

Conflict Update # 74

May 29th, 2022

Conflict Assessment

Key Takeaways

Russian forces continued attempts to take full control of Severodonetsk.

Russian forces continued offensives southeast of Izyum but did not make any confirmed advances toward Slovyansk.

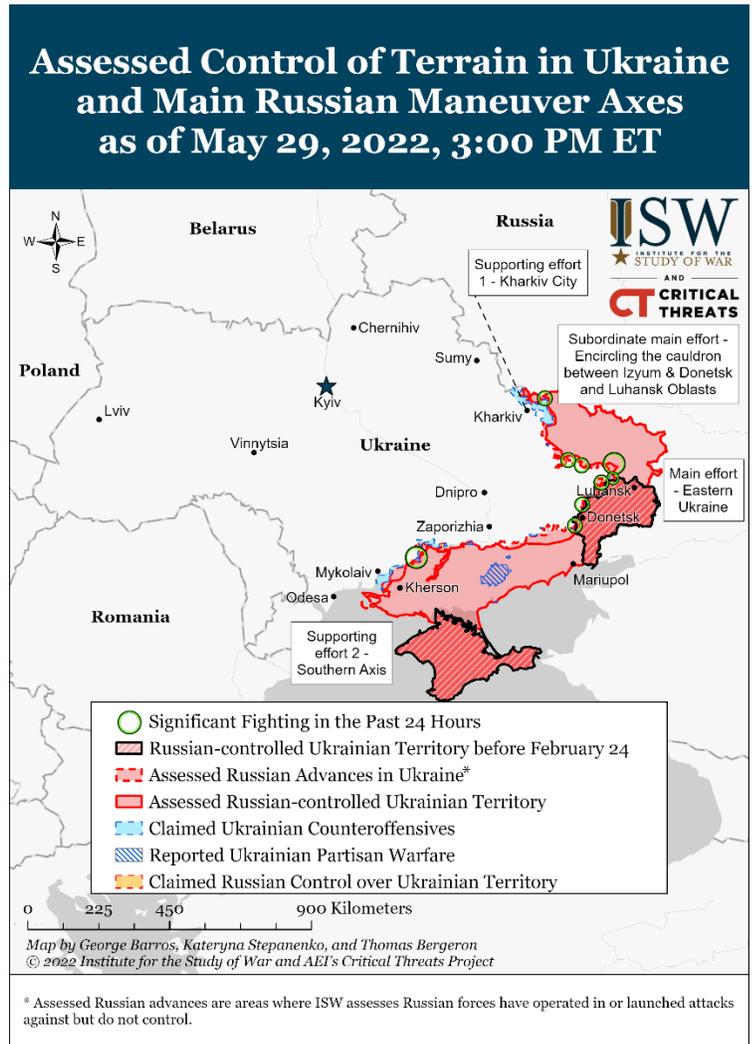
Russian forces continued offensive operations to cut Ukrainian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) northeast of Bakhmut and appear unlikely to attempt to directly assault the city.

The Ukrainian counteroffensive in northwestern Kherson Oblast has forced Russian troops to take up defensive positions and will likely disrupt Russian efforts to effectively dig in and consolidate control of occupied areas along the Southern Axis.

Subordinate Main Effort—Southern Kharkiv, Donetsk, Luhansk Oblasts

Russian forces continued offensive operations southeast of Izyum toward Slovyansk but did not make any confirmed advances on May 29. They unsuccessfully attacked Bohorodychne, about 30 km southeast of Izyum. And shelled Ukrainian positions southwest of Izyum around Husarivka, Velyka Komyshevakha, and Virnopillya, and to the southeast of Izyum around Dovehenke and Raihorodok. Russian efforts south of Izyum have likely shifted from being a key effort to a subordinate action increasingly intended to support offensive operations around Lyman. Advances in both southeastern Kharkiv Oblast and northern Donetsk Oblast are now subordinate to the dominant Russian effort in the Donbas, the encirclement of Severodonetsk.

Russian forces continued ground assaults against Severodonetsk itself on May 29, though ISW cannot confirm any specific advances. The Ukrainian General Staff (UGS) stated today that Russian troops intend to encircle Severodonetsk and Lysychansk and cut the main Ukrainian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) in the area, as ISW has previously assessed. Russian forces additionally attempted to advance northward toward Severodonetsk from Bobrove and Ustynivka. Head of Luhansk Regional State Administration Serhiy Haidai emphasized that Ukrainian troops are still in



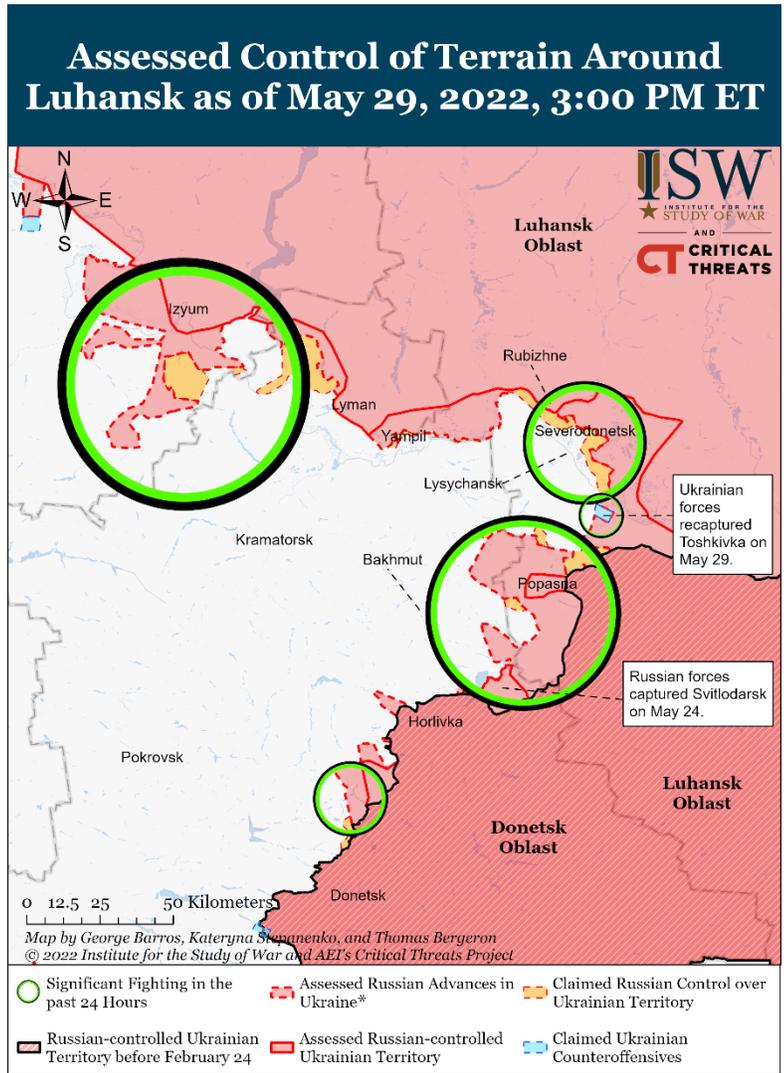
control of Severodonetsk, denying Chechen Leader Ramzan Kadyrov's false claims that Severodonetsk is under full Russian control as of May 28. Haidai additionally claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted a limited counterattack and drove a Russian grouping out of Toshkivka, which may put pressure on Russian operations in the vicinity of Popasna.

Russian forces continued offensive operations to push westward of the Luhansk Oblast administrative border and cut Ukrainian GLOCs northeast of Bakhmut, rather than advancing toward Bakhmut itself, on May 29. The UGS noted that Russian troops are fighting around Volodymyrivka, Vasylivka, Komyshevakha, and Myronivka those troops likely intend to reach and block the Bakhmut-Lysychansk T1302 highway. Russian forces around Donetsk City continued unsuccessful assaults around Avdiivka. The UGS noted that Russian troops intensified air, mortar, artillery, and rocket strikes in western Donetsk Oblast around Kurakhove on May 29. UGS has not reported any Russian offensive operations around Kurakhove since May 16, and this report may indicate Russian efforts to renew offensive operations in this sector to support stalled Russian operations towards Zaporizhia.

Supporting Effort #1—Kharkiv City - Russian forces focused on maintaining their positions north of Kharkiv City and fired on surrounding settlements on May 29. UGS stated that Russian forces fired on Cherkasy Tyshky, Ruski Tyshky, Petrivka, and Ternova to deter further Ukrainian advances toward the international border. A Russian Telegram channel claimed that Ukrainian forces took heavy losses during fighting in Ternova and that Russian troops have subsequently stopped Ukrainian pushes toward the international border.

Supporting Effort #2—Southern Axis - The ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive in northwestern Kherson Oblast did not make any confirmed advances on May 29, and Russian forces focused on maintaining their defensive positions and launching limited attacks to regain lost ground. UGS stated that Russian forces took up defensive positions in Kostromka, a settlement in northwestern Kherson Oblast within 10 km of the Kherson-Mykolaiv oblast border. Reporting by Russian and Ukrainian sources indicates that Ukrainian troops likely conducted a counter-offensive south of the village of Davydiv Brid and east of the Inhulets River on May 28. UGS noted that Russian forces are attempting to recapture positions in Andriivka, Bilohirka, and Bila Krynytsia, indicating the Ukrainian counteroffensive south of Davydiv Brid recaptured these positions on the Kherson-Mykolaiv border on May 28. Russian forces are reportedly fighting around Vysokopillya, Dobryanka, and Kochubeivka, all settlements in northern Kherson Oblast. Russian forces conducted artillery strikes against Mykolaiv and Zaporizhzhia Oblasts and a missile strike against Kryvyi Rih.

Activity in Russian-occupied areas - Russian forces continued to consolidate their administrative control of occupied regions on May 29. Russian occupation forces are reportedly shipping looted rolled steel and metal to Russia through the Port of Mariupol.[22] The Russian-backed head of Kherson's civil-military administration, Kirill Stremousov, told Reuters



that the decision for Kherson to join Russia will likely occur next year and walked back his previous statements that Kherson would join Russia automatically by stating there will be a “referendum.”[23] Stremousov said that the occupation administration is focusing on restoring order in Kherson before making decisions on a potential referendum to join the Russian Federation, indicating that Ukrainian partisan activities may be disrupting ongoing efforts to consolidate full Russian administrative control of Kherson Oblast.

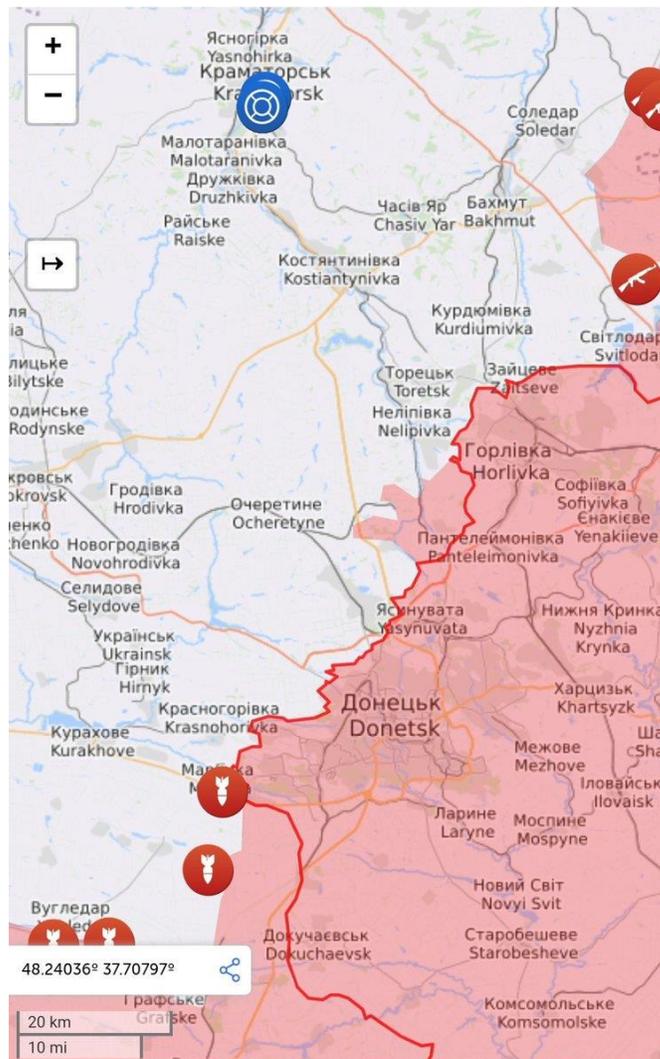
New reports confirmed that Ukrainian forces conducted a successful limited counterattack near the Kherson-Mykolaiv oblast border on May 28, forcing Russian forces onto the defensive.

This Ukrainian counterattack is likely intended to disrupt Russian efforts to establish strong defensive positions along the Southern Axis. While the Ukrainian counterattack does not appear likely to retake substantial territory in the near term, it will likely disrupt Russian operations and potentially force Russia to deploy reinforcements to the Kherson region, which is predominantly held by sub-standard units. Ukrainian counterattacks may additionally slow Russian efforts to consolidate administrative control of occupied southern Ukraine.

Frontlines between Mykolaiv and Kherson in southern Ukraine have remained relatively stable for weeks despite heavy bombardment and airstrikes by both sides. Saturday’s new offensive reportedly put Ukrainian forces across the Inhulets River near Bilohirka, a village about 30-40 miles northeast of Kherson.

A breakout from here could conceivably threaten Russian-held crossings over the lower Dnieper River at the Nova Kakhovka dam and the Antonovskiy Bridge on Kherson’s east side.

The Ukrainian Air Force claimed that amid the operation, a Ukrainian MiG-29 shot down a Russian Su-35S while providing fighter escort for a pair of Ukrainian Su-25s hitting targets in Kherson Oblast.



The Su-35S has far superior beyond-visual-range capabilities to Ukraine’s MiG-29s and it also is superior in a dogfight. In fact, the Su-35 is the most maneuverable operational fighter on earth at slow speeds thanks to its 3D thrust vectoring. Technological and performance advantages are just two aspects of air-to-air combat though. Every scenario is different, with situational awareness, supporting sensor capabilities, pilot expertise, terrain, atmospheric conditions, and luck all playing into the equation, among other factors.

Russian forces continued to assault Severodonetsk on May 29 but did not make any confirmed advances; Russian progress in intense urban combat will likely be slow. The Russian campaign in eastern Ukraine—which previously aimed to capture the entirety of Luhansk and Donetsk Oblasts—is now focused almost entirely on Severodonetsk. Russian troops are unlikely to be able to conduct multiple simultaneous operations and will likely further deprioritize advances southeast of Izyum and west of Lyman in favor of concentrating available forces on Severodonetsk in the coming days.

Russia Probably Has Not Used AI-Enabled Weapons in Ukraine, but That Could Change - there is little reason to believe that Russia is using AI-enabled autonomous weapons in Ukraine, yet. That is the good news. The bad news is that, if Russia's unlawful war in Ukraine drags on, Russia has the intent and likely has the means to deploy autonomous weapons, with or without advanced AI.

Russian reconnaissance and reconnaissance-strike UAVs will receive a digital catalog with electronic [optical and infrared] images of military equipment adopted in NATO countries. This will allow them to automatically identify it on the battlefield and create a map of the location of enemy positions directly onboard the device, which will be broadcast to the command post. . . . It is formed due to neural network training algorithms, which makes it possible to accurately determine the samples of equipment in a wide variety of environmental conditions, including with a short exposure (the technique is visible for several seconds or less), as well as when only part of the sample falls into the field of view of the drone—when, for example, only part of any combat vehicle is visible from cover.

As mentioned above, collecting adequate training data remains a significant hurdle for many military AI development projects. While the invasion of Ukraine has been a disaster in many ways for the Russian military, NATO has provided weapons and equipment to Ukraine that offers the best opportunity yet to collect operational training data for new AI models and more diverse military AI applications. The anonymous quote suggests that Russia's military is taking this opportunity seriously.

Missiles and Escorts: Unblocking Ukraine's Ports on the Black Sea - Russia's three-month blockade of Ukraine's Black Sea ports has kept tens of millions of tons of grains and other food products from reaching their destinations. This is contributing to a growing human calamity that extends far beyond the immediate region, with one estimate indicating the world has only ten weeks of stored wheat reserves left in warehouses. Talks are underway to allow these ships to pass, but they will have a limited effect unless Ukraine is able to fully defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity at sea. To do so, the country critically needs to develop a sea denial capability. First of all, Ukraine needs to acquire somewhere around 100 anti-ship missiles to deter the Russian surface fleet involved in the sea blockade.

Another indispensable capability for Ukraine is to neutralize Russian coastal missile systems based in Crimea using weapons systems like the West's MGM-140 Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS), fired from a HIMARS or M270 MLRS launcher capable of hitting targets at a range of 300 kilometers. An optimal solution, from a security perspective, would be the establishment of a maritime "humanitarian corridor" through the territorial waters of the western Black Sea countries, all the way to the Turkish Straits. However, this requires cooperation among several Black Sea countries, or even with the UN or NATO.

Russia's Space Satellite Problems and the War in Ukraine - Although Moscow has 102 military satellites in orbit, the efficiency of its battlefield reconnaissance, surveillance, targeting, and command-and-control systems still seems to be lower than one would have expected for a country with a space program and military-industrial complex ostensibly as advanced as Russia's. Despite efforts to improve its space capabilities over the last two decades, it has failed to surpass technological and operational benchmarks met by the United States in early 2000s.

Today, Russia has only 12 satellites for intelligence gathering (the US used 30 in 2003 for its war in Iraq), 45 for communications satellites (of which 30 are beyond their planned life-span), and their data transfer speeds are three decades behind the US. Thus, Russian forces have been unable to make full use of space-based capabilities to destroy Ukraine's military infrastructure or eliminate Ukrainian aviation and air/missile-defense systems. When it comes to inadequate reconnaissance and targeting, Russian troubles apparently hinge on a shortage of open optical and synthetic aperture radar satellites. Whereas, its deficient command, control and communications (C3) systems are the result of having too few satellite communication channels and terminals.

Russian shelling of Sievierodonetsk has destroyed 'entire critical infrastructure' of city Zelenskiy says - Russian shelling has destroyed all of the critical infrastructure in the Ukrainian city of Sievierodonetsk, President Volodymyr Zelenskiy said today, describing the taking of the city as Russia's "principal aim" right now.

"As a result of Russian strikes on Sievierodonetsk, all the city's critical infrastructure is destroyed... More than two-thirds of the city's housing stock is destroyed," Zelenskiy said in a televised speech.

"Taking Sievierodonetsk is the principal aim of the occupying contingents," he added.

Ukraine has said its forces still control Severodonetsk amid street fighting with Russian troops, during what Mr Zelenskiy called an "indescribably difficult" defence of government-held areas of the Donbas region.

With air, missile and artillery power that is superior to those of the Ukrainian military, Russian forces have slowly advanced in Donbas since refocusing their efforts on the region after being pushed back from Kyiv and Kharkiv, Ukraine's two main cities.

"All the efforts of the Russian Federation are now focused on capturing the Luhansk region. The city of Severodonetsk is their priority," said Serhiy Haidai, governor of Luhansk, which with neighbouring Donetsk makes up the coal-rich industrial area known as Donbas.

Dozens of houses still under water in village flooded to hamper Russian troops - Months after Ukrainian forces intentionally flooded the village of Demydiv to hamper the advance of Russian troops, dozens of homes remain underwater. "At this time, about 50 houses in the village of Demydiv remain flooded," regional governor Oleksiy Kuleba wrote in a post on the Telegram messaging app.

"People are understanding of the situation. We, in turn, make every effort to resolve the issue," he added.

Shortly after Russia launched its invasion in February, the Ukrainian military destroyed key bridges and roads leading to the capital Kyiv in an effort to thwart Russian troops.

The tactics also included opening a dam on the Irpin River, purposefully flooding Demydiv.

Water surged into the centuries-old village, flooding thousands of acres of fields as well. The move has been credited with preventing Russian tanks from reaching Ukraine's capital.

Although the village was partially evacuated, some residents have now returned after Russia turned its military operations away from the capital and to eastern Ukraine.

Peace Talks

Putin Says Russia Open to More Talks With Ukraine - Russian President Vladimir Putin told his German and French counterparts that Moscow was open to resuming negotiations with Ukraine, but that the West's supply of weapons to the Kyiv government could exacerbate the crisis, the Kremlin said Saturday.

The comments came a day after U.S. officials signaled that the Biden administration is likely to approve the transfer of advanced, long-range rocket systems to Ukraine that the Kyiv government says are necessary to stop Russian advances in the Donbas region in the country's east, where fighting has been intense.

Zelenskyy rules out 'military means' to regain all lost territory - Ukrainian President Zelenskyy said not all lost territory to Russia since 2014, such as Crimea, could be retaken militarily due to the high human cost.

"The situation is very complicated, especially in those areas in the Donbas and Kharkiv region, where the Russian army is trying to squeeze at least some result for themselves," Zelenskyy said in his Saturday video address.

Russian forces stepped up their assault on Severodonetsk on Saturday after claiming to have captured the nearby rail hub of Lyman.

"But our defenses are holding up. It's indescribably difficult there," Zelenskyy said

The Ukrainian leader also said he didn't believe all the land seized by Russia since 2014, which includes Crimea, could be recaptured by force.

"I do not believe that we can restore all of our territory by military means. If we decide to go that way, we will lose hundreds of thousands of people," he said.

He was, however, adamant that "Ukraine will get everything back. Everything."

Impacts

Worshippers drove Ukrainian Orthodox Church's break with Moscow - Ordinary members of Ukraine's Orthodox church branch, until now loyal to Moscow, drove the decision to break ranks with the Russian leadership, its spokesman told the French news agency AFP.

"There was a need for this, a demand in church society," Archbishop Kliment said.

The Council of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church disagreed with the position that Patriarch Kirill I, the leader of the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church, had taken on the war and has made a formal break with the hierarchy in Moscow.

Kirill is a staunch supporter of Russian President Vladimir Putin and has spoken out in support of Russia's invasion of Ukraine several times.

Kliment said the situation was clear: "The commandment 'thou shall not kill' has no other interpretations."

"It is difficult for me to (understand) the explanation or silence of the representatives of the Moscow patriarchate on the tragedy that is happening today," he added.

Putin

Why is Putin silent about attacks on Russian territory? - Numerous reports have circulated in the media of "mysterious" fires and explosions in Russia since the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian war began. Whether or not any or all of these incidents can be satisfactorily attributed to Ukrainian attacks, the main mystery is Russia's muted response to them, as they would seem to be an excellent propaganda tool. Yet Russian media and officials do not always report on these events, and when they do they tend to downplay them. This seems paradoxical. President Vladimir Putin started the current war essentially without a legal justification. His only explanation was the hypothetical threat Ukraine might pose to Russia if it joined NATO. Now, acts of aggression against Russian territory could easily be taken as a *casus belli* and rationale for declaring mass mobilization. But Putin is not doing that. And of all the possible reasons, one is most likely. Namely, enemy attacks on Russian soil would demand a declaration of war and general mobilization; but this could trigger a NATO response, and Putin and his generals, despite their belligerent rhetoric, fear the North Atlantic Alliance. The only trump card in the Kremlin's deck is nuclear weapons, but this bluff is wearing thin.

Russia's 'top priority' is victory in Ukraine's Donbas - The Kremlin's "top priority" is the "liberation" of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has said.

In an interview with France's TF1 Television, Lavrov said the war was not about the "annexation" of eastern regions of Ukraine but "restoring their territorial integrity."

He spoke as Russian forces stepped up their offensive in Donbas over the weekend.

Lavrov said that the path for a return to peace talks had not been cut, but that Moscow's objective was still to "demilitarize Ukraine" so that there are "no longer any weapons on its territory that pose a threat to the Russian Federation."

Speaking about Western sanctions on Russia, Lavrov said he thought they were "prepared a long time ago" and were "unlikely to be lifted in the future."

"The speed with which they were imposed, and their magnitude certainly show that they were not written overnight," he said.

The foreign minister also denied that Russian President Vladimir Putin is ill, saying, "I don't think sane people can distinguish any symptoms of disease in this man."

Sanctions

400,000–500,000 tons - Quantity of grain, worth approximately \$100 million, Russia is believed to have stolen from Ukraine during the course of the war. The Russian navy is additionally blockading more than 20 million tons of foodstuffs at Ukrainian Black Sea ports

How to Break Russia's Blockade of Ukraine's Black Sea Ports - Putin's illegal actions are destroying Kyiv's economy and causing global hunger. The US and allies need to protect grain ships.

The world needs a strategy to break Russia's blockade of Ukrainian ports so it can export food and other goods, and that probably means a plan to use warships to escort merchant ships out of the Black Sea. Russia's military is denying Ukrainians use of their own ports. Mariupol on the Sea of Azov has been destroyed and is now in Russian hands.

The sky above the Ukrainian city of Lviv lit up in the early hours of Tuesday after a volley of precision missiles fired from Russian vessels in the Black Sea destroyed a nearby weapons depot.

The strikes, just 40km from the Polish border, were an explosive reminder of the threat posed by Russia's naval forces despite the high-profile loss of the cruiser Moskva, flagship of its Black Sea fleet.

Russia's navy has had a more successful conflict than Vladimir Putin's land forces, which failed in their initial aim to seize control of Ukraine's biggest cities. By contrast Russia's navy moved quickly to close off the Sea of Azov and establish control of the Black Sea, sealing off other shipping traffic and giving it a platform from which to launch hundreds of strikes on Ukraine.

An estimated 20m tonnes of grain are stuck inside Ukraine, which could ease pressure on global markets if it was released. Ukraine president Volodymyr Zelensky has described the situation as "frightening" while the UN World Food Program's David Beasley has been more explicit. "Millions of people will die because these ports are blocked," he warned last month.

"The blockade is something of a ticking time bomb for the world," said Sidharth Kaushal, a research fellow at the Royal United Services Institute think-tank in London. "And because the rest of the war on land is in stalemate, time is on the blockaders' side."

Escorted naval convoys are a possibility, but Ukraine's navy is tiny and cannot do the job itself. Andriy Zagorodnyuk, a former Ukrainian defense minister who advises the government, has suggested "a protected marine zone" enforced by western naval power. V. Group, the world's largest ship manager, has urged NATO to provide naval escorts for commercial ships.

Similar mechanisms have been used before, such as the UN-mandated naval escorts that have protected merchant vessels from pirate attack off Somalia.

But Black Sea convoys would face greater problems, analysts say. For one the Montreux convention, which regulates shipping through the Turkish straits, limits warships from non-littoral states to being in the Black Sea to no more than 21 days

"To maintain a functional convoy system, you'd have to have a huge western fleet stationed in the Mediterranean to rotate through the Black Sea," said Kaushal.

Even if that worked, there is the risk of escalatory confrontation with Russian warships, a debate that recalls many of the arguments about whether NATO allies should establish "no-fly zones" over Ukraine.

Containment

Denmark, U.S. sending Kyiv Harpoon missiles and howitzers, says Ukrainian defense minister - Ukraine has started receiving Harpoon anti-ship missiles from Denmark and self-propelled howitzers from the United States, Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov said on May 28.

"The coastal defense of our country will not only be strengthened by Harpoon missiles — they will be used by trained Ukrainian teams," Reznikov wrote on his Facebook page.

He said Harpoon shore-to-ship missiles would be operated alongside Ukrainian Neptune missiles to defend Ukraine's Black Sea, including the southern port of Odesa.

The Harpoon is an all-weather, over-the-horizon, anti-ship missile that uses active radar homing and flies just above the water to evade defenses. It can be launched from ships, submarines, aircraft, or coastal batteries.



Russia has blockaded Ukrainian ports, hampering vital grain exports, and used its Black Sea fleet to launch missile attacks against Ukrainian cities.

Reznikov said Ukraine had also received a range of heavy artillery pieces, including modified U.S.-made M109 self-propelled howitzers that will allow the Ukrainian military to strike targets from longer distances.

Ukraine has said it wants to secure deliveries of U.S.-made long-range M270 multiple-rocket launchers (MLRS) to beef up its defense in the east, where Russia has been mounting an increasingly aggressive offensive backed by indiscriminate artillery fire that has provoked huge damage and killed hundreds of civilians.

Putin's Nightmare Is Coming True: MLRS Rockets Are Headed To Ukraine?

- For weeks, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has been pleading with the United States and its allies to provide it with the Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS), an American-developed system that can fire a barrage of rockets hundreds of kilometers, which would be further than any system currently employed by the Ukrainian military.

Zelensky, and other Ukrainian officials, have suggested it would be a game-changer in its war against Russia, which launched its unprovoked and unwarranted invasion in late February.



The challenge is, of course, with such a system, Russia may see such an upgrade in Ukraine's military capabilities and escalate tensions and military action even further.

Ukraine already has in its arsenal a number of Soviet-era MRLS, but the replacement ammunition is only produced en masse in Russia, Newsweek reported. Kyiv has stated that it needs Western-made platforms to fill the gap, and among those would be the M270 MLRS, which was first introduced in 1983, and since has been adopted by several NATO countries.

While production of the platform ended in 2003, some 1,300 had been produced, along with more than 700,000 rockets. The weapon has earned a number of colorful monikers including the "commander's personal shotgun" and "battlefield buckshot," while the tracked system has been referred to as the "Gypsy Wagon," as it crews store various equipment, including nettings, cots, and coolers on the top of the platform.

Humanitarian

'Ukraine's heritage is under direct attack': why Russia is looting the country's museums - 2,000 stolen artworks attest to Putin's desire to erase a nation's history – like so many despots before him.

As Russia's invasion of Ukraine began, the director of the Museum of Local History in Melitopol in the south-east of the country, Leila Ibrahimova, arranged for a hoard of gold artefacts from ancient Scythia to be hidden. Just a few weeks later, she was kidnapped and interrogated by Russian troops. They demanded to know where the Scythian gold was; she refused to cooperate. Subsequently the museum's curator Galina Andriivna Kucher was taken at gunpoint to the museum and asked to show a Russian "expert" and agents where the gold was. She also refused to locate the collection. Kucher was later abducted from her home on 30 April and her whereabouts remains unknown.

According to a report on the theft in the New York Times, Russian troops eventually found the gold hoard, which dates back to the fourth century BC, boxed up in the museum's basement. The items were taken to Donetsk, in the Russian-controlled Donbas region, for "safety," with the museum's newly installed puppet director, Evgeny Gorlachev, stating that the gold artefacts were not just for Ukrainians but "of great cultural value for the entire former Soviet Union." His carefully chosen words were designed to erase the collection's Ukrainian heritage and replace it with a Soviet one, one that suggested Ukraine was back within Russia's sphere of influence and control.

To date, Russian forces have caused the destruction or severe damage of 250 museums and institutions in Ukraine. Twenty-five paintings by Ukrainian folk artist Maria Prymachenko were incinerated after the Museum of Local History in

Ivankiv was hit by a missile. The Arkhip Kuindzhi museum in the besieged city of Mariupol was badly damaged by an airstrike that left paintings exposed to the elements, hanging on walls amid piles of rubble. The Cultural Heritage Monitoring Lab, run by the Virginia Museum of Natural History in association with the Smithsonian, has already logged more than 110 memorials destroyed by Russian weapons. But as well as destroying museums and galleries, Russian troops are accused of having stolen an estimated 2,000 artworks. In addition to the theft of the Scythian gold in Melitopol, in Mariupol a handwritten Torah scroll, and a valuable gospel printed in Venice in 1811 were all have been taken.

Autocratic leaders seizing art as a means to rewriting a nation's cultural history and advance their interests is nothing new: in 1937, Hitler confiscated 17,000 works of art from more than 100 German museums in less than a month. Some were shown in his Degenerate Art exhibition, but many were destroyed or "lost." Napoleon had cartloads of masterpieces shipped to Paris from all over Europe: the classical sculptures Apollo Belvedere and Laocoön from Italy; Rubens's The Descent from the Cross from Belgium. But these latest thefts are in keeping with Putin's attempts to erase Ukraine's independent history and promote his own expansionist model of a new Russian empire.

It is clear that Putin sees the Scythian gold as particularly central to Ukraine's cultural identity and independence. It is not the first time he has tried to claim it for Russia. In 2014, examples of Scythian gold were on loan to the Allard Pierson museum in Amsterdam. Four of the Ukrainian museums that had issued the loans were in Crimea. As Putin invaded and annexed Crimea, he pressed the Netherlands to send the gold back. A protracted legal battle ensued and only in October 2021 did a judge finally rule that the works categorically belonged to the State Museum Fund of Ukraine and not the Russian-controlled Crimean museums (the works remain in the Dutch museum's stores).

When the paintings that were forcibly removed from Mariupol are also considered, a clear pattern emerges. These works have been chosen to undermine Ukraine's national identity. Paintings by western European artists have not been targeted, for example. Instead it is the work of Ukrainian-Russian artists that has been stolen. Take 19th-century maritime painter Ivan Aivazovsky. Born in Feodosiya, a Crimean port, he was a leading Romantic artist who painted heavy seas, golden sunsets and storm-tossed ships. The slightly younger Arkhip Kuindzhi, another whose works were taken, was born in Mariupol. His paintings are the calm before Aivazovsky's storm: landscapes of harmonious tranquillity. Both painters worked in regions that are now in modern-day Ukraine and Russia, and both countries claim the artists as their own. Other works stolen are by Tetyana Yablonska (1917–2005), a politically active Ukrainian painter who was born in Smolensk, Russia, and Mykola Hlushchenko (1901–1977), who lived in Donetsk from an early age but was likewise born in Russia. Russia's line of thinking seems to be that if it seizes such paintings by Ukrainian-Russian artists then the contested territory they once called home will follow.

Geopolitics

India must choose - It was Ukraine's right to choose not to be crushed under the jackboot of a brutal dictator who does not allow his own people democracy and freedom.

On the promenade in Davos this year there was a heavy Indian presence. Major states set up their own investment offices directly opposite India Lounge. Right next door to India's main office was Russia House renamed this year as Russia War Crimes House. Inside were photographs and videos of mass graves, devastated cities and the heart-breaking testimonies of people who had suffered brutalities at the hands of Russian soldiers. Almost everyone who attended this year's unusual summer annual meeting of the World Economic Forum visited the Russia War Crimes House to pay homage.

India must decide how to secure its interests in this unbalanced environment by choosing among six potential strategic options: staying unaligned, hedging, building indigenous military power, forming regional partnerships, aligning with China, or aligning with the United States.

With the horrific war in Ukraine showing no signs of ending, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Berlin, Copenhagen, and Paris could give a glimpse of India's post-Russian strategic future in Europe. As Russia, isolated by unprecedented Western sanctions, deepens its alliance with China, Europe has begun to loom larger than ever before in India's strategic calculus.