who said there were so many prisoners of war that the country was running out of space to accommodate them.

Sanctions

Cheaper oil and Ukraine war are blowing a hole in Russia's finances - There are new signs of strain in the Russian economy as energy prices fall and nearly seven months of war in Ukraine prove increasingly costly.

Russia's budget surplus all but disappeared over the summer, according to data published by the Russian finance ministry this week. At the end of June, the surplus stood at 1.37 trillion rubles (\$23 billion); by the end of August it had fallen to just 137 billion (\$2.3 billion.)

Revenues are under pressure. Oil is traditionally a bigger component of the Russian budget than natural gas, and Brent crude prices — the European benchmark — have fallen about 25% since their peak in early June.

That's a big hit, even before an EU embargo on Russian seaborne oil imports, and a planned G7 price cap come into force in December. And while natural gas prices in Europe remain extraordinarily high, Russia's gas deliveries to the European Union and United Kingdom have dropped by 49% since the beginning of the year, Gazprom said last week.

Spending is also up sharply, both on the military, and on measures to protect the economy from the impact of stinging Western sanctions, according to Janis Kluge, senior associate at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs. He says real-time Russian government data indicate that the budget is now in deficit, adding that the hole in the Kremlin's finances could get much wider as military spending rises.

"Military expenditure was originally planned to be 3.5 trillion rubles this year, but this level was most likely already surpassed in September," Kluge told CNN in emailed comments.

Russian business daily Vedomosti reported Wednesday, citing sources close to the government, that the finance ministry had told government agencies they would need to cut spending by 10% in 2023. Defense spending, however, was set to rise, Vedomosti quoted one source close to the defense ministry as saying.

Speaking on Monday, Russian President Vladimir Putin denied the economy was in trouble, saying the West's "economic blitzkrieg" tactics had failed, and Russia was "confidently coping with external pressures."

Putin met Chinese leader Xi Jinping at a summit in Uzbekistan on Thursday. Trade between the two countries has boomed in the last six months as Russia has sought new markets for its energy and as Chinese exporters have taken advantage of the exodus of Western brands.

Impact

A stunning counter-offensive by Ukraine's armed forces - Russian military vehicles litter the road to Izyum, in Ukraine's north-eastern Kharkiv province. They serve as signposts to the Ukrainian counter-offensive which began on September 5th and liberated virtually the whole province in a matter of days. As you get nearer to the town, which sits atop a strategic hill, the heavy armour turns into a river of metal. There are tanks, artillery pieces and the remains of a tos-1a heavy flamethrower with its rocket pod sheared off. More than a dozen vehicles stand abandoned in one garage alone. Remarkably, much of this graveyard of Russian might seems to have filled up without any fighting. The invaders appeared to have panicked, abandoned their kit to the advancing enemy and fled.

Analysts continue to dissect Ukraine's stunning offensive advances against faltering Russian forces -

Anatomy of a rout: Ukrainian President Zelensky now claims his troops have retaken virtually all of the northern Kharkiv province, reclaimed more than 3,700 square miles, and in some cases driven bedraggled and beaten Russian troops back over the border.

"From the beginning of September until today, our warriors have already liberated more than 6,000 square kilometers of the territory of Ukraine in the east and south," Zelensky said last night. "The movement of our troops continues."

"It's clear they're fighting hard," said a senior U.S. military official at a Pentagon briefing yesterday. "We assess that Russian forces have largely ceded their gains to the Ukrainians and have withdrawn. To the north and east, many of these forces have moved over the border into Russia."

The official said the Ukrainian troops, armed with advanced U.S. weapons and detailed battlefield intelligence, were able to exploit Russian weak points and present Russian commanders "with multiple dilemmas along the forward line of troops," which changed the "dynamics on the battlefield."

"The Ukrainians are conducting operations that are forcing the Russians to make decisions on the battlefield about where they're going to apply their resources," the official said. "And as we've seen, given the challenges that they have, from a sustainment and logistics standpoint, as well as from a command-and-control standpoint, it's a very hard problem to solve."

Russian morale 'in the toilet': A major factor in the collapse of Russia's front line troops is sagging morale after six months of grinding combat in which Russian troops have been poorly led and lack basic supplies, according to the Pentagon.

"Put yourself in the shoes of that Russian who's not getting paid, he's on the front line, doesn't know what he's doing, he hasn't been re-supplied, and he has been hounded for the last six months while living in a trench," said retired Army Lt. Gen. Mark Hertling, former commanding general of Europe for the Seventh Army, on CNN.

"It was a rout," Hertling said. "You have to consider the morale of the forces that's being routed and what I would tell you, the morale of the Russian forces since about March has been in the toilet."

"They've done it masterfully," Hertling said of Ukraine's strategy of targeting holes in Russia's overstretched front lines, "and they've been coordinating, quite frankly, with their European allies and the U.S. to look for weak spots. They've been getting intelligence, where are the Russian forces weak? How can we exploit that? View reconnaissance, find where the holes are, and then push a force through."

Will Putin react in desperation? While the Kremlin pretends everything is going to plan and its "special military operation" is on track to meet all its goals, there's no hiding the humiliating defeat suffered in recent days.

Deputies from 18 municipal districts in Moscow and St. Petersburg have signed a two-sentence petition calling the actions of Russian President Vladimir Putin "detrimental to Russia and its citizens' future," and demanding his resignation, a rare public rebuke that could put them in danger.

The big question now is whether out of desperation Putin will unleash the full force of his military in an attempt to regain the initiative and perhaps save his regime from collapse.

"I have been pretty shocked at how restrained Moscow has been in this war, thinking through all of the pieces of military hardware they could bring to bear," writes Harry Kazianis, president and CEO of Rogue States Project, a national security think tank. "At what point does Putin throw caution to the wind and throw the total weight of Russia's military at Ukraine? At what point does he say the hell with losing fighters and bombers to Kyiv's air defenses and flood the sky with everything he has?"

“Yes, Ukraine has turned the corner, and that is to be celebrated, sure. But this war is far from over, and we should never get excited when a nuclear weapons state starts losing a conflict,” Kazianis warns. “A lot can go wrong, and options for escalation start to look mighty tempting for sure.”

Bolton - Putin 'a lot closer' to using nuclear weapons in Ukraine - Former national security adviser John Bolton said Monday that Russia "is a lot closer" to using nuclear weapons in Ukraine than at any point since invading.

Bolton's claim comes after the recent success by Ukrainian forces in pushing Russian troops out of formerly occupied territory in northern Ukraine, but the former White House adviser argued that Russian President Vladimir Putin will be more inclined to use nuclear weapons to strengthen his position at home than to change the dynamics on the battlefield.

“Where we are now after this Ukraine success in the north is not that point,” Bolton said on WABC radio show *Cats at Night* when asked about the prospect of Putin using nuclear weapons in Ukraine.

“But it is a lot closer to it than we’ve been before,” he added.

The former ambassador to the UN explained that the recent setback Putin's army has faced in Ukraine leaves him weaker domestically than at any point since the start of the war, adding that that weakness leaves him vulnerable.

"Just when you think the Russian military can't perform any worse, they surprise you and they perform worse," he said. "The potential risk of the use of a nuclear weapon is not so much to change the battlefield but to strengthen Putin's position at home."

Bolton added that he believes the only circumstance under which Russia may resort to using nuclear weapons would be if Russian troops begin to flee back across the Russian border and Ukrainian troops follow across the border into Russian territory.

Bolton said there is "no chance" Putin would agree to a ceasefire while his troops are retreating.

Domestically, the Russian president is facing unprecedented criticism from some government officials over the invasion of Ukraine. More than 30 Russian city officials risked prison sentences on Monday to call for Putin's resignation.

UN allows Ukraine's Zelenskiy to prerecord General Assembly address - The UN General Assembly voted to let Ukrainian President Zelenskiy address next week's annual meeting of world leaders in a prerecorded video.

The 193-member General Assembly voted 101-7 with 19 abstentions to allow Zelenskiy to use the format for his address as opposed to requiring him to travel to New York to make his speech in person.

The decision gives Zelenskiy a big political stage at the meeting, which Russian President Vladimir Putin will not attend.

Russia, Belarus, Cuba, North Korea, Eritrea, Nicaragua, and Syria were the seven countries that voted against granting Zelenskiy the exception.

Ukraine's UN mission had argued that Zelenskiy "cannot participate in-person at the meetings of the General Assembly due to ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine."

Dmitry Polyansky, Russia's deputy UN ambassador, said Moscow was always in favor of "in-person diplomacy at the UN," but accused Western countries of a double standard.

Polyansky told the General Assembly the representatives of African countries, who frequently encounter similar difficulties traveling to New York, have been refused. An amendment submitted by Belarus that would have allowed any world leader to address the assembly in a prerecorded video message failed.

Humanitarian

Mass graves - Ukraine's military says they've found a possible mass grave outside of the recently-liberated city of Izyum. So far, they believe they've found 440 bodies in the sandy soil of a pine forest—with impossible-to-miss wooden crosses distributed in staggered intervals over mounds of earth. "If it is confirmed that hundreds were killed by Russian forces," the New York Times reports, "it would be the largest such mass grave to be uncovered in the seven-month-long war."

US, EU express shock over discovery of graves in Ukraine - Western diplomats have reacted with shock to the discovery of a mass burial site and evidence of torture in Izyum days after the city was retaken from Russian forces during Ukraine's successful offensive in the northeastern Kharkiv region.

The diplomats said Russia must be held accountable after officials indicated that most victims at the burial site were civilians.

U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Bridget Brink said on Twitter that the news of the mass grave in Izyum "should reinforce our collective resolve to hold Russia accountable for its atrocities and to support Ukraine in its efforts to defend its homeland and liberate its citizens suffering horribly under Russia's forces."

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Russia was behaving "horrifically" and was likely responsible for war crimes, while EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said the European Union was "deeply shocked" at the discovery of the graves.

"We condemn these atrocities in the strongest possible terms," Borrell said in a statement. "Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has been leaving a trail of blood and destruction across Ukraine."

French President Emmanuel Macron added his voice to the outcry, saying what happened in Izyum were atrocities.

After Russian retreat, witnesses claim torture - In the aftermath of the Ukrainian Armed Forces' rout of Russian troops in the Kharkiv Oblast, witnesses on the ground are beginning to see echoes of the occupation's brutality observed in Bucha back in April after the liberation of that city near Kyiv.

"Sadly, stories about tortures and imprisonment of innocents in occupied towns and villages are becoming a routine," said Anton Gerashchenko, an advisor to the Minister of Internal Affairs of Ukraine, in one of a series of Tweets from the region Tuesday.

GeoPolitics

Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict could impact the Israeli-Russian relationship — especially in Syria - Since the start of the Ukraine war, Israel has been careful to make sure its domestically produced weapons were not used against Russian forces, as part of an ongoing balancing act with Moscow over air space in Syria. But the unexpected, renewed fighting between Azerbaijan and Armenia in recent days is raising eyebrows in Jerusalem.

Azerbaijan is a reliable military customer of Israel, while Armenia's primary military backer has traditionally been Moscow. And clips of Israeli weapons taking out Russian-made equipment is raising concerns in Israel that, as one Israeli defense source put it, Russia will have "big anger" over seeing their defensive equipment exposed.

Israel has been careful to manage its relationship with Russia due to Jerusalem's need for the ability to safely strike inside Syria against Iranian-backed forces. There is a tacit understanding between Israel and Russia that Russian forces

will not fire on Israeli jets and vice versa — although Moscow has occasionally made threats in the past to remind Israel not to get involved in Ukraine.

The Israeli MoD declined to comment on any issue related to the renewed Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict, which has already claimed 155 lives of troops on both sides, raising concerns of potentially more intense hostilities. It represents the largest fighting between the two sides since 2020. (Politico reported today that US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi will travel to Armenia this weekend, more proof that the politics of the region are best described as messy.)

The current round of fighting involves clashes between Russian-made systems operated by the Armenians and Israeli-made systems operated by the Azeris. Two days ago, footage emerged of an IAI-produced Harop heavy loitering weapon system destroying a Russian-made SN -635 radar of an Armenian S-300 air defense system.

Exactly how Russian President Putin might respond, however, isn't clear, Israeli sources acknowledge. Were he to threaten Israel jets above Syria, it would be a challenge but not shut down Israeli operations in that country; the Israeli forces would likely switch more to stand-off weapons launched from the Golan Heights area as opposed to close-in air strikes. However, longer-distance strikes are less reliable, and with the Iran nuclear deal still very much up in the air, Israel is looking to keep pressure on Tehran's proxy forces wherever it can.

The bigger concern would be if the situation escalated, and Russia moved to send forces into Armenia. In such a situation, Russian forces being killed by Israeli-made weapons would be on the table. However, given how stretched Russia's forces are in Ukraine, it seems unlikely any mass force of Russian troops would be shipped to Nagorno-Karabakh. Whether Russia could even send more equipment to reinforce Armenia is unclear, given the supply-chain issues Moscow is facing; that calculus may have played a role in Azerbaijan's decision to restart the conflict.

Moscow wanted to keep a new flare-up in Nagorno-Karabakh from happening again, said Giora Eiland, a retired major general and former head of the Israeli National Security Council. but "this effort failed because Russia is now weak due to the ongoing war in Ukraine.

"This, in my opinion, was the reason for the renewed hostilities," he told Breaking Defense. "This is also a reason for concern in Israel as Russia is being hit in Ukraine and now Israeli weapon systems defeat Russian systems in the war between Armenia, Russia's ally and Azerbaijan."

And while Israeli systems have been deployed by Azerbaijan against Russian systems in Armenia before, the Ukraine situation means "the situation is totally different" in terms of how sensitive Moscow may be to perceptions of its equipment being toppled on the battlefield.

Research from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute shows that Israel accounted for 27 percent of Azerbaijan's major arms imports from 2011–2020. From 2016–2020, Israel accounted for 69 percent of Azerbaijan's major arms imports — a number that represents 17 percent of Israel's arms exports for that same period.

Among the weapons known to be in use by the Azeris: the aforementioned Harop; the Elbit systems SkyStriker loitering weapon system; IAI's Lora, a long-range precision missile; and Israeli-produced Hermes-900 reconnaissance UAVs. All of this was used visibly by the Azeri forces in the 2020 conflict.

Dozens of deaths reported as violence erupts along Kyrgyz-Tajik border despite cease-fire agreement -

Dozens have been killed on both sides in border clashes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan that involved heavy artillery along disputed areas and a reported drone attack on a village in Tajikistan.

The reports about heavy casualties came after the leaders of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan early on September 16 said they had agreed to a cease-fire and ordered their troops to withdraw as reports of clashes raised security concerns in Central Asia.

The Kyrgyz Health Ministry said 24 people were killed and 87 wounded in the clashes. It said early on September 17 that five injured children were among the wounded, and they have been sent to Bishkek for treatment.

The head of Kyrgyzstan's State Committee for National Security, Kamchybek Tashiev, said that the shooting had stopped but the situation remained critical. He said the losses were mainly among military personnel.

The report of deaths and injuries on the Kyrgyz side came after a mosque in the village of Ovchi-Qalacha in Bobojan Ghafurov district was hit by Kyrgyz drone on the evening of September 16, according to multiple sources and a video sent to Radio Ozodi.

Ahror Nematov, a resident of Ovchi-Qalacha, told Radio Ozodi that dozens were killed and injured.

Putin

Putin's Pyrrhus of Epirus moment? - Russian President Vladimir Putin has made his political career on risks and gambles, which taken together have helped him solidify his position as one of the most feared strongmen in international society.

Drawing from his personal experience in the intelligence apparatus, he predicted the slow and minimalistic global response to brutal military actions in Chechnya, Georgia, and Syria. And, emboldened by this lack of international attention, he gambled once again on the annexation of Crimea and the funding of Russian proxies in the Donbas region of Ukraine, sending thousands of troops and FSB agents to destabilize the country. Now once more, faced with international inaction for eight years, Putin gave the green light for a full-fledged invasion of Ukraine – but this time he has received a reality check.

The ongoing Ukraine war has been met with global condemnation, turning Russia into one of the most sanctioned nations on earth. Ukraine was given ample amounts of heavy weaponry to repel the Russian Forces (RF), something the Syrian opposition and Georgians never received.

The war itself has brought immense losses for both Ukraine and Russia, with tens of thousands of casualties. The material losses for the RF have been costly, and it could take many years to rebuild Russia's military to full strength, especially in the event sanctions remain in-place.

Needless to say, the situation isn't going as-planned: Russia's "special military operation" was supposed to end with a quick and decisive victory for the Kremlin, displaying Russian military prowess vis-a-vis NATO and instilling fear in those who oppose Putin's foreign policy – but in reality, the exact opposite has taken place.

NATO membership has expanded to Finland and Sweden, hampering the future freedom of movement of Russia's Baltic Sea Fleet. The Ukrainian armed forces are being trained extensively in Britain, with other European nations providing training as well and, aside from the energy dispute, you could argue that Putin has united NATO in a way not seen since the aftermath of the September 11 attacks of 2001.

After the first few weeks of disorganization after the war broke out, the Russian military successfully consolidated forces in eastern Ukraine, achieving major victories in Luhansk and around the Izium axis, though these early victories came at a massive price.

As of August, both the Pentagon and UK Defense Ministry have estimated thousands of Russian casualties over the past six months of the invasion. That is thousands more casualties than the entire Red Army took in ten years of war in Afghanistan.

What Putin dubbed a "special military operation" has turned into the bloodiest conflict for Russians since WWII, and the effects are starting to be felt at home.

The Wagner Group, a mercenary organization shrouded in allegations of war crimes and closely affiliated with the Russian security apparatus, has reportedly been stepping up recruitment efforts in Africa, Central Asia, and even Russian prison cells. A lack of manpower has become a major issue as the Kremlin refuses to fully mobilize the Russian population. This is likely because the country's demographic outlook is not favorable: with an aging population and many adult Russians fleeing abroad, it no longer has the kind of favorable demographics that the Red Army once did.

The invasion is not just having effects at home but also across Russia's 'near abroad.' As manpower and logistical coordination become intractable issues on the Ukraine front, Moscow's military and geopolitical might has started to wain elsewhere.

In May, Russia recalled several units from Syria to Ukraine, reflecting manpower issues in active-duty forces. This was predictably beneficial for President Erdogan of Turkey, who has announced he will start another offensive in Syria to flush out the SDF. Despite Putin attempting to persuade Erdogan to not push ahead in Syria, Ankara reaffirmed its willingness to conduct operations along the Turkish-Syrian border.

Israel has also taken advantage as well, targeting Iran-backed militias as the Russian army struggles to maintain order on the ground. Likewise, several Russian units were withdrawn from Georgia to Ukraine.

In the Caucasus, tensions have flared between Azerbaijan and Armenia, particularly over the status of the Trilateral Agreement which Yerevan signed when it capitulated in the 2020 War. Baku looks to use their new gas deal with the EU and overextension of Russian forces to forcibly enact the agreement; Moscow arguably benefited from the Armenian capitulation, which grew its sphere of influence in the Caucasus in a way not seen since the USSR.

Russian mercenaries in Africa, who took advantage of the power vacuums on the continent and acted as a counterweight against Western influence, have come under increasing scrutiny. The Wagner Group has been reportedly implicated in massacres in Mali, Libya, and the Central African Republic, and has been accused of pillaging gold in Sudan to finance the war in Ukraine. They have also suffered casualties from al-Qaeda attacks in Mali, stretching their contractors thin.

Recently, Putin signed a decree to increase his active-duty armed forces by another 137,000 troops. This will be difficult to achieve, as Russian demographics have changed dramatically such that the country will likely have a problem sustaining long-term conflicts. What is ironic about the 137,000 increase is that it is near the number of casualties Ukraine has estimated Russia has sustained since February. According to the Kyiv Independent, over 50,000 Russians have killed with an estimated 90,000 wounded and missing. Thus, the decree by Putin could very much indicate Russia's overall losses during the war.

As Russian military power continues to wane, it has given the opportunity for countries like Kazakhstan to break away from Russian influence. The staggering casualties could also lead to pressure against Lukashenko's regime in Belarus, which only survives on unconditional backing by the Kremlin. There has also been growing signs of dissatisfaction by prominent figures in Russia. Between the ultranationalists who want a full mobilization and have criticized Putin for his handling of the war and potential liberals in Russia, who may secretly attempt to negotiate behind his back to end the conflict.

Ukraine's recent lightning offensive in the Kharkiv Oblast has further demoralized the Russian military and general population. The operation didn't just catch Russia off-guard; even Ukrainian and Western military officials have been shocked at its speed and success in routing the RF from the Kharkiv region and into Donbas, with some forces even retreating across the border into Belgorod.

For weeks, the ZSU amassed forces in Kharkiv while the Russian garrison requested forces, only to be ignored due to either forces being stretched too thin, reserves being sent to Kherson, or general strategic incompetence at general command. For several days, the Russian MOD refused to comment on the offensive and, on the same day Ukraine

liberated the key city of Iziium, Putin was opening the world's largest roller coaster as if everything was normal. Putin's seemingly blasé attitude at times risks further fueling the growing discontent amongst Russian military officials, politicians, and analysts over how the war is being conducted.

Vladimir Putin may have found himself in a 'Pyrrhus of Epirus moment,' where years of embarking on risky military ventures may have finally caught up to him. (Geopoliticalmonitor.com).

Containment

US Adds \$675M in Arms, \$2B in Financial Aid for Ukraine, Region – The Biden administration has approved a \$675 million package of arms for Ukraine plus \$1 billion in financial aid for the besieged country and \$1 billion in aid for 18 of its regional neighbors, officials said Thursday.

The announcement was made before the fifth meeting of the Defense Contact Group, a group of nations committed to providing support for Ukraine, held here on Thursday.

The latest package includes more Guided Multiple Launch Rocket Systems, or GLMRS; 105mm howitzers, artillery ammunition, AGM-88 HARM air-to-surface anti-radiation missiles, Humvees, armored ambulances, anti-tank systems, small arms, and more, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin told reporters here. It is funded through the president's drawdown authority.

U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken announced separately in Kyiv that the U.S. would contribute long-term foreign military financing to help Ukraine and its neighbors develop their militaries: "\$1 billion to bolster the security of Ukraine and \$1 billion for 18 of Ukraine's regional neighbors," according to a Pentagon statement.

According to a DOD statement, the package includes:

- Ammunition for High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (or HIMARS)
- Four 105mm howitzers and 36,000 105mm artillery rounds
- High-speed Anti-Radiation Missiles
- 100 armored High-Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicles, or Humvees
- 1.5 million rounds of small-arms ammunition
- More than 5,000 anti-armor systems
- 1,000 155 mm rounds of Remote Anti-Armor Mine, or RAAM, Systems
- Additional grenade launchers and small arms
- 50 armored medical treatment vehicles
- Night vision devices and other field equipment

The United States first sent M777 howitzers to Ukraine in April. The weapons have helped Ukraine arrest and partially roll back Russian advances. "Now, we're seeing the demonstrable success of our common efforts on the battlefield," Austin said. "Russian forces continue to cruelly bombard Ukrainian cities and civilians with missiles and artillery fire. But Ukrainian forces have begun their counteroffensive in the south of their country. And they are integrating the capabilities that we all have provided to help themselves to fight and reclaim their sovereign territory."

Austin also highlighted the other arms contributions of the Defense Contact Group, including a second round of M270 Multiple Launch Rocket Systems from the United Kingdom, bringing their total contribution to \$2.6 billion in weapons and other aid.

Over the summer, he said, "Poland transferred three battalions of 155-millimeter self-propelled howitzers to Ukraine." Other recent contributions from group members include heavy armor from Slovakia and North Macedonia.

US Should Place Multiyear Munitions Orders to Protect Supply, Pentagon Arms Chief Says - Meanwhile, service officials are working with Pentagon leaders on 18-month plans to supply Ukraine -

The U.S. Defense Department needs to sign long-term deals with manufacturers of the missiles and bombs heavily needed by U.S. forces and allies, the Pentagon's top weapons buyer said Wednesday.

Multiyear contracts could persuade weapons makers to improve and expand their factories, said Bill LaPlante, defense undersecretary for acquisition and sustainment.

"What really matters is contracts," LaPlante said at a conference sponsored by Defense News. "We buy munitions and many of these things in a single year."

But the Pentagon does buy some of its most expensive weapons—warships and fighter jets—in bulk across several years. These long-term contracts typically save 5 to 15 percent over annual contracts, according to the Congressional Research Service.

"We do multi-year contracts for ships [and] we do it for airplanes, [but] we don't do it for these other munitions," LaPlante said. "We need to do it because that'll stabilize the supply chain. That'll send a signal to industry to say: 'They're in it for the long haul and we can make the commitment'."

The U.S. has pledged billions of dollars' worth of weapons to the Ukrainian military, which has been trying to fend off a Russian invasion since February. The Pentagon has pledged to resupply its own stockpiles and those of its allies, but many of those deals haven't materialized yet.

The Pentagon needs to "shift gears" to meet the new demand to resupply weapons being donated to Ukraine and prepare for possible conflicts with China, but "the clutch isn't engaged yet," Lockheed Martin CEO Jim Taiclet said during a July earnings call.

"The 'clutch engaged' means there are contracts in place," Taiclet said.

LaPlante said he's spoken to Taiclet and other CEOs in the past month about what he sees in weapon demands in Ukraine and elsewhere around the globe "so that they can have a sight picture so they can start making their investments." Congress ultimately has the final say about whether the Pentagon can sign multi-year contracts with companies, he said.

"We in the department and with the Hill, need to give a better plan" to industry, LaPlante said. "This is what I think they're asking for and I agree with it."

As it's unclear how long the war in Ukraine will last, U.S. military leaders are trying to determine the types of weapons and equipment that will be needed in the coming months. Navy Undersecretary Erik Raven said the Office of the Secretary of Defense is working with the military services to better understand "what might be needed 6, 12, 18 months down the road in terms of these capabilities."

Army wants to double or triple some arms production as Ukraine war continues -

Army leaders are working to dramatically increase the production of critical munitions and equipment drained from service arsenals to aid Ukraine in recent months.

With Congress' support, they are working to triple domestic production of the 155mm howitzer rounds and at least double production of Guided Multiple Launch Rocket Systems and High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems launchers in the next few years, said Doug Bush, the Army's acquisition chief.

"All that is underway, and will all be foundational to supporting Ukraine and its conflict, but also replenishing ourselves and setting us up to support our allies," Bush told reporters Wednesday.

Ukrainians have been fighting the Russian invasion of their country for six months and their successful counteroffensive in the northeast recently has analysts in Europe calling for more support through weapons and aid. The Army has responded to the demand for weapons, Bush said, and is preparing to support the war effort into the future.

Ukraine's Supporters Aim to Create Long-Term Aid Mechanisms - Urgent needs and long-term support for Ukraine were on the agenda at a Thursday meeting of the NATO secretary general, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and officials from various countries supporting Kyiv, two senior defense officials said. according to two senior defense officials here.

"You're going to hear about a [United Kingdom]-created...donor fund so that countries that want to execute procurement contracts to support Ukraine long term will have access to a pool of money, and the Ukrainians will have access to a pool of money for that longer term procurement. And you're going to also hear from NATO, thinking about longer-term sustainment for a country that is a NATO partner," one of the officials told reporters.

"What you've seen with our assistance is we've also started to invest in longer-term capability needs with Ukrainians. And that's where you saw our \$3 billion Ukraine security assistance initiative package, unveiled earlier in August, turning that corner to look at the long term investments," a second official said. Ukraine will continue to need both advanced technologies such as Switchblade drones and reliable access to lower-tech necessities like 155 mm artillery ammunition among a variety of other military needs, according to the official.

Joint Chiefs Chairman Gen. Mark Milley has undertaken an analysis of how the United States can best provide longer-term support for Ukraine, CNN reported Wednesday.

The officials said the challenge is to support Ukraine now, as it attempts to retake territory in the southern portion of the country, while establishing funding and other support mechanisms for the years ahead.

In fiscal year 2022, U.S. assistance to Ukraine has included appropriations of \$12.55 billion "to replenish Department of Defense (DOD) equipment stocks sent to Ukraine via presidential drawdown authority," as well as \$6.3 billion for the Defense Department's Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative and \$4.65 billion in foreign military financing, according to a recent Congressional Research Service report.

White House Asks Congress For \$13.7B for Ukraine - The administration has used about three-quarters of the \$40 billion Congress authorized in May.

President Joe Biden is asking Congress to authorize an additional \$13.7 billion to help Ukraine, the Office of Management and Budget announced Friday.

The request includes \$11.7 billion for security and economic assistance, plus an additional \$2 billion to help cut energy costs that have been driven up in part by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. If approved, it would bring the total amount of Ukraine aid authorized by Congress since the war began in February to more than \$67 billion.

Congress has not yet passed a budget for fiscal 2023, which begins Oct. 1, and is preparing to consider a continuing resolution to keep the government funded past Sept. 30. The White House is asking lawmakers to consider the supplemental request for additional Ukraine money alongside the continuing resolution.

"We have rallied the world to support the people of Ukraine as they defend their democracy, and we cannot allow that support to Ukraine to run dry," the OMB post says. "The people of Ukraine have inspired the world, and the administration remains committed to supporting the Ukrainian people as they continue to stand resolute and display extraordinary courage in the face of Russia's full-scale invasion."

In March, Congress approved \$13.6 billion for its first military and humanitarian aid package to Ukraine. By the end of April, the administration had exhausted that funding, and asked Congress for an additional \$33 billion to provide military, economic, and humanitarian support.

GeoMilitary

Mysterious J-20 fighter-like shapes appear at remote Chinese airbase – A row of unusual fighter aircraft has appeared at a Chinese airbase. There has already been speculation that these could be full-scale decoys or mock-ups of the Chengdu J-20 stealth fighter, China's latest in-service combat jet, but their exact function is unclear. Indeed, certain aspects of their appearance raise even more questions, since they seem to be only loosely based on the J-20, if at all.



The eight 'airframes' are seen in a recent update to the Google Earth database, dated July 2022, which we were alerted to by Twitter user @foolsball. The location is Lintao Air Base, a relatively obscure facility that's located northeast of Lanzhou, in Gansu Province, north-central China.

This airbase is normally home to J-7H fighters of the 18th Air Regiment, 13 of which can also be seen on the same flight line on the north of the facility, covered in distinctive red/pink colored tarpaulins. There have been reports in the past that the base is due to receive J-11 Flanker fighters, to replace the J-7s, but there is no immediate evidence of that such a conversion has occurred yet.

Whatever these 'shapes' were doing at Lintao, their presence there seems to have been brief. Further examination of satellite imagery shows that they appeared around July 19 this year and were gone as of September 9.

However, it is not impossible that what we have seen at Lanzhou does have some connection to a still-secret combat aircraft or drone program. After all, there have been previous examples of mysterious fighter-like shapes appearing at Chinese airbases. Last October, The War Zone examined an unusual delta-wing, tailless airframe that was spotted at the Chengdu Aircraft Corporation's flight test airfield.

China's Li Zhanshu offers a very bold endorsement of Russia's war in Ukraine - Offering quiet support to President Vladimir Putin since his renewed invasion of Ukraine in February, China is growing increasingly uncomfortable as Russia's war effort struggles.

As the war drags on, China risks alienating European powers that now regard Russia as the preeminent threat to their security. Such alienation poses a major threat to President Xi Jinping's interests in that it risks undermining his long-term strategy to degrade and eventually displace the Western alliance structure. This displacement is the necessary ingredient for China's emergence as the new global hegemon.

It is understandable, then, that top Chinese officials have cautiously played down the war in Ukraine wherever possible — until now, it seems.

Meeting Putin and Russian legislators at an economic forum in Vladivostok last week, a top Chinese official endorsed Russia's war in Ukraine. As reported by the New York Times, a Russian parliamentary readout of the meeting records that Li Zhanshu stated that "China understands and supports Russia on issues that represent its vital interests, in

particular on the situation in Ukraine." Li is said to have added, "On the Ukrainian issue, we see how they have put Russia in an impossible situation. And in this case, Russia made an important choice and responded firmly."

Li isn't just some ambassador who got over his skis. He's chairman of the very powerful Communist Party Politburo Standing Committee and thus a member of Xi's inner circle. His words carry weight. It is striking, then, to see such a powerful Chinese official offering such unrestrained support for Moscow's war. But Li wasn't done. He apparently also told the Russian parliamentarians that the Chinese government "fully understand[s] the necessity of all the measures taken by Russia aimed at protecting its key interests. We are providing our assistance."

Bold stuff.

After all, alongside China's participation in Russia's Vostok 2022 military exercises, these words offer a fundamental rebuke to European leaders, such as Macron of France, who believe they can have European stability and also eat China's economic cake. China has banked on using its vast investments into sclerotic European economies to earn Europe's silence on geopolitical concerns over which Beijing is in conflict with the United States. But with Europe's attention evermore drawn to Russia's massive land war on its eastern flank, China's genocide against the Uyghurs and repression of Hongkongers, and China's arrogant disdain for European democracies, Xi's gambit is an increasingly dangerous one.

Waging trade wars against EU members like Lithuania while endorsing Russia's war just south of that nation, Xi may push erstwhile partners like Macron and German Chancellor Scholz into a corner where they cannot help but endorse a tougher EU policy toward China — Macron and Scholz's alternative being to tolerate Beijing's aggression and thus doom the European project by showing its vulnerable members that they can rely only on non-EU democracies like the U.S., Britain, and Australia for true support.

If that happens, Xi's master plan for global economic and political hegemony will flounder even as rising domestic challenges make its speedy development evermore crucial. Li the bold, indeed. (Washington Examiner).