

Conflict Update # 64

May 19th, 2022

Conflict Assessment

Key Takeaways

Russian forces are intensifying operations to advance north and west of Popasna in preparation for an offensive toward Severodonetsk.

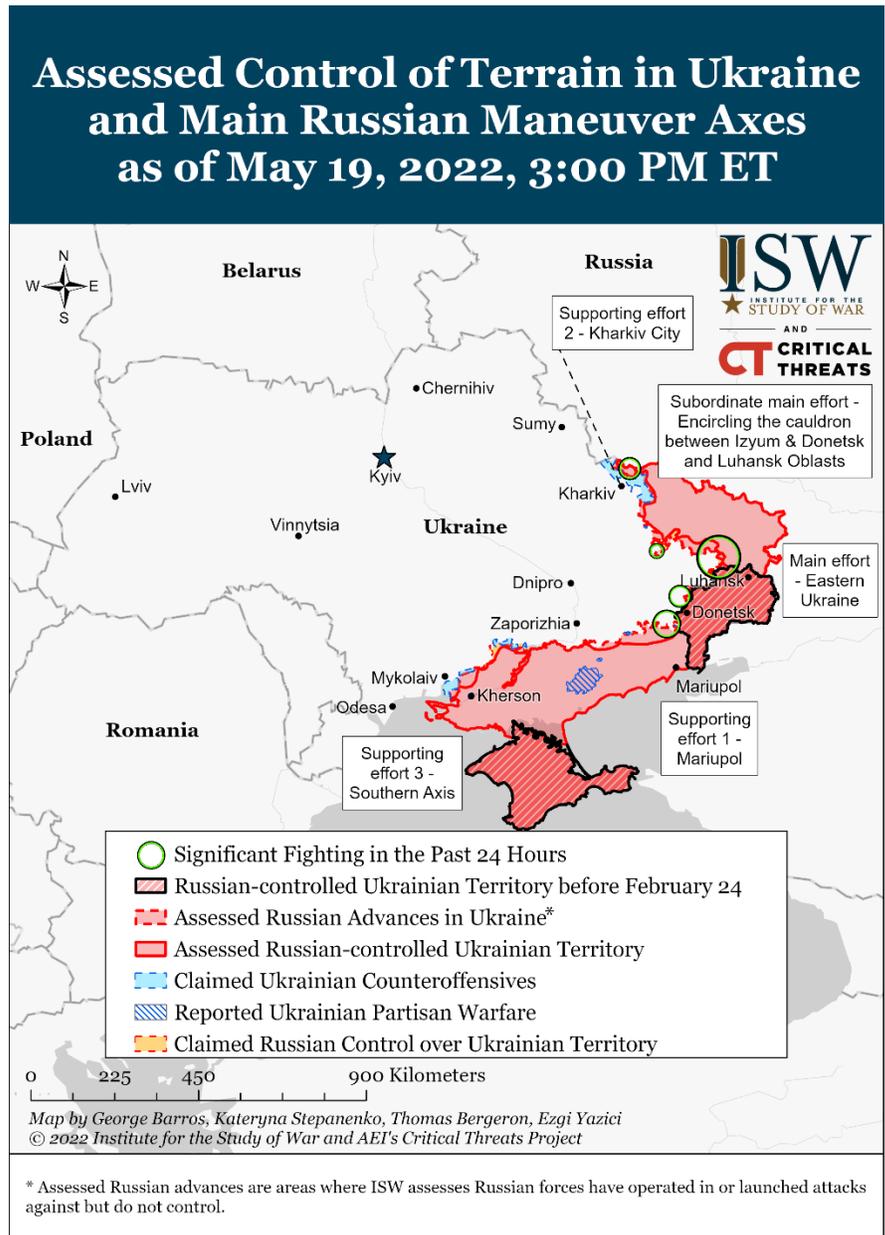
Russian and proxy authorities in Mariupol are struggling to establish coherent administrative control of the city.

Russian forces reportedly attempted to regain control of the settlements they lost during the Ukrainian counteroffensive north of Kharkiv City.

Russian forces are bolstering their naval presence around Snake Island to fortify their grouping on the island.

Subordinate Main Effort—Southern Kharkiv, Donetsk, Luhansk Oblasts - Russian forces unsuccessfully attempted to resume offensive operations southwest of Izyum and did not advance in the Slovyansk or Lyman directions on May 19. Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces suffered significant losses and retreated after a failed assault on Velyka Komyshevakha approximately 23 km southwest of Izyum and that they are resuming the Slovyansk offensive despite the loss of offensive capabilities. Ukrainian artillery yesterday struck Russian electronic warfare equipment 7 km from Izyum.

Russian forces intensified efforts to advance north and west of Popasna in preparation for the Battle of Severodonetsk. Ukrainian officials reported that they conducted several unsuccessful assaults in settlements leading to the Lysychansk and Bahmut highways near Popasna. The Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) claimed to have encircled Ukrainian troops in Zolote and Hirske, approximately 12 and 14 km northeast of Popasna, respectively. ISW cannot independently confirm this LNR claim. Russian forces also attempted to break Ukrainian defenses west and east of Avdiivka without any success and maintained heavy shelling in the area.



Russian troops have begun operating at a company scale rather than at the level of a BTG to focus on seizing specific villages in Donbas, according to US officials. An unnamed US defense official also noted that Russian forces are still facing challenges in coordinating communication between commanders and synchronizing artillery fire in supporting ground assaults.

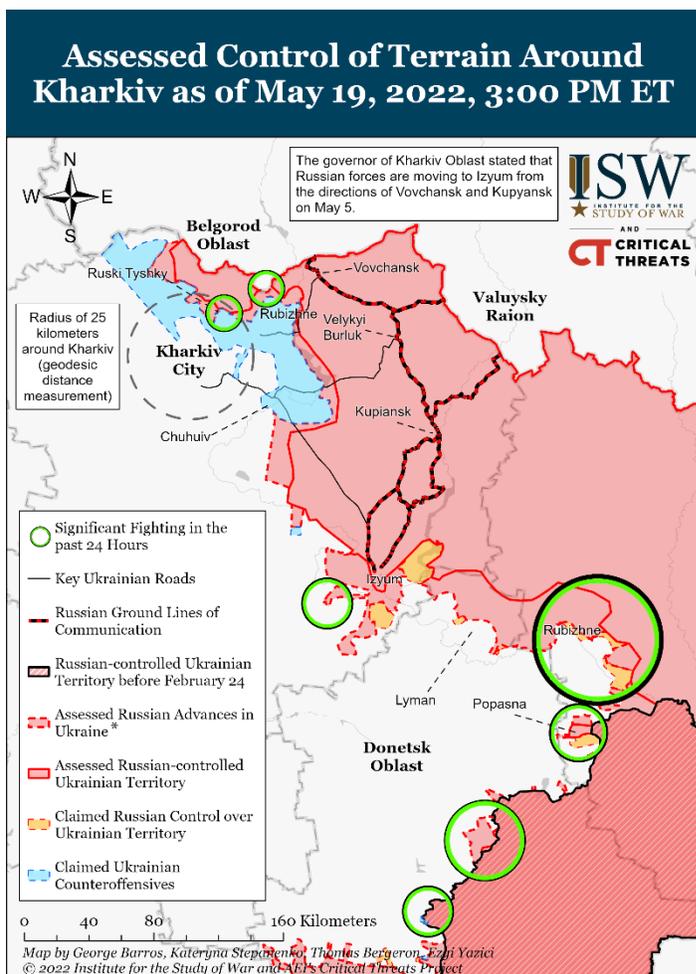
ISW previously reported that some Russian military bloggers criticized the Russian reconnaissance-strike complex due to its excessively centralized approval system for artillery fire. A pro-Russian military Telegram channel criticized the current Russian strategy, claiming that Russian forces are hitting a “strategic dead end” and are suffering significant losses trying to slowly capture small villages in different directions.

Supporting Effort #1—Mariupol - Russian and proxy occupation authorities in Mariupol reportedly struggled to establish coherent administrative control of the city today. Advisor to the Mayor of Mariupol Petro Andryushchenko claimed that authorities in Mariupol who are collaborating with Russian occupiers do not report to the leadership of the Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) and instead are being guided by the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB).

Andryushchenko additionally stated that the Luhansk People’s Republic (LNR) will become the only “independent” political organ of Russia due to the way DNR officials are imposing their occupational agendas on Mariupol. He noted that Head of the DNR Denis Pushilin has commanded elements of the police corps currently stationed in Mariupol to move to other areas in Donetsk to respond to riots caused by “an internal struggle of political clans.” While ISW cannot independently confirm Andryushchenko’s claims, they are consistent with the overall lack of coherency in the implementation of occupation agendas by Russian and DNR authorities alike.

Factional infighting between proxy authorities in Mariupol is likely being exacerbated by the ongoing evacuation of Ukrainian defenders from the Azovstal Steel Plant. Pro-Russian Telegram channels complained that Russian forces are removing wounded Russian servicemen from hospitals in the DNR to treat wounded Ukrainian soldiers who were recently evacuated from Azovstal. If confirmed, these reports indicate a continued lack of consistency in the way Russian and proxy authorities are handling the evacuation of Ukrainian forces from Azovstal and the overall capture of Mariupol.

Supporting Effort #2—Kharkiv City - Russian forces focused on maintaining their positions north of Kharkiv City to prevent further Ukrainian advances on May 19. Ukrainian General Staff noted that Russian troops conducted unspecified and unsuccessful counterattacks in an attempt to restore lost positions around Kharkiv City.



Deputy Chief of the Main Operations Department of the Ukrainian General Staff Brigadier General Oleksiy Gromov reported that the Ukrainian counteroffensive in northern Kharkiv Oblast has liberated 23 settlements since May 5, but did not name the settlements. Russian troops continued to conduct artillery attacks on Ukrainian positions and suburban settlements around Kharkiv City.

Supporting Effort #3—Southern Axis -Russian forces have not made any confirmed advances on the southern axis and shelled along the frontline. They conducted artillery attacks against Kherson, Zaporizhia, Dnipropetrovsk, and Mykolaiv Oblasts. Unidentified partisans reportedly blew up a Russian armored train in Melitopol and damaged two railway tracks and a locomotive with ten fuel tanks. Russian forces are continuing to fortify their grouping on Snake Island with two warship detachments and cruise missiles.

The situation in Transnistria remains unchanged.

Immediate items to watch

- Russian forces will likely complete their withdrawal from the vicinity of Kharkiv City but attempt to hold a line west of Vovchansk to defend their GLOCs from Belgorod to Izyum. It is unclear if they will succeed.
- The Russians will continue efforts to encircle Severodonetsk and Lysychansk at least from the south, possibly by focusing on cutting off the last highway connecting Severodonetsk-Lysychansk with the rest of Ukraine.

Fighters That Left Steelworks Registered As POWs, As Russia Keeps Up Shelling Of Areas In Eastern Ukraine - Russia's Defense Ministry says 771 Ukrainian fighters at the Azovstal steel plant in Mariupol -- Ukraine's last stronghold in the besieged southern port city -- have "surrendered" in the last 24 hours, taking the total to 1,730 since May 16 as the Red Cross began registering "hundreds" of them.

The ministry said 80 of those who gave themselves up were wounded. All of them were reportedly transferred to territory in eastern Ukraine that is controlled by Kremlin-backed separatists.

There was no independent confirmation of the figure, and no indication of the fate of the troops still holed up in the compound. Moscow and Kyiv have given different estimates on the number of Ukrainian soldiers who were extracted from Azovstal. Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar said on May 18 that negotiations for their release were ongoing.

Putin

‘Our Commander Is Leaving With Us’: Putin’s Troops Openly Plot to Ditch ‘Stupid’ War - Russian soldiers are apparently so sick of Vladimir Putin’s “stupid” war in Ukraine that they are now openly plotting with their own commanders to go AWOL.

The Ukrainian Defense Ministry’s Main Intelligence Directorate released a recording on Thursday that is said to show precisely that happening, with a soldier heard in a purportedly intercepted phone call detailing the plan.

The soldier, identified by Ukrainian intelligence as one of many men “mobilized” by authorities in occupied Donetsk, complains that he and others in his battalion are so under-equipped that even the Chechen forces fighting alongside them mock them as “meat.”

“Everyone who is here ... I’m telling you ... everyone is planning to take off on the 26th,” the purported soldier says.

“Isn’t that stupid?” says the other man, apparently a relative back home.

“Isn’t it stupid that we’re here?” the unnamed soldier shoots back.

He goes on to explain that the troops have decided to abscond “on the basis of the fact that they put us on the front with absolutely nothing.”

"I want to tell you even more," he says, adding that a "battalion commander is leaving with us and even a staff colonel."

"They don't provide us with any [equipment]," he says, adding that the rifles given to snipers are "from 1945."

Other units "look at them and go, 'Holy s---, what would you need those for?' They laugh at us. You know what they call us? Blessed. We ask, 'Why blessed?' They say because we are walking around with no equipment, no helmets, without anything. ... The Chechens call us meat."

"It's not desertion, because we shouldn't be on this territory... We crossed the border as 200s," he says, using a Russian military term for those killed in battle. "We're not actually here. So if they say I'm a deserter, f--- off, I'm not here. Prove otherwise."

Other Russian soldiers are said to have taken equally drastic measures to get themselves out of the war. Ukrainian intelligence has released several recordings in recent days that purportedly show Russian soldiers resorting to injuring themselves in an effort to get pulled from the war.

On Thursday, Ukraine's Security Service released another recording said to reveal that trend. In the purportedly intercepted call between two Russian soldiers, one of the men tells his friend that fighting is getting more and more intense by the day, and despite daily fatalities, the military leadership is not providing backup.

"Take someone else's weapon, a Ukrainian one, and shoot yourself in the legs," his friend advises.

Ukrainian Lawmakers Outline Resolution Recognizing Putin As A 'War Criminal'— Ukrainian lawmakers have outlined a resolution that would designate Russian President Vladimir Putin as a war criminal over for his "aggressive" moves against the country, including launching an unprovoked invasion in February. The draft resolution was prepared by parliamentary groups and committees and registered at the Verkhovna Rada (Supreme Council) on May 19.

Ukraine has accused Russia of committing atrocities during its unprovoked invasion and said it has identified more than 10,000 possible war crimes. Russia denies targeting civilians and claims that evidence of atrocities presented by Ukraine was staged.

Russia Could Actually Lose Territory Amid Ukraine War Disaster – A debate has reportedly emerged within NATO circles over the possibility Ukraine could seize the momentum in its fight against Russia and take back Crimea and the Donbas region.

Following Russia's withdrawal from the Kyiv region to focus on the Donbas in Ukraine's east, NATO expects a "standstill for a while," an unnamed alliance official said. But in comments also reported by Ukrainian media, the official told CNN: "I think [Ukraine] could [retake Crimea and the Donbas], yes. Not now, not soon, but if they can keep up the fight I think so."

Talk of the future of Crimea, which Russia annexed in 2014, was ramped up by Kyiv on Monday. It leapt upon a statement by Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov, who said Moscow had "no territorial disputes" with Finland or Sweden, which are seeking to join NATO.

However, Peskov did say that Ukraine joining the bloc would mean Russia would have a "territorial dispute" with an alliance member.

Oleksiy Arestovych, an advisor to Ukrainian President Zelenskyy, said this was a significant change in language, with local news outlet Unian reporting that it suggested Russia is "morally preparing the population for the surrender of the peninsula."

Arestovych said that previously Crimea was not considered a "territorial dispute" for Moscow and that its status as part of Russia, which the world community disputes, had been secured by a "referendum of the people."

U.S. ambassador to Ukraine, Kristina Kvien has also given an upbeat assessment of the chances that Ukraine could win back territory.

She told Ukrainskaya Pravda that given that Kyiv's forces had driven Russian troops back from the capital and from Kharkiv, "the assumption that it will expel the Russians from other occupied regions is not devoid of logic."

British magazine The Spectator reported that some in the U.K. security establishment believe Ukrainian President Zelenskyy should try to push Russia out of Crimea, "not because the aim is realistic," but because it would tie up Russian forces and stop them "from recovering and re-arming." This came with the caveat that Ukraine using western-supplied equipment in Crimea would risk escalation.

'Culture of cover-ups and scape-goating' among Russia's top brass has crippled Putin's invasion of Ukraine as 'distracted' generals focus on saving their own skin rather than winning, MoD says - A 'culture of cover-ups and scape-goating' within Russia's military has hobbled its invasion of Ukraine, British intelligence believes, as 'distracted' generals focus on saving their own skin rather than winning.

Putin's top brass are 'increasingly seeking to defer key decisions to their superiors' to avoid being forced to carry the can for any mistakes instead of seizing the initiative and taking the fight to Ukraine, a briefing by the Ministry of Defence said today.

Lieutenant-General Sergei Kisel, commander of the 1st Guards Tank Army, and Admiral Igor Osipov, commander of the Black Sea Fleet, have already been sacked for respectively failing to take Ukraine's second-city of Kharkiv and for the sinking of the flagship Moskva, the UK has said.

It is being reported today that Putin has instituted a further round of senior generals being sacked.

Tsar Nicholas II sacked his generals, as did Stalin – and both lived to rue the day that they did.

Containment

Spain's military chief is dropping by the Pentagon today - Defense Minister Margarita Robles is expected shortly after 1 p.m. ET. Robles, a former Spanish Supreme Court justice, has been chief of the military for almost four years.

September is the new "month to watch," - according to Mark Galeotti of the UK's Royal United Services Institute. That's when Russia will really start to feel the effects of attrition from Ukraine's newly-acquired long-range artillery.

Finland and Sweden to buy firearms, anti-tank weapons together - Finland and Sweden will buy portable firearms and anti-tank weapons together, Finland's defense ministry said on Wednesday, as the two Nordic country's handed in their applications to join the Western military alliance NATO.

The two countries will step up their cooperation in defense procurement by Finland joining an agreement to acquire anti-tank weapons from Swedish weapons maker Saab Dynamics, a subsidiary of Saab (SAABb.ST), the ministry said.

Pentagon May Give Sweden, Finland More Security Aid - Finland and Sweden may get more security support now that they have formally applied to become members of NATO, a move that has drawn Russian ire, a senior defense official said Wednesday.

After Finland announced it would submit its application, the Russian ministry of defense warned that “Russia will be forced to take retaliatory steps, both of a military-technical and other nature, in order to stop the threats to its national security arising in this regard.”

On Wednesday, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin hosted Swedish defense minister Peter Hultqvist at the Pentagon, where they discussed ways the United States might offer protection during the weeks or months—or even years—while the new applications are being considered.

U.S. Senate Gives Final Congressional Approval To \$40 Billion Aid Package For Ukraine - The U.S. Senate has overwhelmingly approved a \$40 billion package of military and economic aid for Ukraine.

The 86-11 vote gave final congressional approval to the package, which is expected to be quickly signed by President Joe Biden, who proposed the spending package just a few weeks ago. “Help is on the way, really significant help. Help that could make sure that the Ukrainians are victorious.” The House of Representatives approved the Ukraine bill 368-57 last week.

Pentagon Claims Successful Test of Nuclear-Capable Hypersonic Missile - The U.S. Air Force says it carried out a successful test of a new type of hypersonic missile over the weekend. The Pentagon says a B-52 bomber off the coast of Southern California successfully test-fired an “Air-Launched Rapid Response Weapon” that reached five times the speed of sound. The test of the nuclear-capable missile follows similar tests by China and after Russian President Vladimir Putin said he’s deployed hypersonic missiles during Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Geopolitics

Could Ukraine Offer a Template for Better US-Gulf Security Relations? - Relations between Washington and some of its traditional Gulf Arab partners, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, are at their lowest point in history, which is why the Biden administration on Monday sent a high-level delegation to Abu Dhabi: specifically to pay respects upon the death of former UAE President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan and to congratulate his successor, Mohamed bin Zayed, but more generally to try to heal those ties.

There are grievances on both sides. Washington, long concerned about human rights violations during the Saudi-led war in Yemen, is freshly disappointed with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi for refusing to consider a U.S. demand to increase oil production to reduce soaring international prices and financially undercut Russian President Vladimir Putin’s war effort in Ukraine. Saudi and Emirati officials are disappointed with American leaders for, they say, doing too little to protect them from Iran.

This impasse can be overcome—though trust won’t be restored overnight and not all problems in the relationship will be solved—if Riyadh and Abu Dhabi agree to pump more oil, even if temporarily, and if Washington comes up with more effective ways to help defend Saudi Arabia and the UAE against missile and drone attacks by Iran and its proxies across the region.

The challenge is to identify what’s politically feasible for the Biden administration and what practical tools it can use to keep its side of this potential bargain. Formal U.S. security guarantees—which Saudi Arabia and the UAE are asking for—are off the table for a host of strategic and political reasons. But perhaps U.S. military assistance to Ukraine can offer a partial model. One major lesson from Russia’s invasion is that a formal defense pact with the United States is not required to be a recipient of generous, effective, and immediate U.S. security assistance during a military crisis.

Indeed, Ukraine is not a U.S. treaty ally and yet Washington has provided Kyiv with lots of arms, both offensive and defensive, including anti-tank Javelins, anti-aircraft Stinger missiles, helicopters, sophisticated radars, armored personnel carriers, and unmanned aerial systems, all with unprecedented speed. (Defence One).

President Biden Heads to Asia for Six-Day Tour Amid Tensions with China and North Korea - Later today, Biden departs on a six-day trip to Asia, where he's scheduled to meet with leaders of South Korea, Japan, India and Australia. Biden's trip comes amid increased naval tensions with China and as analysts say North Korea is preparing an underground nuclear weapons test in the coming days — which would be the first such test since 2017.

NATO

Sweden's prime minister and Finland's president visited the White House this morning - one day after the two Nordic nations formally applied to become members of the 30-nation, Russia-focused NATO alliance.

U.S. President Biden said from the Rose Garden that legislation will be submitted to Congress as soon as Thursday, adding that “New members joining NATO is not a threat to any nation.”

This is expected to pass both chambers before the summer recess, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky said just days ago during a trip to Helsinki.

Turkey's President Erdogan insists Turkey will reject the expansion bids, he reportedly said while speaking to students on Thursday. "We will continue our policy in a determined way. We have told allies that we will say no to Finland and Sweden's NATO membership,"

Sanctions

Russia just ejected more than two dozen Spanish diplomats in retaliation for similar moves from Spain back in April. Moscow also booted diplomats from France and Italy on Wednesday.

Navalny's team urges more Russian sanctions to help Ukraine - Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny's team hit Capitol Hill on Thursday, urging a fresh round of sanctions over the war in Ukraine that moves beyond wealthy oligarchs to spread the financial pain to Russian government officials, mid-level politicians and public figures.

The group is discussing with senators a list of 6,000 people for possible sanctions, including Russian defense and security officials, administrative employees, governors, members of parliament, even editors and managers at state-aligned media operations.

Russia might start using China's Zhaoxin x86 chips because of sanctions - A company has announced it will start selling motherboards with Chinese Zhaoxin KaiXian KX-6640MA chips preinstalled in Russia to fill the semiconductor void left by recent sanctions. These might get used in simple office PCs but won't be able to replace Western-designed CPUs in any workloads demanding high performance.

Ever since AMD, Intel, IBM, and other semiconductor companies stopped sales to Russia, the country has been having a hard time sourcing the chips needed to keep essential government systems operational.

This situation has forced them to start allowing bootleg tech imports and reusing components from household appliances. Russia is also planning to manufacture chips locally, but that could take years.

China in Talks With Russia to Buy Oil for Strategic Reserves - China is seeking to replenish its strategic crude stockpiles with cheap Russian oil, a sign Beijing is strengthening its energy ties with Moscow just as Europe works toward banning imports due to the war in Ukraine.

They are in discussions with Moscow to buy additional supplies. Crude would be used to fill China's strategic petroleum reserves, and talks are being conducted at a government level with little direct involvement from oil companies, said one person.

Impacts

Azerbaijan Strives to Be a Regional Renewable Energy Hub - Azerbaijan intends to contribute to Europe's energy security by developing into a regional "green" energy hub, the government officially announced on May 9. In line with such goals, several days earlier, Azerbaijani and Romanian officials discussed prospects for exporting electricity to Romania generated by offshore wind turbines in the Caspian Sea.

The electricity will be transmitted from the Georgian coast via submarine cables stretching across the Black Sea. Previous bilateral talks with the French government revealed that Baku sees the potential to produce up to 7.2 gigawatts of wind energy in the Caspian through 2036.

Furthermore, Azerbaijan is courting European companies to cooperate on the export of renewable energy and "green" hydrogen (that is, produced using offshore wind power) to Europe. And according to Azerbaijani Energy Minister Parviz Shahbazov, the expansion of the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) project (the westernmost link of the Southern Gas Corridor, which carries Azerbaijani natural gas to the Balkans and Italy) should additionally enable 10 percent of the pipeline's capacity to be devoted to transporting hydrogen.

While Azerbaijan's large oil and gas resources are well known and already being exported to multiple international markets, its energy ministry estimates that the country also has rich potential to develop about 27,000 megawatts of renewable energy on land and 157,000 megawatts at sea. And Baku has plans to build two new transmission lines to increase electricity exports to Europe.

Google Is Filing for Bankruptcy in Russia - Google is set to pull out of Russia after Russian authorities seized its bank account and made it all but impossible for operations to continue in the country.

The good news for the Russian population is that free Google services including Android, Gmail, Maps, Search, and YouTube will continue to function. The Play store is also sticking around, but currently can't be used to purchase any apps because Google suspended all payment services as part of its response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Russia Looks to Prisons in Desperate Search for People With IT Skills - Russia is reviewing what "forced labor" means for prisoners now that the country is facing a serious shortage of people with IT skills.

Waging war on another country and the sanctions that have followed means skilled workers are leaving Russia in droves and local businesses need to find replacements. With vacancies for IT positions numbering the high tens of thousands, Russian prisoners are now being viewed as a new source of potential talent.

As KrebsSecurity reports(Opens in a new window), late last month the Russian Federal Penitentiary Service announced it was considering using prisoners for remote IT work at commercial Russian companies. According to Alexander Khabarov, deputy head of Russia's penitentiary service, the idea was proposed by a number of businessmen in Russia eager to find the staff they needed.

There's thought to be around 95,000 jobs requiring IT skills in Russia that can't be filled. The reason? IT specialists are fleeing the country, with the Russian Association for Electronic Communications (RAEC) estimating up to 100,000 are leaving for new overseas positions in destinations including the US, Germany, Georgia, Cyprus, and Canada.

Russia ‘disappointed’ by recent Israeli statements - Russia’s Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov said Thursday that Moscow is disappointed by recent “anti-Russian” statements by Israeli officials.

“Of course, we were a little disappointed in such anti-Russian statements by a number of responsible persons in Israel, because this does not correspond to the nature of the traditionally friendly relations that we have been building for 30 years since the late 1980s,” said Bogdanov in response to a question from the TASS Russian news agency.

The deputy minister made his comments on the sidelines of the “Russia – Islamic World: KazanSummit 2022” in the Russian republic of Tatarstan. Bogdanov added that he expects Israel “to take a more balanced and objective position” on the war in Ukraine, according to TASS.

Germany’s Schroeder loses office amid anger over Russia ties - German lawmakers agreed Thursday to strip former Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder of his office and staff after he maintained and defended his long-standing ties with Russia and its energy sector despite the invasion of Ukraine.

Chinese Hackers Tried to Steal Russian Defense Data - Emails landed on March 23 in the inboxes of scientists and engineers at several of Russia’s military research and development institutes, purportedly sent by Russia’s Ministry of Health. They carried a subject line that offered seemingly tantalizing information about a “list of persons under U.S. sanctions for invading Ukraine.”

But the emails were actually sent by state-sponsored hackers in China seeking to entice their Russian targets to download and open a document with malware, according to a new report to be released Thursday by the Israeli-American cybersecurity firm Check Point.

The report provides new evidence of Chinese efforts to spy on Russia, pointing to the complexity of the relations between two countries that have drawn closer in solidarity against the United States. It also underscores the sprawling, and increasingly sophisticated, tactics China’s cyberspies have used to collect information on an ever-expanding array of targets, including countries it considers friends, like Russia.

Despite the growing global outrage over Russia’s war in Ukraine, China has refused to criticize Moscow and has echoed Russian propaganda to depict the United States and NATO as aggressors in the conflict. But Check Point’s research showed that despite the countries’ deepening ties, China appeared to view Russia as a legitimate target for the theft of sensitive military technological information.

The Chinese campaign targeted Russian institutes that research airborne satellite communications, radar and electronic warfare, Check Point said in its report. The institutes belong to Rostec Corporation, the Russian military conglomerate that is one of the largest and most powerful entities in Russia’s defense establishment.

New Zealand food companies suffer substantial losses as they stop exporting food to Russia - It's March, and fruit and vegetable exporter Freshco has seven large containers full of apples being loaded onto a vessel in Napier. The vessel is bound for Russia. Halfway through loading, Freshco partner John Mangan hears the news that New Zealand is imposing sanctions on Russia over the war in Ukraine.

"Three of [the containers] were already on the vessel and going, and four we managed to get off," Mangan says. "Since then, we've stopped completely." It's three months now since the war began and countries around the world started imposing sanctions worth billions of dollars. Companies from McDonald's to Fonterra have started pulling out of the country in self-imposed boycotts.

But not everyone has made that call.

New Zealand's largest organic grower, Bostock is continuing to send fruit to Russia. Owner John Bostock says the company condemns the Putin regime but backs the supply of "humanitarian food shipments" into Russia and Ukraine.

While it's not illegal to send food products to Russia under New Zealand's sanctions regime, many companies have withdrawn anyway, and at substantial cost to their business.

Fruit and vegetable exporter Freshco is one of those companies. They pulled the plug, leaving containers of outbound stock in the lurch, waiting on the wharf in Napier, to either be juiced or binned. Mangan says it was the right thing to do.

Widening of War

Tensions Between Moscow and Circassians Reach Crisis Proportions – Circassian Genocide and Sochi 150 years ago. Circassians aka Agydhe have been protesting in Turkey, Russia and in other countries against the Olympics. About 150 years ago, the Circassians also known as the Agydhe were forcefully removed from North Caucasus where they live in Adygea or Circassia, Karachay-Cherkessia and Kabardino-Balkaria. Sochi which is a Circassian word also had a large Circassian population until 1860. Circassians made up the majority of the people in North Caucasus a century ago. They were massacred and removed from republics outlined in red in the map to the right. Today, Circassians are scattered around the region and Turkey.

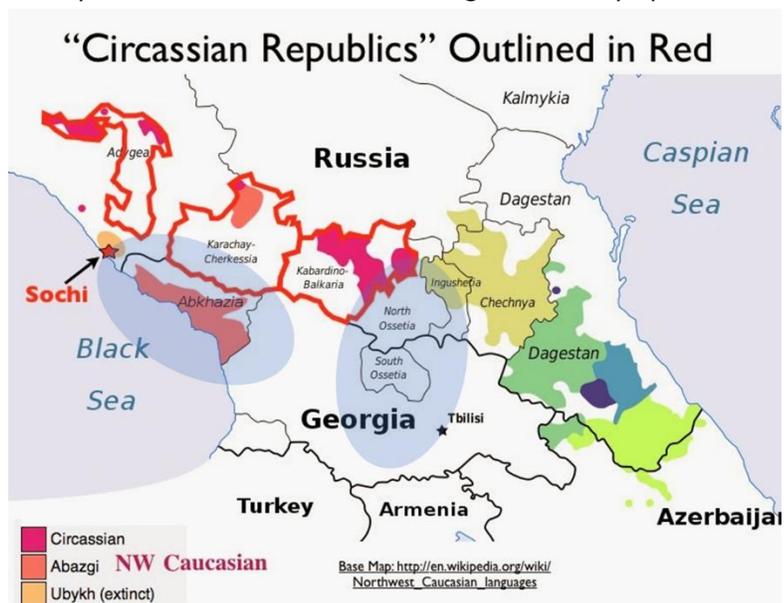
The blue-shaded areas are the current provinces of Georgia that Russia claims as part of Russia.

Tensions between Moscow and the Circassians, both within Russia and abroad, have reached a boiling point. The driving factors are numerous and multi-varied. In part, they stem from long-time Circassian efforts to promote their national language and identity, to return Circassians living abroad back to their North Caucasus homeland, and to secure international recognition for what they argue was an act of Russian "genocide" against them in 1864 (Caucasus Times, April 25).

More recently, frictions have erupted because of Circassian declarations of solidarity with Ukrainians in their resistance to Russian aggression. On the other side, the Circassians have been growing angrier over President Putin's apparent conviction that he is now in a position to suppress the identities of peoples inside the Russian Federation, just as he is seeking to do with Ukrainians abroad. Indeed, strains between the Circassians and Moscow are presently even higher than they were in 2014, when Putin and the Circassians clashed over the holding of the Winter Olympics on the site from which Russian forces deported that nation on May 21, 1864.

Today, both two sides appear more committed to achieving their mutually exclusive goals than ever before. This situation could easily lead to an explosion—one that might begin in the North Caucasus but would quickly send shockwaves outward.

Like other non-Russians within the Russian Federation, the Circassians have been confronted by Putinist policies that threaten the survival of their language, republics and even identity. But additionally, they face two other problems that set them apart. On the one hand, the Soviet authorities split the Circassian nation into various subgroups divided among multiple administrative territories; and they sought to prevent the Circassians from asserting a common national identity



or demanding a single Circassian republic in the North Caucasus. More recently, however, the Circassians have fought back, viewing the much-delayed 2020 Russian census as a means to reunite Kabards, Cherkess, Adygeys and other parts of the Circassian nation under a single “Circassian” umbrella. The census results have yet to be published, but clearly this mobilization effort has already shown significant success.

And on the other hand, ever more members of the over five million Circassians living abroad are seeking to return to the homeland, something that Moscow fears would destabilize the region by dramatically changing the present ethnic mix there. Today, fewer than 700,000 Circassians live in the Northwest Caucasus.

Moscow threw up all kinds of obstacles to prevent the return of the diaspora communities; and now, it is set to make it virtually impossible. The Russian Duma (lower chamber of parliament) is considering legislation that will strip Circassians abroad who do not speak Russian—and few of them do—of the right to claim compatriot status, despite being descendants of people who lived in Russia earlier. That has sparked outrage among Circassians at home and abroad.

The Clash of Asia’s Titans - With global attention focused on Russia’s war in Ukraine, China’s territorial expansionism in Asia – especially its expanding border conflict with India – has largely fallen off the international community’s radar. Yet, in the vast glaciated heights of the Himalayas, the world’s demographic titans have been on a war footing for over two years, and the chances of violent clashes rise almost by the day.

The confrontation began in May 2020. When thawing ice reopened access routes after a brutal winter, India was shocked to discover that the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) had stealthily occupied hundreds of square miles of the borderlands in its Ladakh region. This triggered a series of military clashes, which resulted in China’s first combat deaths in over four decades and triggered the fastest-ever rival troop buildup in the Himalayan region.

India’s counterattacks eventually drove the PLA back from some areas, and the two sides agreed to transform two battlegrounds into buffer zones. But, over the last 15 months, little progress has been made to defuse tensions in other areas. With tens of thousands of Chinese and Indian troops standing virtually at attention along the long-disputed border, a military stalemate has emerged.

But stalemate is not stagnation. China has continued to alter the Himalayan landscape rapidly and profoundly in its favor, including by establishing 624 militarized border villages – mirroring its strategy of creating artificial militarized islands in the South China Sea – and constructing new warfare infrastructure near the frontier.

As part of this effort, China recently completed a bridge over Pangong Lake – the site of past military clashes – that promises to strengthen its position in a disputed area of India’s Ladakh region. It has also built roads and security installations on territory that belongs to Bhutan, in order to gain access to a particularly vulnerable section of India’s border overlooking a narrow corridor known as the “Chicken Neck,” which connects its far northeast to the heartland.

All of this, China hopes, will enable it to dictate terms to India: accept the new status quo, with China keeping the territory it has grabbed, or risk a full-scale war in which China has maximized its advantage. China’s expansionism relies on deception, stealth, and surprise, and on apparent indifference to the risks of military escalation. The aim of its brinkmanship is to confound the other side’s deterrence strategy and leave it with no real options.

China learned from its strategic folly of invading Vietnam in 1979 and has become adept at waging asymmetric or hybrid warfare, usually below the threshold of overt armed conflict. This enables it to advance its strategic objectives, including land grabs, incrementally. Coercive bargaining and overt intimidation also help to overcome resistance.

This salami-slicing strategy has already enabled Chinese President Xi Jinping to redraw the geopolitical map in the South China Sea. And the terrestrial application of this approach being deployed against India, Bhutan, and Nepal is proving just as difficult to counter. As India is learning firsthand, countries have virtually no options other than the use of force.

One thing is certain: simply hoping that China will stop encroaching on Indian territory will do India little good. After all, India got into this situation precisely because its political and military leadership failed to take heed of China's military activities near the frontier. On the contrary, while China was laying the groundwork for its territorial grabs, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was bending over backwards to befriend Xi. In the five years before the first clashes flared in May 2020, Modi met with his Chinese counterpart 18 times. Even a 2017 standoff on a remote Himalayan plateau did not dissuade Modi from pursuing his appeasement policy.

Seeking to protect his image as a strong leader, Modi has not acknowledged the loss of Indian territories. India's media enables this evasion by amplifying government-coined euphemisms: China's aggression is a "unilateral change of status quo," and the PLA-seized areas are "friction points." Meanwhile, Modi has allowed China's trade surplus with India to rise so rapidly – it now exceeds India's total defense budget (the world's third largest) – that his government is, in a sense, underwriting China's aggression.

But none of this should be mistaken for unwillingness to fight. India is committed to restoring the status quo ante and is at its "highest level" of military readiness. This is no empty declaration. If Xi seeks to break the current stalemate by waging war, both sides will suffer heavy losses, with no victor emerging.

In other words, Xi has picked a border fight that he cannot win and transformed a conciliatory India into a long-term foe. This amounts to an even bigger miscalculation than Modi's policy incoherence. The price China will pay for Xi's mistake will far outweigh the perceived benefits of some stealthy land grabs.

In a sense, China's territorial expansionism represents a shrewder, broader, and slower version of Russia's conventional war on Ukraine – and could provoke a similar international backlash against Xi's neo-imperial agenda. Already, China's aggression has prompted Indo-Pacific powers to strengthen their military capabilities and cooperation, including with the United States. All of this will undercut Xi's effort to fashion a Sino-centric Asia and, ultimately, achieve China's goal of global preeminence.

Xi might recognize that he has made a strategic blunder in the Himalayas. But, at a time when he is preparing to secure a precedent-defying third term as leader of the Communist Party of China, he has little room to change course, and the costs will continue to mount.

Previous conflicts along the Chinese/Indian border has been conducted by primitive fighting techniques as the use of modern weaponry has been outlawed by mutual agreement. Clubs and hand weapons are used.

Both China and India are part of the BRICS alliance, and this War Update has in prior editions referred to a possible disruption in this 5-nation agreement.

India is being wooed by the US and EU in an attempt to distance them from Russia and China, not made any more difficult by the apparent weakness of Russian arms, forming as they do a significant portion of Indian military preparedness.

The US this week announced an expanded aid package for India, and President Biden leaves today for an Asian tour, including to India. India has also recently expressed acute interest in acquiring US and EU arms.

Watch this space.