

Conflict Update # 197

September 29th, 2022

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Conflict Assessment

Russian losses – 58,580 (+430) soldiers killed, 2,325 (+13) enemy tanks, 4,909 (+20) armored combat vehicles, 1,385 (+4) artillery systems, 331 (+0) MLRS systems, 175 (+0) air defense systems, 262 (+1) warplanes, 224 (+0) helicopters, 995 (+6) UAVs of the operational-tactical level, 246 (+5) cruise missiles, 15 (+0) warships/cutters, 3,751 (+9) trucks and tankers, 4 Iskander Missile Launchers (+0), 76 fuel bowsers (+0) and 130 (+0) units of specialized equipment.

Key Takeaways

Russian commander suffers serious injuries after fire attack on HQ – A Russian commander was seriously injured in Ukraine this week.

Major General Oleg Tsokov, Commander of the 144th Motorized Rifle Division, was reportedly wounded in a Ukrainian "fire attack" at his HQ near Svatove, in partially occupied Luhansk region.

Ukraine voting brings 'dangerous phase,' more nuke threats - Putin's referendums in several occupied regions of Ukraine will pave the way for a "pretty dangerous phase" of the ongoing war, according to a retired U.S. admiral James Stavridis. He said that Putin can ramp up nuclear threats since he can use the referendums as a base to claim that those occupied areas are no longer Ukraine.

"Putin will then really rattle that nuclear sabre and say, 'If you attack Donetsk or Luhansk or Kherson, that's part of Russia,'" Stavridis said.

Ukraine targets Russia's ammunition depots, undermining its artillery advantage - It is an almost everyday occurrence in the Russian-occupied parts of eastern and southern Ukraine.

Russia's ammunition depots blow up, with large fires erupting as tons of ordnance detonate for hours. Some of these incidents cause giant blasts with a radius of hundreds of meters.

Now that Ukraine has acquired advanced Western artillery and rocket systems, it has gradually begun a campaign to take out Russia's key military infrastructure. Over the last four weeks, nearly 20 Russian ammunition depots in Russian-occupied Donbas and Ukraine's south, including some of the largest, have been hit or completely destroyed.

As Russia continues with its slow but steady advance in Ukraine's eastern region of Donbas, Ukraine's military is working to undermine its overwhelming artillery power and disrupt its logistics deep in occupied territories.

An ammunition depot located near an airfield used by Russia's forces continued detonating for days after the strike. Along with ammunition, Ukraine has also attacked a number of Russian command posts, transportation centers, and barracks, mainly in the occupied cities of Yasynuvata and Kadiivka (formerly Stakhanov).

Ukrainian strikes upon Russian facilities continue on a daily basis.

As a result, by July 7, Russia had lost most of its key ammunition depots, and many of its smaller depots in occupied Donbas. Notably, many key targets as much as 50-80 kilometers into Russian-controlled territory have been successfully destroyed.

This suggests that, along with Western-made rocket systems, Ukraine has also managed to improve its reconnaissance, situational awareness, and target indication, to the point of being able to identify targets even of medium importance



deep in Russian-occupied areas.

Russia plays defense as Ukraine advances in Luhansk despite referendum - Russian troops have been put on the defense in Luhansk as Ukrainian forces continue to advance, and Kyiv looks to retake occupied territory the Kremlin has held for months.

"Units are making slow advances on at least two axes east from the line of the Oskil and Siverskyi Donets rivers, where forces had consolidated following their previous advance earlier in the month," the U.K. Ministry of Defense said in its Wednesday intelligence update. (See commentary in following article).

Defense officials said Russian troops are now "mounting a more substantive defense than previously" as Ukrainian forces have pushed the front lines out of Kharkiv as they advance on Luhansk.

Luhansk, located in the northern Donbas region, remains a chief priority in Russian President Vladimir Putin's war effort as he looks to illegally annex several regions across eastern and southern Ukraine.

Russia faces 'imminent defeat' in Lyman as Ukraine envelops invaders - Russia faces "imminent defeat" in Lyman, an occupied town in Ukraine's northeast, as Kyiv encircles Russian forces in the region as part of its counteroffensive.

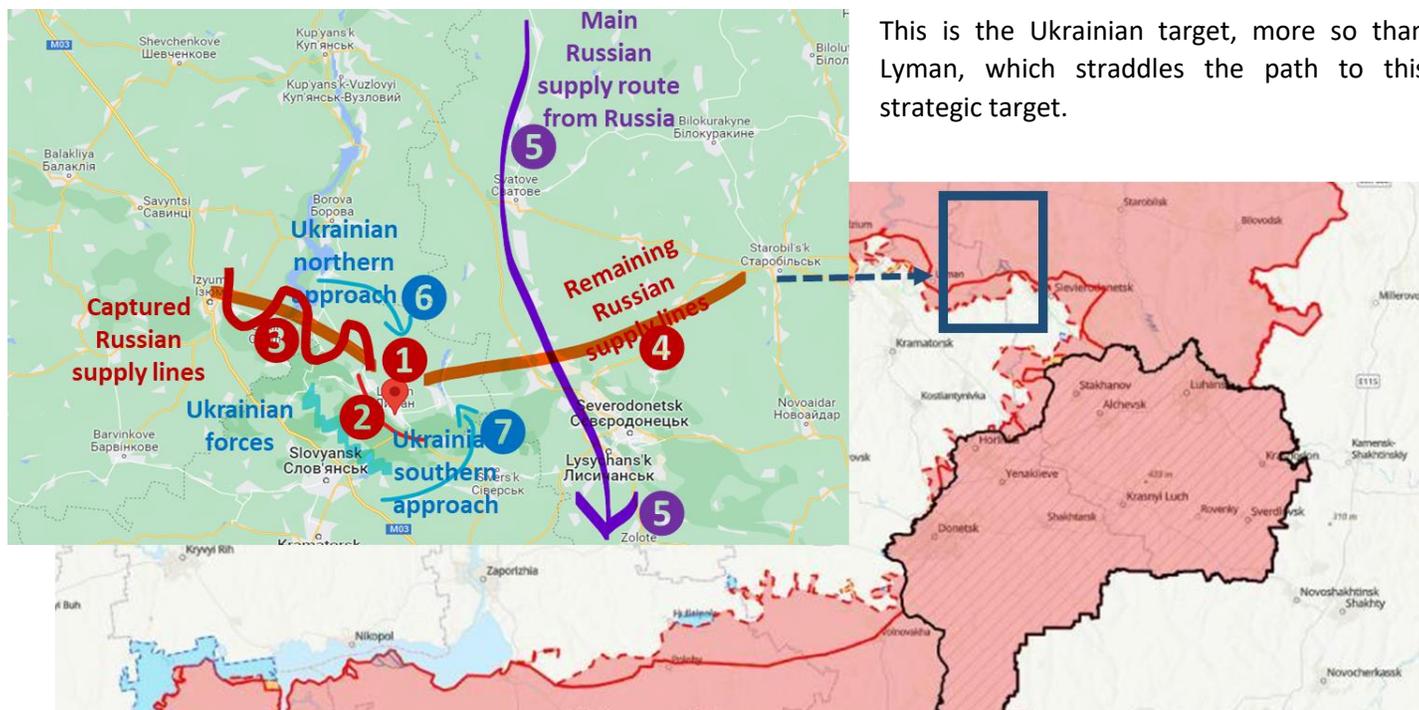
ISW noted that Russian military bloggers were discussing Ukrainian gains around Lyman with "increased concern" on Wednesday, suggesting that Russian forces in the city may face imminent defeat—potentially further undermining their morale.

The key supply hub was seized by Russian forces in May, three months after Putin's war against Ukraine began and is a key railway junction. Ukrainian forces may be able to use the area to press on with their successful counteroffensive in the east.

Comment – We have been referring to this battle in recent weeks. Ukrainian forces are not mounting a full frontal attack, as Russian forces have dug in with quite substantial defenses constructed to the west of the city.

So Ukrainian forces are encircling the area instead, moving north and south from the direction of Izyum. Referring to the map below, **1** is the town of Lyman in the northeast of Ukraine, with **2** the defensive line to its west, and **3** represents one of Lyman’s two supply lines, now in the hands of the Ukrainian forces. The sole remaining Russian supply line into Lyman is reflected by **4**.

Just to the east of Lyman is Russia’s primary supply route **5** from Russia into the Ukrainian oblasts to the south, running through Svatove. This is an incredibly important Ukrainian target, as severing it dramatically affects Russian forces throughout the northeast of Ukraine.



6 and **7** are Ukraine’s moves to outflank Lyman where the Russians have a battalion of an estimated 3,000 soldiers. These troops are already under supply siege and, once Ukrainian forces sever the remaining supply line from Severodonetsk through Kreminna, they will be isolated.

Success here will see Ukrainian forces rapidly advance south into Luhansk and Donetsk Oblasts and thereafter toward Zaporizhzhia Oblast, linking to Kherson where their forces are making headway.

There are an estimated 3,000 to 3,500 Russian soldiers in danger of being trapped in and around Lyman.

SSU detains collaborator whom Russians appointed to rule in occupied settlement in Kyiv region - The Security Service of Ukraine (SSU) has detained another henchman of Russian invaders who, during the temporary occupation of Kyiv Oblast, was appointed by the occupiers as the so-called "deputy head of the Dymier settlement council."

According to the Security Service of Ukraine, the detainee provided fuel for Russian military equipment, arranged the supply of gas, electricity and food to Russian forces.

The collaborator participated in interrogations of illegally imprisoned citizens, including representatives of the Red Cross Society of Ukraine. The Russian occupiers "knocked out" information about locations of units of the defence forces and the residence addresses of the participants of the anti-terrorist operation.

Russia sends conscripts from annexed Crimea to fight in Kherson Oblast - Russia is sending newly mobilized Crimean men to the front lines in Kherson Oblast, according to Ukrainian non-governmental organization CrimeaSOS. "They are (already) being transferred from Sevastopol, where they had spent only two days since they received their draft summonses," said Oleksii Tilnenko, the head of the organization's board, on Sept. 29. The conscription of residents of occupied territories to the ranks of the occupying army is a war crime.

Ukrainian Security Service captures Russian agents scouting Ukrainian positions near Kramatorsk and Zaporizhzhia - The Security Service of Ukraine (SSU) has detained 2 Russian agents who were spying on the combat positions and movements of Ukrainian Armed Forces units near Kramatorsk and Zaporizhzhia.

One of the detainees was a local businessman who was trying to establish a construction business in occupied Crimea. Employees of the Russian GRU offered him "cooperation" in exchange for resolving business issues. On the instructions of the invaders, he was supposed to collect intelligence on the defence of Kramatorsk.

Ukrainian Armed Forces strike nearly 30 concentrations of Russian personnel and equipment - Ukraine carried out air and ground strikes on Russian forces, striking a total of 30 areas where Russian military personnel and equipment were concentrated.

Ukrainian Armed Forces repelled Russian attacks in the vicinity of Zaitseve, Maiorsk, Zalizne, Mykolaivka Druha, Pervomaiske, Pobieda, Novomykhailivka and Bezimenne.

Ukrainian aircraft carried out 17 airstrikes, striking over 14 areas of concentration of Russian military personnel and equipment, 3 Russian strong points and 7 anti-aircraft defence systems on 27 September. In addition, Ukrainian air defence forces struck down a Russian aircraft, 6 UAVs and a Kh-59 guided cruise missile.

Ukraine's Rocket Forces and Artillery struck 12 areas where Russian military personnel, weapons and equipment were concentrated and 4 anti-aircraft systems, ammunition storage points and electronic warfare systems (in particular, a Zhitel communication jamming station). Russia's total losses have yet to be confirmed.

Ukraine's Armed Forces kill 58 invaders and destroy almost 80 units of Russian equipment in Ukraine's south - "A Russian tank platoon has attempted to carry out offensive actions on the Chkalove – Bezymenne axis. One tank blew up on an anti-tank mine and another two retreated.

Rocket and artillery units of the Armed Forces of Ukraine have carried out 250 firing missions, striking, in particular, a checkpoint and an ammunition storage point in the Beryslav district of Kherson Oblast.

Confirmed Russian losses in these operations are as follows: 58 military personnel, a tank and another 77 vehicles. The remaining outcomes are being established.

"The enemy's naval group in the Black Sea has been halved. Six vessels have stayed on maneuvers, three of which are surface-to-air missile carriers with 24 Kalibr cruise missiles on board," Operational Command Pivden said in a statement.

Ukraine will take back Crimea by mid-2023 - Retired U.S. General Ben Hodges predicts that the Ukrainian military will liberate Crimea and all other Russian-occupied territory by the middle of 2023.

Hodges, the former commanding general of United States Army Europe from 2014 to 2017, told Lithuanian media outlet LRT that he has "great confidence" in Ukraine's Armed Forces.

"I hope that by the end of this year, Ukrainian forces will push Russian forces to the positions of February 23," Hodges told LRT, "and that by the middle of next year, the Ukrainians will be in Crimea."

A new “(Russian) Crusade”?

Russian patriarch Kirill says Russian soldiers killed in line of duty will have sins absolved - Russian soldiers who die in the line of duty in Ukraine have all of their sins forgiven, the patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church proclaimed in a sermon, comparing their sacrificial death to that of Jesus.

The assertion, made on Sunday, ratchets up Moscow Patriarch Kirill's already staunch support for Russia's war on Ukraine since its beginning in February.

Kirill has characterized the war as part of a larger metaphysical struggle against an encroaching liberal West, which he depicts as demanding gay pride parades. He has echoed Russian President Vladimir Putin's depiction of Ukraine as spiritually and politically tied to Russia through their common medieval roots.

This harkens back to Pope Urban II who on November 27, 1095, in perhaps the most influential speech of the Middle Ages, giving rise to the Crusades by calling all Christians in Europe to war against Muslims in order to reclaim the Holy Land, with a cry of “Deus vult!” or “God wills it!”

At the Council of Clermont, in France, at which several hundred clerics and noblemen gathered, Urban delivered a rousing speech summoning rich and poor alike to stop their in-fighting and embark on a righteous war to help their fellow Christians in the East and take back Jerusalem. Urban denigrated the Muslims, exaggerating stories of their anti-Christian acts, and promised absolution and remission of sins for all who died in the service of Christ.

Peace Talks

Erdogan: 'Referendums' in occupied territories will undermine efforts to resume Ukraine-Russia peace talks - During a phone call with President Volodymyr Zelensky on Sept. 28, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that Russia's "unilateral" referendums held in Russian-occupied territories of four Ukrainian regions will complicate efforts to revive the "diplomatic process."

Referendum in four oblasts

Referendums complete - Kyiv said on September 28 that Moscow-orchestrated votes on becoming part of Russia held in four Ukrainian regions partially controlled by Moscow were "null and worthless," and called on the West to "significantly" increase its military aid to Ukraine.

Russian-backed officials had announced the final results earlier, saying voters had "overwhelmingly" supported becoming part of Russia. Two Moscow-appointed regional heads sent "requests" to join Russia shortly after

Referendums that the West and United Nations have called “sham” votes took place between September 23- and September 27 in the parts of the Zaporizhzhya, Luhansk, Donetsk, and Kherson regions that are under Moscow's military occupation. The territories account for about 15 percent of Ukraine's territory.

In eastern Ukraine's **Donetsk** region, **99.23 percent** of those who came to the polls voted for its entry into Russia, prompting Moscow-backed separatist leader Denis Pushilin to hail the result as "colossal."

In another eastern region, **Luhansk**, Russia-appointed election officials said the final result was **98.42 percent** in favor of the annexation

Russia to annex regions in plan condemned by UN - Russia plans to sign treaties Friday to absorb four occupied regions of Ukraine after annexation votes condemned by the UN as illegal. Putin plans to address legislators on Friday, his spokesman said.

Putin may face an early test of his annexation plans in the Donetsk town of Lyman, where Ukrainian, Western and Russian military analysts say Russian units are at risk of being enveloped.

He will hold a ceremony and later make an address to legislators and other officials, his spokesman said. The final formalities of annexation are expected to be completed next week.

The move puts the Kremlin on a fresh collision course with the US and its allies. Putin has threatened to use “all the means at our disposal” to defend Russia, a signal he may use nuclear weapons to defend the lands he’s annexing.

UN’s Guterres says Russian annexation ‘has no place in modern world’ – UN S-G Guterres condemned Russia’s annexation announcement as a violation of international law and the UN charter.

“Any decision to proceed with the annexation of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions of Ukraine would have no legal value and deserves to be condemned,” he said. “It cannot be reconciled with the international legal framework. It stands against everything the international community is meant to stand for. It flouts the purposes and principles of the United Nations. It is a dangerous escalation. It has no place in the modern world. It must not be accepted.”

Ukrainian President Zelenskiy expressed appreciation in a tweet for the clear statement by Guterres on Russia’s “criminal intention” to annex more land.

Mobilization

Most Russians Alarmed by Military Call-Up, Poll Shows - Most Russians are alarmed at Putin’s decision to order a “partial mobilization” after major battlefield losses in Ukraine, and slightly more are concerned that their war on their neighbor is going badly, an opinion poll showed.

According to the survey by the independent Levada Center, 70% of respondents had feelings of fear, alarm or shock after Putin ordered the call-up, with many worrying that a full-scale nationwide draft will follow. A total of 66% believe that’s a possibility, compared with 28% in February.

While a wide majority of those polled said they still supported the invasion, the share of Russians saying the conflict isn’t going well increased to 31% from 17% in April. More respondents - 48% - now back peace talks, versus 44% a month earlier.

Russia Says Mobilized Troops Will Be Used for ‘Defense’ - Russia said mobilized troops will be for the “defense” of the territories it occupies in Ukraine, as fear of being sent to the front lines of the invasion has led hundreds of thousands of draft-aged men to flee the country.

The Defense Ministry said that the mobilized troops will receive training and then be deployed to “control and defend” territory held by Russia, Interfax reported. Ukraine has steadily pushed Russian forces back in recent weeks, but the Kremlin is moving ahead with plans to annex the areas it holds, as well as laying claim to neighboring regions that Kyiv controls. The UN has denounced Russia’s annexation plans as illegal and illegitimate.

Anti-mobilization protests in Dagestan becoming a maidan in the North Caucasus - Since Putin announced mobilization, officials across Russia have sought to carry out his order, sparking protests in more than 50 cities and fire bombings of official buildings in more than 20. Outside the two capitals (Moscow and St. Petersburg), the largest

protests have been in non-Russian areas and in ethnic Russian rural areas far from the Kremlin, the two areas where the Russian authorities had erroneously calculated they would find it easiest to meet mobilization quotas.

In response, authorities have cracked down, arresting more than 2,300 demonstrators thus far. The largest flashpoints have been in Buryatia and Sakha in the Far East, as well as across the non-Russian republics and Russian krais and oblasts of the North Caucasus (Rfi.fr, September 25; Novayagazeta.eu, September 26).

But, overall, far and away the largest and most uninterrupted demonstrations outside Moscow and St. Petersburg—and the site of the largest number of arrests outside the capitals—have been those in Dagestan. Activists there say that Putin's mobilization order has destroyed popular myths about and support for the Kremlin leader and that they and the thousands of residents of the Muslim republic are showing the rest of Russia how to resist Moscow's orders and how such resistance can be effective (Kavkaz.Realii, September 26; Rfi.fr, September 26; Novayagazeta.eu, September 27).

Immediately after his order, Dagestanis in villages and cities across the 3-million-strong Muslim republic took to the streets to denounce the partial mobilization and demand that the Kremlin reverse its decree. As the protests continued—and Dagestanis are currently still demonstrating—some Russian officials have tried to calm things by saying they will work to ensure that any problems with the mobilization will be corrected; but Russian special forces, including troops dressed in civilian clothes, have moved in, firing live ammunition over the protesters' heads, engaging in fights with them and arresting more than 100.

But so far, they have failed to intimidate the population. Instead, these actions appear only to have outraged the crowds further. Demonstrations against mobilization continue, with some Dagestanis now blocking major roads to prevent the Russian authorities from moving law enforcement around (Meduza, September 25; Ehorussia.com, September 25; Rfi.ru, September 26).

Moscow has good reason to be alarmed by this course of events for two primary reasons. On the one hand, it had expected to harvest a large number of mobilized veterans from a republic where poverty has forced many men to serve in the military, men who the Kremlin might expect would be less opposed to serving again than those in other places where economic conditions have been better.

And on the other, in Dagestan, perhaps even more so than elsewhere, opposition to the mobilization decree is deeply intertwined with opposition to Putin's war in Ukraine and his regime's policies more generally, thus creating a potentially explosive cocktail of resistance that will likely spread if it is not suppressed quickly. That sets the stage for a possibly brutal Muscovite intervention in the coming days. In truth, the situation may have already reached the point in which using force will prove to be like throwing water on a grease fire—it is more likely to spread the conflagration than to extinguish it.

Because Dagestan is far from Moscow with its Western embassies and journalists, it has not attracted the attention in the West that it deserves, as was the case with the growing national movements at the end of Soviet times; even so, one country—Ukraine— has been extremely attentive and for good reason.

This past week, Ukrainian President Zelenskyy spoke directly about Dagestan. “We see that people, in particular, in Dagestan,” he said, “are beginning to struggle for their lives. We see that they are beginning to understand that this is a question of their life. Why should their husbands, brothers and sons die in this war? ... Fight to prevent the dispatch of your children to death and of all those who may fall victim to this criminal Russian mobilization” (Facebook.com, September 25).

Some Ukrainian commentators are now going even further, referring to the events of the past week as “Dagestan's Maidan,” a reference to events in Ukraine during 2014 that set the stage for the country's increasingly independent and pro-Western course (Apostrophe, September 26). Putin must be worried that he now faces not only the results of the Maidan in Ukraine but also the potential for similar ones within the current borders of the Russian Federation.

Albania says it welcomes Russians - Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama said Russians fleeing the country are “welcome” in Albania, according to Tirana-based portal Albanian Daily News. When it comes to the Balkan region, the Russian exodus so far has been focused on Serbia.

Police in Russia's Tyva disperse anti-mobilization rally, detain women - Police in Russia's Siberian Tyva region have detained at least 27 women and dispersed a rally against the mobilization of local men for Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine.

Dozens of women chanted "No to mobilization! No to genocide!" before the rally was dispersed just minutes after it started on the central Arat Square in Tyva's capital, Kyzyl, on September 29.

Russia's chaotic mobilization unlikely to change Ukraine war's course - The first week of Russia's earth-quaking mobilization campaign has topped all expectations — in terms of its harshness, hastiness, and chaos.

With the Russian positions in Ukraine rapidly deteriorating, the Kremlin upped the ante and risked announcing a draft. The regime aims to draft between 300,000 and over 1.2 million people, upon various reports.

The Kremlin adhered to the most straightforward way of generating manpower: Conscript just about anyone, give them little to no training, give them poor provisioning, and send them to the war zone within weeks or even days.

The chaos of mobilization emphasized the fundamental flaws of the Russian military that make it unfit for a large-scale war.

The war now enters a new phase. In it, Russia tries to stop the Ukrainian counter-strike and buy time with the primitive use of the regime's most expendable resource – people.

Such an escalatory step precipitates an even more massive loss of life and even more brutal and intense hostilities.

And yet, it's unlikely to help the Kremlin dramatically reverse the war's tide.

The Kremlin has made a way from employing short-term contract "volunteers" to letting the greatly empowered Wagner Group private company recruit convicts in prisons.

Now the time has run out. Ukraine has completed its own mobilization effort, having unfolded a standing military force of some 750,000 troops, vastly operating Western weaponry and advanced tactics.

As multiple testimonies on Russian social media suggest, Moscow found an ingenious solution in sending its newly-mobilized personnel to the war zone with very little or even no training.

In a now-famous video plea aired on Sept. 26, a newly-mobilized member with Russia's 1st Tank Regiment claimed his unit would not get any training before being sent to the Kherson Oblast on Sept. 29.

According to Russian opposition media outlet Mediazona, mobilized men of the 237th Tank Regiment, part of Russia's 3rd Motor Rifle Division, are being sent to Donbas after just one day of training.

The first waves of reservists are being sent to the front line to reinforce severely degraded Russian units rather than join newly-formed units.

As the ISW concluded, such manpower is "unlikely to meaningfully reinforce Russian positions affected by Ukrainian counter-offensives in the south and east."

"Mind it that to prepare a shitty soldier, you need a month of intense training," said Igal Levin, a Ukraine-based military expert and Israeli army reserve officer.

"You need three months to get a mediocre soldier, and six months to get a fairly good fighter. A commander requires at least six months, or up to one year, and even more."

Over 120,000 young conscripts now seeing the end of their service term in October will likely be automatically mobilized again as those with military experience and less than 35 years old.

Those who once took the bait and signed a "short-term military contract" (3-12 months in service) to make some easy money fighting Ukraine are in big trouble now, too. According to the law, they can't leave as long as the mobilization period continues.

Then there's always the growing pressure upon Russian logistics.

Even the lowest estimate of draftees to be called up, the 300,000 voiced by Russia's defense minister Sergei Shoigu, demonstrate the campaign's immense scale.

The February invasion force thrown against Ukraine counted some 180,000-190,000 troops, including Russian-led militant forces of Donbas and mercenaries. Even at this scale, Russia's endemic logistics issues severely impeded its advances and precipitated the defeat at Kyiv.

Whether Russia can cope with the influx of hundreds of thousands of new personnel coming in the next weeks or months is a very open question.

Whether Russia can put the newly-arriving force to good use to meaningfully reinforce its degraded battalions and brigade, or even extend them into larger military units to be used in future offensive operations against Ukraine is also very unclear.

Russia has conscripted 100,000 people since Sept. 21 - The figure was provided by Oleksiy Hromov, a deputy chief of the General Staff's main operations department. Russia has announced plans to mobilize 300,000 conscripts. "We understand that the announced figure of 300,000 is not final. The number of mobilized conscripts will most likely be far larger," Hromov said.

Belarus prepares to accommodate 20,000 Russian conscripts - Belarus is preparing to take in 20,000 newly mobilized Russian men who will replenish the units already stationed in the county, Ukraine's Defense Ministry reported on Sept. 29. Belarusian authorities are using civilian premises, buildings, and cars for accommodating and transporting Russian soldiers.

Impacts

With Russian industrial base in shambles, US looks for arms sale 'opportunities' - "Countries that have heretofore relied on Russian equipment are going to find it very difficult to get even basic supplies coming through because of this weakened defense industrial base. So it is an opportunity," said Cara Abercrombie, deputy assistant to the president and the White House's coordinator for defense policy and arms control.

EU Says Ready to Make Russia Pay 'Heavy Price' - The European Commission doesn't accept Russia's "sham" referendums aimed at annexing Ukrainian territories, spokeswoman Dana Spinant said in Brussels.

"We will never accept any annexation of territory or any land-grabbing by Russia," Spinant said. "We are ready to make the Kremlin pay a hefty price for this new escalation in the conflict."

Sanctions

West prepares new sanctions to make Russia pay 'severe economic cost' for escalating war through referendums - The United States and its allies are preparing to impose fresh sanctions on Russia in the wake of what the West and United Nations have called "sham" referendums in four Ukrainian regions, with the White House saying the measures would exact a "severe" economic price on Moscow.

Yesterday, European Commission President von der Leyen introduced a new package of measures, saying they are designed "to make the Kremlin pay" for escalating the conflict in Ukraine.

"We do not accept the sham referenda nor any kind of annexation in Ukraine, and we are determined to make the Kremlin pay the price for this further escalation," she told reporters in Brussels.

The proposed eighth sanctions package includes further import bans on Russian products that are meant to deprive Moscow of an additional 7 billion euros (\$6.7 billion) in revenues.

Montenegro declares Russian diplomats persona non grata - Six Russian diplomats in Montenegro have been declared persona non grata, Tass news agency reported, citing a Twitter post on the page of the Montenegrin foreign ministry's press office. Russia will give "an appropriate response," Tass reported, citing the nation's foreign ministry.

Earlier on Thursday several Montenegrin citizens were detained in Podgorica on suspicion of having worked for Russian intelligence, Vijesti reported, citing unidentified people with knowledge.

Putin

Putin's allies are starting to turn on Ukraine war – As Putin's invasion of Ukraine sparked widespread criticism and sanctions, several countries maintained ties with Russia, or at least did not outright condemn the attack.

But as the war has stretched on for more than seven months and recent Ukrainian counteroffensives have increased hope for a victory against Russia, some of Putin's allies have pushed away from his regime and aggression in Ukraine.

U.S. President Biden has been working to create a global coalition to isolate Russia and pressure Putin to end the war, and the latest criticism of Russia indicates Biden's strategy might be working.

Western leaders and Ukraine have stressed that they will not accept the results of such referendums, but Putin is also facing pushback from one of his allies, former Soviet Union member Kazakhstan.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who has maintained diplomatic and economic ties with Russia since the start of the war, told PBS' Judy Woodruff in an interview last week that Russia should not be permitted to keep any of the Ukrainian territory it has captured. He also stressed that the invasion itself "cannot be justified."

During a meeting of heads of state in Uzbekistan recently, Indian Prime Minister Modi skipped hugging Putin and told the Russian president that "today's era is not one of war."

At the UN last week, top Putin ally Belarus spoke in support of Russia, but it also called for the conclusion of fighting that it described as a "tragedy." China, which has continued to buy Russian oil amid the war and voted against the U.N. resolution in April, said that facilitating peace talks was a "pressing priority."

Putin is testing the limits of China's friendship - Putin may be stress-testing the limits of his friendship with his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping this week after taking the first steps in formally annexing pro-Russian regions in eastern and southern Ukraine.

Each of the occupied regions of Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia declared landslide victories on Tuesday after holding controversial referendums to become Russian federal subjects. The pro-Kremlin leaders of Luhansk and Donetsk—whose independence was recognized by Putin in February as a pretext for a full invasion—have asked the Russian president to begin accession procedures.

Putin's move could be no less contentious for China, which swears by the sacrosanctity of territorial integrity to uphold its own claims and doesn't speak lightly of self-determination, the principle cited by Russia's leader for backing Ukraine's breakaway regions.

Zhang Jun, Beijing's U.N. envoy, told a gathering of the Security Council that "the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries should be respected," and "the legitimate security concerns of all countries should be taken seriously"—the latter a familiar nod to the Kremlin's grievances against NATO expansion.

Amid calls in the West for harsher punishment against Moscow, Zhang said "political isolation, sanctions and pressurization will only lead to a dead end," before renewing calls for peace talks.

Precedent suggests Xi won't easily support Russia's latest round of territorial expansion. Beijing didn't follow Moscow's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the pro-Russian regions in Georgia, following the Russo-Georgian War in 2008. China also hasn't recognized Russia's annexation of Crimea via a status referendum in 2014—the same playbook being repeated this week.

China's ambassador abstained when the U.N. Security Council voted to condemn Russia in March 2014. Qin Gang—the Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson who's now China's top envoy in Washington—explained at the time: "China always respects the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries. That is a basic diplomatic principle that has long been upheld by China."

"We believe that due to complex historical and practical factors, we should take everything into consideration when dealing with the Ukraine issue," said Qin, who called China's position "fair and objective."

Putin seen as more dangerous as Russia-Ukraine war turns sour - Putin is becoming more dangerous and desperate as he faces growing pressure at home over the flailing war effort in Ukraine, observers of the conflict and Moscow say.

Putin in the last week has renewed his threats of using nuclear weapons in Ukraine and moved to annex territories from Ukraine, while arguing attacks on that territory would amount to an attack on Russia.

His government is also suspected in leaks to a pipeline under the Baltic Sea that carries fuel to Europe, although the gas flow was earlier suspended.

The new threats come after a mobilization effort of 300,000 reservists in Russia, announced in response to criticism of Putin's war effort, received blowback across the country. Images of lines of cars seeking to get across the border into neighboring states have circulated, underscoring internal tensions over the war.

The Biden administration and U.S. allies have reacted forcefully, warning that the use of nuclear weapons would lead to serious consequences.

Outside experts describe a tinderbox of sort.

"He is dangerous, he is desperate," said Daniel Fried, distinguished fellow at the Atlantic Council and a former U.S. ambassador to Poland.

"Because he's in a weak position he's doubling down on what he may consider to be his strongest remaining assets: nuclear threat and ability to use violence to achieve his aims, such as blowing up the Nordstream pipelines, if in fact

Russia is responsible, which it appears they may be. He's hoping to use unpredictability as a tactical weapon to intimidate the West."

The Biden administration, in its delivery of heavy artillery to Ukraine, has requested and received assurances from the Ukrainians that they would not strike within Russian territory out of a fear that such an action would escalate a bigger reaction from Russia.

But that limit is not expected to apply to Ukrainian territory forcibly occupied by Russia.

"Ukraine has the absolute right to defend itself throughout its territory, including to take back the territory that has been illegally seized one way or another by Russia," Secretary of State Antony Blinken told reporters on Tuesday. "The weapons that we and many other countries are providing them have been used very effectively to do just that."

The U.S. has not adjusted its nuclear posture in response to Putin's latest comments, a sign both that it does not see an imminent threat and that it does not want to escalate the conflict. (The Hill, as extracted).

Is Putin's war in Ukraine costing Russia control of its own backyard? - For three decades, Russia has been struggling to manage the ongoing collapse of the USSR. Its primary goals have been to bind former Soviet republics to Moscow-led international organizations, to keep outside powers away from its backyard, and to use its considerable clout to at least freeze the many territorial and political disputes that still bedevil the region.

Now, thanks to the war in Ukraine, all of those objectives look compromised.

Tensions are spiking around the former USSR, where a massively distracted Russia seems increasingly unable to perform its usual role of regional stabilizer due to growing commitments to the war and the negative example it has set by using force to settle its own post-Soviet disputes.

Over the past month, an armistice brokered by Russia between Armenia and Azerbaijan after a bitter war two years ago broke down as Azerbaijani forces, backed by Turkey, surged forward and attacked the recognized territory of Russian-allied Armenia. And an unresolved border dispute ignited in bloody fighting between the mountainous Central Asian republics of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, both Russian allies, leaving at least 100 people dead and a diplomatic quandary for Moscow in its wake.

Those two crises have simmered down with hastily imposed cease-fires, but those and many other potential flashpoints remain. Analysts warn that the entire post-Soviet region – never very stable – will continue to present problems for Moscow in the form of conflicts, political instability, and an increasing tendency to flirt with foreign powers to offset the influence of a Russia preoccupied with Ukraine.

"Russian military action in Ukraine, which is not going according to its initial design, has consumed a lot of Russian resources and energy," says Fyodor Lukyanov, editor of *Russia in Global Affairs*, a leading Moscow-based foreign policy journal. "Obviously different countries will use this situation to pursue their own agendas. ... A general reconfiguration of the post-Soviet space has been underway for some time. Many of these new countries need to demonstrate their sustainability as states. They are very nervous about their neighbors and their own internal stability. The Russian operation in Ukraine has given a big impetus to all such tensions and uncertainties."

Indeed, Russian behavior in Ukraine, which is ostensibly aimed at protecting Russian-speaking populations, must worry other post-Soviet states with large ethnic Russian minorities in their midst, such as Kazakhstan, Moldova, and the Baltic States, says Andrey Kortunov, director of the Russian International Affairs Council, which is affiliated with the Foreign Ministry. "It's not just that Russia is distracted," he says. "Many must wonder, if it can happen in Ukraine, why not to other countries as well?"

But post-imperial issues abounded, including territorial disputes and breakaway statelets in Georgia, Azerbaijan, Moldova, and even Russia itself. Large populations of ethnic Russians were left stranded beyond the borders of Russia, especially in Ukraine, the Baltic States, and Central Asia, and have been a constant source of tensions ever since.

“The problems that followed the USSR’s collapse were serious. The rules, boundaries, economic conditions that prevail in a united state turn dangerous when parts of it become separate entities. Rules and systems change,” says Vladimir Zharikhin, deputy director of the official Institute of the Commonwealth of Independent States in Moscow. “These problems are not always resolved peacefully.”

Russia overturned any semblance of post-Soviet accord, experts say, by invading Ukraine and seeking to redraw the borders it inherited from the USSR. That sets an example to others, and also undermines Russian credibility as a mediator for other frozen conflicts in the region.

Two years ago, Russia declined to come to the assistance of its Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) ally Armenia on the grounds that the attacking Azerbaijanis were only retaking their own sovereign territory that had been illegally occupied by Armenia in a post-Soviet war. Russia was able to impose a peacekeeping regime at that time, but it has all but unraveled in recent weeks as Azerbaijan moved to take more territory and even attacked Armenia proper.

As Russia struggled to reimpose the cease-fire, U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi flew to Yerevan to express her support for Armenia, and also fan the flames of Armenian outrage – that its supposed big protector, Russia, appeared to be missing in action as Armenia faced Azerbaijani aggression alone.

That situation remains exceedingly dangerous, not just because Azerbaijani ambitions have grown amid political crisis in Armenia, but also because it raises the specter of a much wider war. Turkey is Azerbaijan’s key sponsor, while Iran has mobilized forces and warned that it might intervene if Armenia’s borders should be threatened. In recent years, Iran has become an important trading partner and even something of a strategic partner for Armenia.

No matter how it turns out, Russia’s war in Ukraine is going to have a huge impact on many former Soviet countries. If Russia should lose the war, the consequences could be widespread and devastating, says Mr. Kortunov.

In 2008, Russia successfully intervened to block a Georgian military attempt to retake two pro-Russian breakaway regions, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which belong to Georgia under international law.

“A lot of these suppressed conflicts will swiftly unfreeze,” he says. “Georgia has unfinished business [with those rebel regions], and a wounded Russia may not be able to exert itself next time. There is endemic unrest in other places, like Belarus, that could easily flare up again. Central Asia is a perennial problem. Russia and the CSTO were able to quickly restore stability in Kazakhstan earlier this year with a quick and limited intervention. Would it be able to repeat that in future?” (Christian Science Monitor).

Nuclear

US asks China, India to convince Putin not to use nuclear weapons - U.S. officials are urging countries of the Pacific region to put pressure on Russian dictator Vladimir Putin and communicate to him that the use of nuclear weapons will have a harsh economic and diplomatic response, Politico reports, citing unnamed sources in President Joe Biden's administration.

Intelligence: Probability of Russia striking Ukraine with tactical nuclear weapons is 'very high' - “They will likely target places along the frontlines with lots of personnel and equipment, key command centers, and critical infrastructure,” Vadym Skibitsky, a deputy head of Ukraine's military intelligence, told The Guardian. “In order to stop them, we need not just more anti-aircraft systems but anti-rocket systems.” Tactical nuclear weapons are

approximately 100 times more powerful than the missiles that Russia has used against Ukraine so far, according to Skibitsky.

The reasons that Putin is 'brandishing' nuclear weapons: Gen. Jack Keane - [Putin] wants to put pressure on Europe as the winter is coming. He wants them to get shut down in terms of their energy supplies. And certainly his intent is to sort of break their will somewhat [with] the suffering of their people and curb their support for the Ukrainians ... That's why he's brandishing nuclear weapons, likely for the same reason - to reduce and minimize the support that the Ukrainians are receiving from arms, ammunitions, but also economic support and enforcing the sanctions. ... Putin has always been of the mind, Neil, that at some point the Europeans will buckle. Their self-interest will prevail, as they have in the past, and they will cut off to some degree the support for ... Ukraine. He's counting on that to happen as part of his strategy.

US spy planes appear to be monitoring a Russian enclave in Europe, possibly looking for signs of nuclear weapons activity - The US military appears to be stepping up aerial surveillance of Kaliningrad, a Russian territory in Europe, potentially signaling concern that the Kremlin could decide to deploy or even use nuclear weapons in Ukraine as Russian leaders have warned.

On Wednesday, a US Boeing RC-135 electronic surveillance plane departed from a base in the United Kingdom and circled around Kaliningrad, a Russian territory along the Baltic Sea — sharing no land border with the mainland — that was annexed after World War II, according to a flight tracking website. It was the 3rd such flight in the past week.

Home to nearly 500,000 people, it is sometimes referred to as Russia's "unsinkable aircraft carrier" because it is wedged between Poland and Lithuania, providing the Kremlin a forward operating base within NATO territory.

In 2018, Russia carried out a "major renovation" of an active nuclear weapons storage facility in Kaliningrad some 50 kilometers from Poland, according to Hans Kristensen, a nuclear arms expert at the Federation of American Scientists. The facility, he wrote at the time, could function "as a forward storage site that would be supplied with warheads from central storage sites in a crisis."

Something fishy in the Baltics.....

Pipeline leaks appear to be result of deliberate act - European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said Wednesday that all indications are that leaks from two Nord Stream natural gas pipelines in the Baltic Sea "are the result of a deliberate act."

"We will support any investigation aimed at getting full clarity on what happened and why and will take further steps to increase our resilience in energy security," Borrell said in a statement. "Any deliberate disruption of European energy infrastructure is utterly unacceptable and will be met with a robust and united response."

The U.S. State Department said late Tuesday that Secretary of State Antony Blinken discussed the situation with Danish Foreign Minister Jeppe Kofod and that the United States "remains united with our allies and partners in our commitment to promoting European energy security."

U.S. national security adviser Jake Sullivan tweeted that the U.S. is supporting efforts to investigate the apparent sabotage.

Denmark's defense minister Morten Bodskov is due to discuss the matter with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in Brussels on Wednesday.

Sweden's coast guard says it found a fourth leak on the Nord Stream pipelines carrying gas from Russia to Europe. Three leaks were found earlier this week after gas was seen bubbling to the surface of the Baltic Sea, near the Danish

island of Bornholm. According to Helsinki's Coast Guard, "There are currently two gas leaks in Swedish waters, a larger leak above North Stream 1, and a smaller leak above North Stream 2." The distance between those two is one nautical mile, or 1.8 km. There are also two reported leaks in Danish waters; and the closest is 2.6 nautical miles, or 4.6 km, from those leaks in Sweden's waters.

NATO says the leaks appear to be "deliberate, reckless, and irresponsible acts of sabotage," according to a statement from the 30-nation alliance published Thursday. "Any deliberate attack against Allies' critical infrastructure would be met with a united and determined response," the alliance added.

NATO promises 'determined' response to infrastructure attacks - NATO allies warned that any deliberate attack against allies' infrastructure would be met with a "united and determined response," following gas pipeline leaks in the Baltic Sea discovered this week.

In a joint statement, the North Atlantic Council echoed other officials, saying information currently indicates the leaks are the result of "deliberate, reckless and irresponsible acts of sabotage." They added they are committed to defending against any "coercive use of energy or hybrid tactics by state and non-state actors."

Even as Poland has blamed Russia for the damage, the NATO statement refrained from naming any names as a joint investigation by Denmark, Sweden and Germany is under way.

EU security officials observed Russian Navy ships in vicinity of Nord Stream pipeline leaks - European security officials on Monday and Tuesday observed Russian Navy support ships in the vicinity of leaks in the Nord Stream pipelines likely caused by underwater explosions, according to two Western intelligence officials and one other source familiar with the matter.

It's unclear whether the ships had anything to do with those explosions, these sources and others said – but it's one of the many factors that investigators will be looking into.

Russian submarines were also observed not far from those areas last week, one of the intelligence officials said.

Comment – Given the vulnerability of the Nordstrom pipeline as it lays underwater, this raises the similar susceptibility of international Internet and communication cables, essential in everyday life around the globe.

GeoPolitics

US touts \$810M for Pacific islands to help fend off China, some for Solomons - In its most high-profile effort yet to woo Pacific island nations away from the pull of Beijing, the US treated island leaders to red carpet treatment at the White House — including a dinner with President Joe Biden — and they will be on the receiving end of some \$810 million in funding as part of a newly announced "Pacific Partnership Strategy."

The largest pledge to any one country is going to the Solomon Islands, which had been reticent to agree to the proposed plan for the Pacific, according to several news reports. The Solomons, in particular, became a flashpoint for the concern over Beijing's Pacific strategy after it was revealed those two nations had signed a secret security pact. The new US funding to the Solomons is in the form of a grant program worth \$20 million "to spur tourism investments and jobs in the Solomon Islands."

Much of the rest of the money announced today appears to be a \$600 million program spread over 10 years that the administration first announced in July. Most of it will be associated, a White House Fact Sheet released today says, with the South Pacific Tuna Treaty.

Containment

U.S. announces \$1.1 billion in aid for building Ukraine's military - The United States will provide an additional \$1.1 billion in military aid to Ukraine, including funding for about 18 more advanced rocket systems and other weapons to counter drones, the White House announced yesterday.

The package is aimed at helping Ukraine secure its longer-term defense needs under the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative, which funds the purchase of weapons and equipment. This means it could take a year or more for Ukraine to get the systems.

Most of the other military aid packages announced by the United States have thus far used Pentagon drawdown authority to provide weapons more immediately.

Meeting in Brussels signifies a turning point for allies arming Ukraine - In a sign that the United States and its allies believe that the fighting in Ukraine will last years, military officials from more than 40 countries gathered at NATO's headquarters in Brussels on Wednesday to discuss how their governments can ramp up production of arms and ammunition.

The meeting was held under the auspices of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group, which the U.S. Defense Department created after Russia invaded the country in late February.

What happened in Brussels?

A senior NATO official said delegates discussed gaps in weapons stockpiles and how to coordinate manufacturing to fill them quickly, for fighting that he predicted would reach a critical point in the coming months.

The official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak publicly, did not offer specifics on which weapons might next be sent to Ukraine, and American officials would not comment on the discussions. So far the Biden administration has provided Ukraine with nearly \$16 billion in security assistance, including 21 separate packages of military aid from Pentagon stockpiles.

Weapons procurement and delivery can take years to complete, but the NATO official described some short-term fixes, including agreement among many countries to buy more ammunition, largely to backfill stockpiles reduced by the war.

Who are the members?

More than 40 nations attended the group's inaugural meeting at Ramstein Air Base in Germany on April 26, including all of the countries in NATO, several European nations that hope to join and eight so-called "major non-NATO allies" from Africa, the Middle East, Asia and the Pacific. Since then, a few countries from the Americas have also signed on.

The meeting of national armament directors included officials from across Europe and the Indo-Pacific but not defense industry representatives or weapons manufacturers.

Why was this meeting necessary?

The top priority for the discussions was increasing ammunition for howitzers and rocket artillery, a senior U.S. defense official said on Friday.

Some of the components Ukraine needs are obsolete, and shortages of ball bearings, microelectronics and other items have created production delays in the United States, said the official, who was not authorized to speak publicly about the group's plans.

The United States is trying to solve those problems, the official said, adding that the Pentagon would be willing to adopt solutions offered by different countries who may be facing the same problems.

Which countries make these munitions?

Dozens of NATO and non-NATO countries make the kinds of ammunition used by members of the alliance. Federal law prevents the State Department from saying which have been issued licenses to produce American-designed weapons, but nearly two dozen countries make the 155-millimeter artillery shells that Ukraine needs.

In the first decades of NATO's existence, the allies had not settled on which kinds of artillery they should all use. But eventually, the 155-millimeter howitzer and the smaller 105-millimeter gun became the mainstay of those countries.

By the early 1980s, American-designed 155-millimeter shells were rolling off factory floors in Belgium, Britain, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway and Turkey. And in 2022, Australia, Bosnia, the Czech Republic, Israel, Slovakia, South Korea and Spain are among the contact group nations making them as well.