

# Conflict Update Day 390

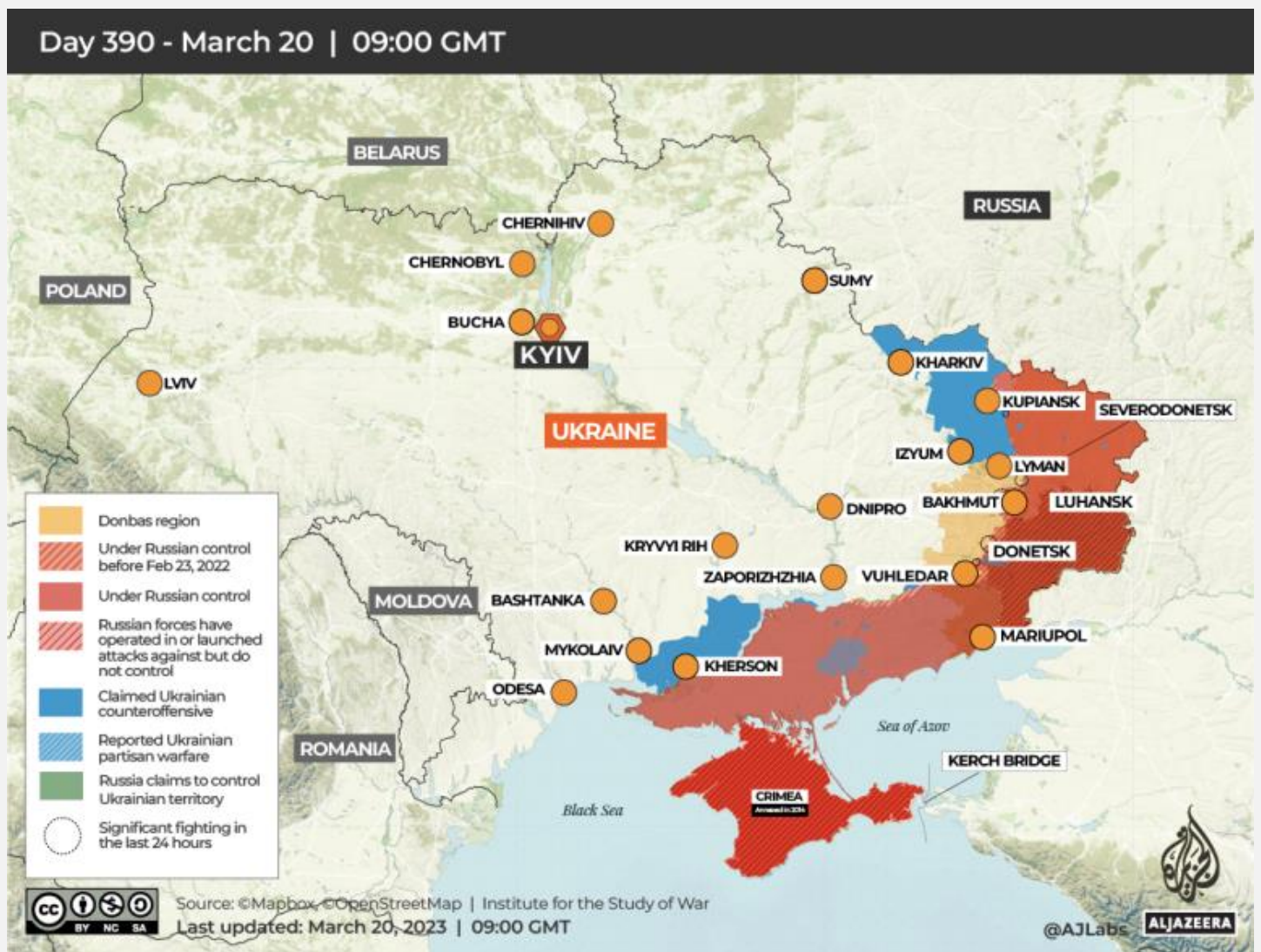
March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2023

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## Conflict Assessment

**Russian losses** – 165,610 (+700) soldiers killed, 3,537 (+5) enemy tanks, 6,869 (+16) armored combat vehicles, 2,577 (+9) artillery systems, 507 (0) MLRS systems, 270 (+2) air defense systems, 305 (+0) warplanes, 290 (+0) helicopters, 2,160 (+1) UAVs of the operational-tactical level, 907 (+0) cruise missiles, 18 (+0) warships/cutters, 5,416 (+8) trucks and tankers, 4 Iskander Missile Launchers (+0), 239 fuel bowsers (+0) and 265 (+3) units of equipment.

## Key Takeaways



Ukraine this morning said its air, rocket, and artillery forces had conducted strikes against 10 Russian temporary bases over the previous day.

Ukraine's military said it had also repelled almost 70 Russian assaults with Moscow's forces conducting offensives in Lyman, Bakhmut, Avdiivka, Mariinka, and Shakhtarsk in Donetsk Oblast.

**Collaborator who oversaw torture in Kherson Oblast confirmed dead.** Serhiy Moskalenko, who helped Russian troops kidnap and torture Ukrainians in Kherson Oblast, was identified yesterday by Ukraine's military intelligence as the collaborator who was killed in a March 17 car explosion in the region.

**British intelligence: Russian forces making gains near Avdiivka.** Russia has been progressing toward Ukrainian-controlled Avdiivka in Donetsk Oblast over the past three weeks using mobilized forces from occupied territory that are familiar with the local terrain, according to the U.K. Defense Ministry. Avdiivka has been a frontline city since Russia first invaded Donbas in 2014 and is mostly in ruins. **Comment** – This where a complete Russian division was wiped out within minutes late last week.

**Russia damaged or seized more than 1,700 fire trucks, hundreds of fire stations during war** - Serhii Kruk, who heads Ukraine's State Emergency Service, reported yesterday Ukraine has lost more than 1,700 fire trucks, 300 fire stations and more than 700 buildings run by the Emergency Service since the start of Russia's full-scale war.

Some of these lost assets have been damaged from constant shelling, the rest have been seized by the Russian army in occupied areas.

Kruk added that Ukraine currently receives a lot of aid from various countries, including "extremely necessary" equipment for rescuers and special clothing.

Over the past year, Kyiv alone received 36 fire trucks, including 12 fire trucks and 7 ambulances from Germany and Poland, as well as rescue equipment from Switzerland, which the city received in July last year.

**ISW: Ukrainian forces likely conducted localized counterattack southwest of Bakhmut** - Geolocated footage published yesterday indicates Ukrainian forces conducted a successful counterattack southwest of Ivanivske, six kilometers west of Bakhmut, and pushed Russian forces further away from the key highway in the area, ISW said.

Serhii Cherevaty, a spokesperson for the eastern grouping of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, said Russian forces conducted 25 attacks in the Bakhmut area on March 19, but likely only secured "marginal gains."

Russian sources amplified footage on March 18 alleging to show a column of Ukrainian armored vehicles along the highway southwest of Kostiantynivka (22 kilometers southwest of Bakhmut) and speculated that Ukrainian forces are preparing to launch counteroffensive operations southwest of Bakhmut.

A prominent Russian military blogger claimed that Ukrainian forces "are currently capable of intensifying counterattacks to stabilize the front line around Bakhmut."

"The growing Russian discussions about an imminent Ukrainian counteroffensive in the Bakhmut area suggest that Russian sources are increasingly uncertain about the Russian military's ability to maintain the initiative around Bakhmut," the ISW found.

**Comment** – We reported on Ukrainian moves south of Bakhmut in our Update of Day 387.

**Nine Russian warships spotted off the coast of Crimea** – Nine Russian warships, two of which are missile carriers, in combat condition have been seen on the coast of Crimea, according to a Sunday report by Ukrainian media outlet Ukrinform.

On March 18, Ukraine's Navy claimed to have spotted 14 Russian warships off the coast of Crimea, four of which were missile carriers. It is unclear whether they were all combat-ready. The report quoted Ukrainian spokesperson for Operational Command South (OCS) Natalia Humeniuk.

Humeniuk said that the naval vessels are more than 100 nautical miles from Ukrainian weaponry, which means that Ukrainian forces have been unable to attack the vessels so far.

As of February, 18 Russian warships were reportedly destroyed by Ukrainian forces since the beginning of the invasion.

The enemy ship group continues its maneuvers in a safe area - where they cannot be hit by our weapons. At least, that's what they think so far, noted OK South.

**Russian troops fear imminent Bakhmut counter offensive—ISW** - Russian military bloggers are worried about the ability of Moscow's troops to handle an imminent Ukrainian counter offensive, ISW has said.

The US think tank noted how the Russian information space was reacting to footage on Saturday, which allegedly showed a column of Ukrainian armored vehicles along the highway around 13 miles southwest of Bakhmut.

Russian sources speculated that this signaled plans by Kyiv to launch a counter offensive operation southwest of the city, with one prominent milblogger saying that Ukrainian forces were capable of intensifying counter attacks to stabilize the front line around the Donetsk town.

ISW yesterday said that increasing discussions about an imminent Ukrainian counter offensive "suggest that Russian sources are increasingly uncertain about Russian military ability to maintain the initiative around Bakhmut."

Lending weight to speculation about Ukraine's intentions was geolocated footage published yesterday showed how Ukrainian forces had conducted a successful counter attack southwest of Ivanivske, around four miles west of Bakhmut. Newsweek has emailed the Russian defense ministry for comment.

**Unarmed Russian soldiers run into Ukrainian fire for the sole purpose of digging trenches or carrying ammunition. Those who refuse could be killed or imprisoned, report says** - Unarmed men with the sole purpose of digging trenches or carrying ammunition are being sent toward Ukrainian fire as part of Russia's unrelenting efforts to capture Bakhmut, according to Ukrainian soldiers who spoke to The New York Times.

Russia has made incremental progress in Bakhmut since it waged a battle in the eastern Donetsk region more than seven months ago but at a deadly cost: A NATO official estimated five Russian soldiers die for every Ukrainian soldier killed.

A media officer for Ukraine's Third Assault Brigade, which has spent the past three months in Bakhmut, told the newspaper his unit surmised some of the fighters might be on drugs, bewildered that the men would so willingly move toward their death. Ukrainians have previously speculated that Russian soldiers might be taking drugs, though there is no evidence this is the case.

But the men also may not have much of a choice. Russia is using what Ukrainian commanders described to the Times as anti-retreat units in which soldiers, some of them unarmed, push forward enemy fire.

Yaroslav, a Ukrainian soldier who leads a drone unit, said men face the possibility of execution or imprisonment if they turn back. (Ukrainian soldiers interviewed by the Times were only identified by their first name or military nicknames.)

In drone footage shown to the newspaper, a lone unarmed Russian soldier could be seen briefly looking back before he continued to move toward incoming weapons fire.

"Do you see? He's not carrying a weapon," Yaroslav told the Times. "He's a digger."

Ukrainian commanders have also heard orders against desertion in intercepted phone calls or seen them written on a document found in the pocket of a dead soldier, the Times reported.

Other reported Russian strategies included sending prisoners recruited by the Wagner Group, Yevgeny Prigozhin's paramilitary organization, to the frontlines in order to draw fire and reveal a Ukrainian unit's position.

"I'll be honest. It's genius. Cruel, immoral, but effective tactics. It worked out. And it's still working in Bakhmut," one soldier told BBC.

Yaroslav said most Russian soldiers in Bakhmut have little training but are effective at crawling and hiding underground.

"They will just crawl," he said. "Even when there are bullets flying a meter over their heads, they will just crawl."

**Wagner chief's warning shows fear Russia about to 'lose the initiative'—ISW** - Prigozhin has hinted his concerns Moscow will "lose the initiative" in the war with Ukraine, according to military analysts.

A new report by ISW claims Prigozhin spoke to his affiliated outlet RIA FAN on March 17 and claimed Ukrainian forces were preparing a large counter-offensive.

Coming at a crucial time as the conflict moves into its second year with question marks over Russia's strategy, Prigozhin is said to have claimed that Ukrainian forces will carry out the operations across the occupied eastern regions of the country starting in mid-April.



**'Who, if not us, should stop them?': Ukrainian women on the front lines** - For over a year, women fighting on the front lines of the war in Ukraine have done so without proper equipment, a Ukrainian charity says.

Since Feb. 24, 2022, about 60,000 Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, charity aiding female soldiers on

Their military uniforms do not fit eyes as they slide off their heads,

"The most important thing is a commander on Ukraine's front CTVNews.ca. "The uniform that is and as it gets colder, you need to clothes."

Access to menstruation products are facing. Pads and tampons are difficult to change when the ground.

A number of Ukrainian snipers are against Russian units in operational particularly effective and lethal operators in every sphere of the ongoing war.



women have joined the fight against the founders of Zemliachky, a the front lines, told CTVNews.ca.

properly, their helmets cover their and their boots are too big.

military uniform," Karina, a deputy lines, said in an email to issued is not always of the right size dress in warm and high-quality

are another difficulty these women hard to come by and even more bathroom is a hole dug in the

women who volunteered for duty areas. They are reported to be

## Comments, Updates, Developments and Reports

**"Poland will enter into a conflict with Russia in the event of the defeat of Kyiv" - Polish ambassador to France** - In the event of Kyiv's defeat in the war against Russia, Poland will enter into a conflict with the Russian Federation.

This was stated by the Ambassador of Poland to France, Jan Roscyszewski, on the air of the French TV channel LCI.



"Either Ukraine today will defend its independence, or we will be forced to enter this conflict, because our main values, which were the basis of our civilization, our culture, will be in danger. Therefore, we will have no other choice but to enter the conflict," he said.

**After a year of war, Russian gas still flowing through Ukraine** - Almost from the moment Russia invaded last year, Ukraine has been insistently urging European countries to end their reliance on Russian gas, arguing that these purchases are funding Russia's war effort. "Please do not sponsor the weapons of war of this country, of Russia," Ukrainian President Zelenskyy told the European Parliament last March. "No euros for the occupiers. Close all of your ports to them. Don't export them your goods. Deny energy resources. Push for Russia to leave Ukraine."

Europe has responded, though not as forcefully as some would like, cutting its use of Russian oil and gas, investing in other energy sources and vowing to completely phase out Russian imports by 2027. US and European intelligence agencies reportedly now suspect that a pro-Ukrainian group was behind the explosion that damaged the Nord Stream gas pipelines linking Russia and Germany. If true, it would be the most profound indication of the lengths at least some Ukrainians will go to halt these exports. (The government in Kyiv denied any involvement.)

Less discussed is the fact that the vast majority of these energy resources run through Ukraine itself. Ukraine's own pipeline system carries nearly all of Central and Western Europe's remaining exports of Russian gas. Every day 44 million cubic meters of gas, worth well over \$100 million, pass through pipelines owned and maintained by the same country they are shelling and bombing on a daily basis.

"At the start of the war in Ukraine, a lot of commentators thought that Russian gas flows through Ukraine would be the first to go," Natasha Fielding, head of European gas pricing at Argus Media, an energy analytics firm, told Grid. "And actually, they're almost the last ones standing."

It's a strange and surprising story of what happens when war breaks out in a world of evermore interdependent economies.

### A vital link

Ukraine's gas infrastructure is a crisscrossing network of about 45,000 miles of pipelines. The system dates to Soviet times and at one point supplied 80 percent of Europe's natural gas. Long before this war, Europe had concern about the reliability of this supply in an era of Russia-Ukraine tensions.

During the winter of 2009, a pricing dispute between Russia and Ukraine's pro-European government led to supplies being cut for nearly two weeks, resulting in almost a dozen deaths from the cold in Europe. Over time, Europe began to diversify its supplies of Russian gas away from Ukraine, in

### Europe's vital arteries

Nearly all of Europe's remaining imports of natural gas from Russia pass through [Ukrainian pipelines](#), many of which are still in operation despite the war.



part via the construction of new pipelines like Nord Stream (under the Baltic Sea) and Turk Stream (via the Black Sea and Turkey.) Still, about 40 percent of Russian gas exports to Europe continued to flow through Ukraine.

Ukraine stopped buying Russian gas for its own energy needs in 2015, but the country has continued to collect revenue for shipping that gas west. In 2019, soon after Zelenskyy took office, Ukraine and Russia reached an agreement under which the Russian state-owned company Gazprom agreed to ship 65 billion cubic meters of gas through Ukraine in 2020 and then 40 billion cubic meters per year from 2021 to 2024. The deal was supposed to net Ukraine around \$7 billion in transfer fees over five years.

As far as Ukraine is concerned, that contract is still in effect.

“We continue implementing our obligations in terms of transit, which are also our obligations to Europe,” Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister Olha Stefanishyna told Grid. “Ensuring the transit, according to the international agreements that we have, shows our resilience and credibility. Despite the full-scale war, we still delivered on our obligations.”

Given the extraordinary circumstances, it might seem logical that Ukraine would at least use its leverage over these gas supplies to pressure European countries to cut their imports. But Andrian Prokip, a Kyiv-based energy analyst for the Wilson Center, told Grid, “There’s a fear that this would be seen as blackmailing.”

Ukraine not only relies on European support for its military resistance against Russia, it has important aspirations of one day becoming an EU member state. That means Zelenskyy can’t exactly afford to just turn off the tap.

### **The energy war within the war**

None of this is to say that the system has continued running smoothly.

In May, Ukraine halted gas flows through the pipeline’s Sokhranivka transit point on the Russian-Ukraine border, which previously handled about a third of the Russian gas flowing through the system. Part of the Sokhranivka route passed through territory occupied by Russian troops and the Ukrainian company that operates the pipeline system declared “force majeure,” accusing occupying forces of diverting gas to the Russian-backed separatist regions in the Donbas. The Ukrainians say they won’t reopen the closed route until Ukraine has full control of its pipeline system.

In September, Ukraine’s state-owned energy firm Naftogaz initiated an arbitration proceeding against Gazprom, accusing the Russian company of failure to pay its transit fees. The Russian government meanwhile has threatened to sanction Naftogaz over the closure of the pipeline, which could result in a complete halt of gas supplies through Ukraine.

For now, though, gas keeps flowing. Exports slumped in January, as a mild winter and EU efforts to build up energy stockpiles resulted in customers taking less gas under existing contracts, but volume ticked up again in February.

Meanwhile, as Russia has stepped up its attacks on Ukraine’s energy infrastructure, another bizarre coda was added to the pipeline story: Ukrainian repair crews were going out in combat zones to repair and maintain the pipelines bringing gas to Europe and rubles to Moscow.

**Kremlin tells officials to stop using iPhones** - The Kremlin told officials involved in preparations for Russia’s 2024 presidential election to stop using Apple iPhones because of concerns that the devices are vulnerable to Western intelligence agencies, the Kommersant newspaper reported.

**Comment** – As included in previous Updates, Ukrainian Intelligence tracks Russian soldiers’ calls, enabling Kievan forces to not only locate call densities and so trace Kremlin BTG movements, but also to lock into the geographical coordinates so as to direct artillery fire.

The Kremlin previously ordered troops to switch off their cell phones when initiating their Bakhmut offensive.

## Containment

**EU's ammunition plan for Ukraine** - European Union ministers will look to sign off on a 2-billion-euro plan to raid their stockpiles and jointly purchase artillery shells for Ukraine.

Ukraine has told the EU it wants 350,000 shells a month to allow them to launch fresh counter-offensives later in the year.

The first part of the plan involves committing a further one billion euros (\$1.06 billion) of shared funding to try to get EU states to tap their already stretched stocks for ammunition that can be sent quickly.

The second part would see the bloc use another one billion euros to order 155-millimetre shells for Ukraine as part of a massive joint procurement push intended to spur firms to ramp up production.

**Ukraine receives Leopard tanks from Norway.** Norway has delivered eight German-made Leopard 2 main battle tanks and four support vehicles to Ukraine, Norwegian Armed Forces reported on March 20. Ukrainian tank crews are already being trained in Poland, according to the report.

**Britain ready to fill Warsaw's air defence gaps** - Britain is ready to help Poland fill its air defence gaps caused by Warsaw sending some of its MiG-29 fighter jets to Ukraine but Poland has not yet made such requests, British Armed Forces Minister James Heapey has said.

Poland last week said it would send Ukraine four MiG-29 fighter jets in the coming days, making it the first of Kiev's allies to provide such aircraft and possibly creating a need to ramp up Poland's air defence equipment.

Britain would be able to help fill such gaps, as it previously did when Poland sent T-72 main battle tanks to Ukraine, providing Warsaw with Challenger 2 tanks, Heapey told German newspaper Welt. "We will look very positively at a Polish request to fill in the gaps that have arisen," Heapey said.

**US announces new \$350 million military aid package for Ukraine.** The aid package includes "more ammunition for U.S.-provided HIMARS and howitzers, as well as ammunition for Bradley Infantry Fighting Vehicles, HARM missiles, anti-tank weapons, riverine boats, and other equipment," US Secretary of State Blinken said today.

## Sanctions

**Russian court freezes all Volkswagen assets in Russia** - A Russian court has frozen all Volkswagen assets in Russia, court documents seen by Reuters showed.

Volkswagen was one of a string of foreign carmakers that suspended operations in Russia after western countries imposed unprecedented sanctions on Moscow over the conflict in Ukraine.

Russian auto manufacturer GAZ, which was contracted to produce Volkswagen vehicles at its factory in Nizhny Novgorod, sued the German carmaker for breach of contract after Volkswagen terminated the agreement in August.

GAZ estimated its losses from the terminated contract at almost 16 billion roubles (\$207.79 million).

Volkswagen is attempting to sell its flagship Russian factory in Kaluga, south of Moscow. The plant, which has a capacity of 225,000 vehicles a year, has been furloughed since March 2022.

**Russia's space program is in big trouble** - Crippled by war and sanctions, Russia now faces evidence that its already-struggling space program is falling apart. In the past three months alone, Roscosmos has scrambled to resolve

two alarming incidents. First, one of its formerly dependable Soyuz spacecraft sprang a coolant leak. Then the same thing happened on one of its Progress cargo ships.

The civil space program's Soviet predecessor launched the first person into orbit, but with the International Space Station (ISS) nearing the end of its life, Russia's space agency is staring into the abyss.

"What we're seeing is the continuing demise of the Russian civil space program," says Bruce McClintock, a former defense attaché at the US embassy in Moscow and current head of the Space Enterprise Initiative of the Rand Corporation, a nonprofit research organization. Around 10 years ago, Russian leaders chose to prioritize the country's military space program—which focuses on satellite and anti-satellite technologies—over its civilian one, McClintock says, and it shows.

Russia's space fleet is largely designed to be expendable. The history of its series of Soyuz rockets and crew capsules (they both have the same name) dates back to the Soviet era, though they've gone through upgrades since.

Its Progress cargo vessels also launch atop Soyuz rockets. The cargo ships, crewed ships, and rockets are all single-use spacecraft. Anatoly Zak, creator and publisher of the independent publication RussianSpaceWeb, estimates that Roscosmos launches about two Soyuz vehicles per year, takes about 1.5 to 2 years to build each one, and doesn't keep a substantial standing fleet.

For nine years after the final space shuttle flight, NASA depended on Russia to carry astronauts to the ISS—Soyuz offered the only ride to space. But in 2020, NASA began using SpaceX Crew Dragon spacecraft. Soon, Boeing will start providing rides too. NASA still relies on Russia for some cargo deliveries and a few astronaut flights, but that may soon change, McClintock says. "I think it's likely—and it would be prudent—for NASA to be conducting a similar analysis to see if they can maintain resupply and astronaut transfers to the station without depending on the Russians," he says.

Beyond launch problems and coolant leaks, Russia's civil space program faces another problem: the ISS. For the past quarter of a century, the station has provided a critical tie between the US and Russian space programs, but that's winding down, along with plans to retire the giant structure altogether. NASA is investing in next-generation commercial space stations, with modules scheduled to arrive in orbit as early as 2030. Russia has no role in those commercial concepts, nor in China's new Tiangong station.

## Putin & Russia

**Putin 'knows he's in the corner' in Ukraine, ex-NATO spy chief says** - Putin realizes he has put himself in danger with his military gambit in Ukraine, but will double down rather than change course. That's according to Estonia's former foreign intelligence chief.

Mikk Marran, who headed Estonia's Foreign Intelligence Service from January 2016 to October 2022, told Newsweek that Russia's war on Ukraine will not end soon given Putin's "obsessive" focus on controlling the country, and the deep revanchism that extends beyond the president through the highest levels of Russia's political elite.

"I can't predict whether we're talking about months or years, but we shouldn't expect that the war ends in the coming weeks," said Marran, who since leaving the intelligence service has served as the CEO of the Estonian State Forest Management Center. "Putin is still very much focused on getting this thing done in Ukraine that he started. But of course, he will fail."

"I think he still thinks that he can outlast the West," Marran said of Putin. "But at the same time, he knows he's in the corner."

Western nations and their G7 partners should intensify their attacks on Russia's lucrative fossil fuel export revenues and throttle Moscow's ability to fund its ongoing war in Ukraine, Marran said.



"We should initiate more sanctions, we should lower the oil price cap," Marran said. "We should put more sanctions on the top banks in Russia, because there are still powerful banks that have not been sanctioned by the West, for example, Gazprombank, one of the major banks in Russia."

**Russian Investigative Committee opened cases against judges and prosecutor in The Hague** – The Investigative Committee announced the initiation of criminal cases against judges and the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague.

Prosecutor Karim Ahmad Khan is suspected of "bringing a knowingly innocent person to criminal responsibility," as well as preparing to attack a representative of a foreign state "in order to complicate international relations."

Judges Tomoko Akane, Rosario Salvatore Aitala and Sergio Gerardo Ugalde Godinez - in "knowingly unlawful detention" and also preparing to attack a representative of another state.

**Russia threatens to blow up ICC with hypersonic missile** - Former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev issued an ominous warning on Monday, suggesting that Russia could strike the International Criminal Court (ICC) with a hypersonic missile in response to its decision to issue an arrest warrant for President Vladimir Putin.

Attempts to try Putin in the ICC would have "monstrous" consequences for international law, Medvedev, deputy head of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, said in a statement on his Telegram channel.

**Peace is impossible in Ukraine, Kremlin press secretary declares** - Dmitry Peskov, press secretary of Russian President Vladimir Putin, stated that it's impossible to talk about peace in Ukraine at the moment, according to pro-Kremlin news outlet RIA Novost.

**'Russians will support you in 2024 election,' Xi tells Putin** - Chinese President Xi Jinping has told Putin that he was convinced Russians would support him in a presidential election due in 2024, even though the Kremlin chief has not yet said if he will seek another term.

Putin, who came to power on the last day of 1999 when Boris Yeltsin resigned, is the longest-serving Kremlin leader since Josef Stalin.

"Under your strong leadership, Russia has made great strides in its prosperous development. I am confident that the Russian people will continue to give you their firm support," Xi told Putin.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov swiftly pointed out that Xi had not specifically said Putin would participate in next year's election but added that the Kremlin shared Xi's confidence in Russians' support for Putin.

## China

**Xi Jinping says China ready to 'stand guard over world order' as he lands in Moscow** - Xi Jinping has said China is ready with Russia "to stand guard over the world order based on international law" as he landed in Moscow for a state visit days after Vladimir Putin was made the subject of an arrest warrant by the international criminal court.

Xi is expected to position himself as a potential peacemaker in the Ukraine war during his first state visit to Russia since Putin invaded Ukraine. For his part, Putin will be hoping to project unity in the face of western isolation.

Russia is framing Xi's trip, his first since securing an unprecedented third term this month, as proof that it has not been isolated by the global community as the war in Ukraine, now in its 13th month, drags on.

“We are grateful for the balanced line of [China] in connection with the events taking place in Ukraine, for understanding their background and true causes. We welcome China’s willingness to play a constructive role in resolving the crisis.” Putin said in an article in China’s People’s Daily published on the Kremlin website on Sunday evening, adding that he had high hopes for the visit from his “good old friend.”

**Comment** – China’s “friendship” with Russia hinges on what the latter does to aid Beijing in formulating and executing its desired bi-polar new world order. At the same time though, Xi is surely irked by Putin’s invasion of Ukraine and future plans thereafter. But he has to live with this situation given their interdependence in seeking a larger goal.

What it does illustrate is that China needs Russia in this new world order pursuit, because if it didn’t, it would have long ago castigated Putin for his warmongering follies.

What history will at some future time unveil will be whether Xi was aware of and supported Putin’s ill-feted Ukrainian adventure. Time will tell.

**Xi Jinping’s visit to Russia isn’t really about bringing peace to Ukraine** - The overwhelming impression has been that Xi is heading to Russia with the aim of negotiating a settlement to the Ukraine conflict—a presumption bolstered by China’s remarkable brokering earlier this month of restored ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia, as well as by reports that Xi will also hold a virtual meeting later this week with Ukrainian President Zelensky, their first direct conversation since Russia invaded more than a year ago.

“My upcoming visit to Russia will be a journey of friendship, cooperation and peace,” Xi wrote in an article for the Kremlin-run Russian Gazette newspaper published earlier today. Putin, meanwhile, wrote his own commentary in the Chinese Communist Party mouthpiece the People’s Daily on Sunday that welcomed his “good old friend” Xi to make a “meaningful contribution to the settlement of the crisis.”

However, the likelihood that Xi can somehow persuade both Russia and Ukraine to agree to a truce remains remote. “A ceasefire in the current situation is very difficult—both sides think they can win, they cannot give up,” says Prof. Wang Yiwei, director of the Institute of International Affairs at Renmin University in Beijing. “I don’t expect anything helpful to come out of this visit,” says Sean King, senior vice president of political risk firm Park Strategies.

In fact, it doesn’t look like Ukraine is Xi’s primary focus anyway. Of the more than 1,800 words Xi wrote in the Russian Gazette, “Ukraine” featured just three times in two adjacent paragraphs. He devotes much more space to eulogizing bilateral relations and that bilateral trade soared to \$190 billion last year (while glossing over the fact that this was largely as a consequence of evading Western sanctions). (**Comment** – And largely attributable to China taking advantage of a falsely lowered Russian oil price in order to attract sales and foreign revenue.)

Xi’s focus, says Wang, will be to “manage spillover effects including the food crisis, humanitarian crisis, energy [supply disruptions] and global supply chain connectivity”—matters directly relevant to China’s interests, in other words.

Moreover, Xi will be less inclined to alienate Putin given Russian support is increasingly important geo-strategically. Last week’s signing of an enhanced AUKUS security pact between the US, UK, and Australia, which allows the latter to acquire and operate nuclear-powered submarines, has put Xi on the defensive in his own backyard. “AUKUS forces China and Russia to cooperate in a more strategic way,” says Wang.

Alexander Korolev, an expert in China-Russia relations at the University of New South Wales, says that Xi wants to consolidate his alignment with Putin because Russia is China’s only strategic partner that is a great power. “China will need Russia for its impending conflict with the U.S.,” he says. “Xi Jinping cares about China’s interests and problems in the Asia Pacific. He doesn’t care about Ukraine or the war there.”

“It just goes to show that autocrats stick together,” says King.

For Xi, there is also a clear propaganda element. His Russia Gazette article talks up his “new type of international relations and a community with a shared future for mankind”—his pitch to replace existing US-dominated global governance mechanisms with new “multipolar” relations.

As such, the Moscow trip is another opportunity to paint himself as a neutral party and the US in particular as stoking the conflict. “To run the world’s affairs well,” writes Xi, “one must first and foremost run its own affairs well.” To hammer that point home, China also released on Monday its annual “State of Democracy in the United States” assessment—which, while breathtakingly hypocritical, does point out some undeniable flaws in American governance.

With the entire world—especially developing nations of the Global South—hostage to the inflation and instability wrought by the conflict, Xi will take every chance to paint the US as an aggressor at least as guilty as Putin. And Western cynicism regarding any proposed Chinese attempts to negotiate peace is portrayed as self-serving. “The US saw the Ukraine crisis as a lucrative opportunity,” says the report on the U.S. “Instead of taking any measures conducive to ending hostilities, it kept fueling the flames and made a huge fortune from the war business including the arms industry and the energy sector.”

Meanwhile, China’s proposals of compromise and dialogue—nebulous as they undoubtedly are—stand in stark contrast to American bickering about the type and quantity of deadly weaponry to dispatch to the frontline. “Increasingly, Western rhetoric about the Ukraine conflict is seen as shrill, increasingly prone to conspiracy theories and misinformation, and warmongering in itself,” writes Chris Devonshire-Ellis, chairman of business consultancy Dezan Shira & Associates, in a briefing note. “The non-Western world increasingly sees this as a desire to continue the conflict—instigated by the West.”

Xi’s visit is a clear example of “balance of power politics 101,” says Korolev. “There is a growing understanding in Beijing that China and the United States are on a collision course. That is not going to change.”

*Article this morning on DNUYC website, quoted from original in Time.*

**Gordon Chang: China Is The ‘Fuel’ Behind Putin’s War In Ukraine** - Putin and Xi are meeting for their 40th in-person chat. The conversation, in Moscow, is scheduled to run until Wednesday.

Xi’s timing confirms his closeness to Putin. The summit, for one thing, is being held much earlier than expected. The Wall Street Journal on the 21st of last month reported the pair might get together “in April or in early May.” (**Comment** – We suspect it is to do with the harrowing Russian situation in its invasion of Ukraine, incrementally worsening and forcing Beijing’s hand in trying to rescue its partner.)

As it turned out, the meeting announcement occurred just hours before the ICC issued a warrant for the Putin’s arrest for the deportation of Ukrainian children. Beijing and Moscow had to know the warrant would be announced soon, so the trip could be China’s way of signaling support for Russia’s alleged war crimes, including genocide, in Ukraine.

During the three-day meeting, Xi and Putin will undoubtedly issue expressions of support for the other. They are also expected, at least according to Russian media, to sign significant agreements.

There will certainly be discussions about Beijing’s 12-point peace plan, titled “China’s Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis,” released February 24. Xi Jinping will undoubtedly press acceptance of his proposal in order to leverage the success of the Iran-Saudi deal Chinese diplomats brokered this month.

China’s Ukraine proposal was “essentially ignored” as the Associated Press put it. And for good reason. National Security Council spokesman John Kirby correctly termed Beijing’s call for an immediate cease-fire a “ratification of Russian conquest.” A halt to the fighting, he said, would allow Russia’s forces to recover “so that they can restart attacks on Ukraine at a time of their choosing.”

Observers say that at this time, Ukraine has the advantage on the battlefield. Beijing knows that. Allowing Russia to regroup is not in the interests of anyone but the Russians.

And the Chinese. In reality, Ukraine is a superpower proxy war, and China is backing Russia.

Russia and China know the stakes. Putin is obviously all-in on Ukraine, and the Chinese are in full support. It's apparent China greenlighted the invasion of Ukraine. Russia and China issued their 5,300-word joint statement after Putin met Xi in Beijing last year, just 20 days before Russia's attack. That's when they declared the "no-limits" partnership.

"No limits" is not much of an exaggeration. China, with elevated commodity purchases, effectively finances Russia's war. Furthermore, Beijing has been offering financial services to Russia as America and partners cut Russian banks and institutions off. Beijing is putting diplomats in service of Moscow. Chinese central government and Communist Party media have been amplifying Russian war disinformation.

Moreover, China has been providing lethal assistance. In the opening moments of the war, there is reporting suggesting China fed location data, obtained from the Chinese-made drones that Ukraine had been operating, to Russia so that it could take out the drone operators.

More recently, there is also evidence to suggest China has been selling drones to Russia's Wagner Group.

Indeed, Beijing has been supplying urgently needed items. In November, Defense Express, a Ukrainian site, reported that almost every day an An-124 cargo plane ferried military products from China's Zhengzhou to Russia. The Russian planes turned off their transponders when they departed. The Washington Free Beacon in January reported that the flights carried, among other things, ammunition.

The Biden administration for the longest time refused to acknowledge China's lethal assistance, saying only that Beijing was contemplating providing it. Now, Washington has had to make an admission. In the middle of this month, according to Kyodo News, the U. confirmed the presence of Chinese ammunition littering battlefields in Ukraine.

Now that it's clear that China's regime has crossed President Joe Biden's "red line," the Chinese leadership is probably worried about what happens next. That could also explain the timing of Xi's excursion to Moscow.

In any event, Xi and Putin are clearly coordinating policies, dividing the international system into camps and in the process forming the core of a new axis. The war in Ukraine, therefore, looks like the first conflict of a divided world, what some are calling "Cold War 2."

*Article by Gordon Chang in "1945" published earlier yesterday.*