

Conflict Update # 303

December 23rd, 2022

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Conflict Assessment

Russian losses – 100,950 (550) soldiers killed, 3,005 (+2) enemy tanks, 5,986 (+5) armored combat vehicles, 1,984 (+6) artillery systems, 414 (+1) MLRS systems, 212 (+0) air defense systems, 283 (+1) warplanes, 267 (+0) helicopters, 1,698 (+5) UAVs of the operational-tactical level, 653 (+0) cruise missiles, 16 (+0) warships/cutters, 4,622 (+7) trucks and tankers, 4 Iskander Missile Launchers (+0), 239 fuel bowsers (+0) and 178 (+0) units of equipment.

Key Takeaways



Watch what Ukrainian forces are doing – With battle fields presently untraversable because of the mud season, both lines have been pretty slow in any operational maneuvers. But the ground will shortly freeze making it possible to use mechanical equipment again.

Ukrainian batteries and strike craft have been systematically targeting any Russian operation and hub that will hinder the Ukrainian startup. They are eliminating fuel dumps and vehicles, food and supply trucks, command posts, ammunition depots and anything that targets their missiles such as air defense and MLRS systems.

All signs point to a “preparation phase” where they are clearing as much resistance to Ukrainian ground movement as they can. Reading further down today’s Update, incoming weapons include longer-range missiles and artillery shells. As well as target kits to update old Soviet-style bombs to convert them into smart bombs.

When Ukraine captured Kharkiv Oblast in September they recovered more tanks, armored vehicles and ammunition from the retreating Russians than they had had in their stocks at the start of the Russian invasion.

When they took back the western Kherson Oblast they recovered even more ordnance and stocks from the Russians.

Russia only has the old “dumb” bombs, but millions of them. Ukraine is now converting these into smart bombs. The fact that Russia only has these “dumb” projectiles does in some small way explain the wanton destruction they cause when shelling areas.

Reading between the lines – Zelenskyy’s visit this week to the US is being reported as timely and securing both further and longtime aid from America.

But, with increasing signs of an extended Russian campaign from the north and north east of Ukraine, it is not too difficult to assume that this was uppermost in discussions, again - timely.

Coupled with Poland locating heavy armor along the Polish/Belarusian border, current and vastly increased training of Ukrainian forces in the US and other NATO countries – reportedly around 20,000 soldiers, pilots and operators – NATO SG Stoltenberg continuing to indicate an expansion of the conflict is closer and an American officer yesterday – again – stating that his battalions are ready to enter Ukraine “if need be,” then it is logical to draw the visit together with what is happening on the ground.

Russia in turn is starting to make increasing noises about conditions both conducive to and not conducive to peace talks, it is stretched very thin along crucial fronts, needing to rely evermore on the Wagner Group, it understands Ukrainian armory inventory is now hugely upgraded with smart weaponry and new (modern) choice, defensive equipment destined to nullify its methods of war conduct is being shipped in, and yet still slated to see further upgrading within the next two months, Ukrainian strength reported to be around 750,000 soldiers in uniform already whereas they are struggling to round up further conscripts, and one can safely guess that the Kremlin is anxious.

Russia yesterday warned that incoming Patriot systems are legitimate targets for attack, adding that the Kremlin believes these weapons are manned by American or NATO personnel.

China this week sent Putin a letter demanding a timetable for a cessation of the war, following their earlier demand that Russia refrain from using any nuclear option(s).

Should Belarus invade Ukraine, as I think is on the cards, this places Lukashenko at severe and immediate political risk.

Transferring Belarussian military strength from protecting him to engaging in an invasion will seriously undermine his internal security. Should this transpire, Putin stands to lose the other main throughfare into Russia along the flat plains leading west to east, with Belarus in peril of being overthrown by pro-West politicians. That in turn will further isolate Kaliningrad.

Putin can see (surely) the writing on the wall.

The war is set to enter a new strategic phase over the following two to three months.

Putin - My goal is “not to spin the flywheel of military conflict, but, on the contrary, to end this war.”

He added: “We will strive for an end to this, and the sooner the better, of course.”

“All armed conflicts end one way or another with some kind of negotiations on the diplomatic track,” Putin said.

As mentioned previously, Russian veracity is extremely hard to find.

Lukashenko puts Belarus on war footing - Lukashenko has been testing the combat readiness of his country's troops, only days after Putin's visit to Minsk raised concerns that the Russian president might be pressuring his ally and counterpart to get further involved in the conflict in Ukraine.

The official website of the President of the Republic of Belarus reported yesterday that Lukashenko had held a meeting about the country's security, claiming that "the current situation and threats" posed by the war in Ukraine justified preparing its troops for combat and re-deploying them closer to the border.

"If you want peace, prepare for war. It was not invented by me and not by you either," Lukashenko said during the meeting, according to an official report.

NYT reveals names of 22 Russian servicemen who used phones of murdered Bucha civilians to make calls - The New York Times has published a video with the results of its 8-months long investigation of the war crimes committed by Russia's servicemen in Ukraine's town of Bucha.

The locals told the NYT that Russia's servicemen would take cell phones off them by force. The American media outlet studied data on calls made from the Bucha district and identified the names of 22 Russian servicemen of the 234th Air Assault Regiment who used the phones of their victims. It is evident that Russian soldiers routinely used the phones of victims to call home to Russia, often only hours after they were killed.



Ukrainian forces use ‘threat emitters’ to trick Russian pilots - To confuse Russian aircraft, Ukraine has access to a training tool from the United States.

Known as “Threat Emitters,” they are a way for pilots to learn the signatures of hostile aircraft and missiles, allowing them to safely practice identifying and reacting to combat situations in training. In simulated scenarios, pilots learn how their sensors would perceive real threats, and can safely plan and adapt to the various anti-aircraft weapons they might encounter. The net effect is that pilots learn to fight against a phantom representation of air defenses, in preparation for the real thing.

But when brought to actual war, the emitters in turn are a way to make an enemy’s sensors less reliable, confounding adversarial pilots about what is real and what is merely an electromagnetic mirage. These “low-cost emitters were built for ranges inside the U.S. but now are in the hands of Ukrainians,” reported Aviation Week, citing Air Force Chief of Staff Charles Q. Brown Jr.

“The emitters can replicate surface-to-air missiles and aircraft, and are a cheap, innovative way to further complicate the air picture for Russia.”

One such system is the Joint Threat Emitter. There are two major components to the system: a command unit that lets soldiers operate it, and trailer-mounted radar threat emitters. A command unit can control up to 12 different threat emitters, and each emitter can simulate up to six threats at once.

Some of the signals it can generate mimic surface-to-air missiles and anti-aircraft artillery, both of which threaten planes but require different countermeasures. One example of a non-missile air defense system is the ZSU-23, built by the Soviet Union. The ZSU is an armored vehicle with anti-aircraft guns pointed on a turret that uses a radar dish to guide its targeting. As a Soviet-made system, ZSU-23 systems were handed down to successor states and are reportedly in operation by both the militaries of Ukraine and Russia.

In Ukraine, the use case for these emitters is to augment existing air defenses by using emitters to project air-defense signals across the battlefield—signals identical to known and real Ukrainian air defenses—masking where actual defenses are.

Real defenses lurking in a sea of mirage defenses, simulated but not backed up by actual weapons, is a vexing proposition for an attacker. Discovering what is real means probing the defenses with scouts (or hoping that satellite imagery provides a timely update). But because the emitters, like the weapons they emulate, can be driven around, even a view from space cannot accurately pin down a fixed location for long.

While the threat emitters alone do not offer any direct way to shoot down aircraft, having them in place makes Russia’s work of attacking from the sky that much harder. Even if a threat emitter is found and destroyed, it likely means that Russia spent ammunition hitting a decoy target, while missing a real and tangible threat.

Portable X-ray units deployed to Ukraine’s frontline - An Adelaide, Australia manufacturing company has been credited with saving lives in Ukraine with its newly-developed portable X-rays.

“We’ve developed at Micro-X a new way of making X-rays that allows us to really shrink the size and weight of X-ray tubes which allows us to shrink the size and weight of the X-ray unit systems,” Micro-X Managing Director Peter Rowland told Sky News Australia.

He said they’re used in situations in which the light weight and portability are “really critical.”

Russia is using rape as a weapon in Ukraine. The West must hold Putin accountable - In researching this article, Tara Chandra of Yahoo News found stories of an 11-year-old boy who was raped in front of his mother and now

will not speak, and an 83-year-old woman who was raped in her home by Russian soldiers and is now struggling to recover. There were very disturbing reports of children and even infants being sexually assaulted by Russian soldiers, including one case where an 11-month-old baby died from being raped, and another case where a mother had to witness all of her children assaulted—including 9-year-old triplets who were raped by soldiers and her 11-month-old baby sodomized by a candlestick. There is also likely sexual violence being perpetrated against adult men as well, but severe underreporting makes it difficult to know how widespread this is.

This violence has been co-occurring with other atrocities, as in Bucha, where there were mass executions of civilians, in Mariupol, a besieged city where Russian forces purposefully attacked a maternity hospital, and at a prison where civilians and prisoners of war were being held.

Most audiences—international and domestic—find rape in war to be horrifying, and there is, unsurprisingly, a visceral dislike of this behavior. By employing a tactic that is universally disliked, and graphically demonstrating that the costs of continued resistance will be the appalling violation and mutilation of Ukrainian citizens' bodies, Russia is attempting to coerce Ukrainians into surrendering. It is likely that these tactics are being used with the hope that Ukrainian citizens who are terrified that they or their compatriots will soon be targeted in these ways will pressure Zelenskyy's government to make significant concessions to the Russians.

These tactics have not broken the will of the Ukrainian people in resisting Russia's invasion of their sovereign land, but it is not clear that there is, at this point, any form of violence the Russians will not perpetrate, as they continue to attempt to coerce Ukraine into some form of settlement. The Russians may be hoping that these atrocities will convince the West to pressure Ukraine into backing down.

The use of sexual violence as a strategy in the war in Ukraine illustrates two things—and neither is good.

As someone who has studied this closely, her expectation of a professional military like the Russian armed forces would be that there is a tight chain of command, and that soldiers are responsive to orders issued by their commanding officers. The fact that this behavior is so widespread and so well documented means that the Russian military is knowingly violating every international law and norm about the conduct of war and intentionally using rape as a strategy of coercion.

If this is indeed an attempt at coercion, it would mean an undoing of more than 70 years of norms and laws built to protect civilians during armed conflict. As any scholar of international relations will tell you, norms can and do erode if they are not upheld, so any unwillingness on the part of the West to call attention to and prosecute these atrocities could set a dangerous precedent for future wars.

Research on sexual violence in war sheds light on the second observation that deserves attention in this conflict: despite being an armed force representing an advanced nation state, the Russian military is not as cohesive and professional as we previously believed.

Dara Kay Cohen, who literally wrote the book on rape in civil war, finds that rape—particularly gang rape—is used by armed forces to create unit cohesion when soldiers have been forcibly recruited. Given the reports circulating that Russia has been conscripting young, inexperienced men, some of whom reportedly do not even realize they are being sent to fight in Ukraine, it is unsurprising that the Russian military has poor unit cohesion. Forcing or encouraging these men to participate in gang rape—an inherently risky activity, particularly from a sexual health standpoint—can help force bonds between soldiers who were not willingly recruited to fight.

But the bottom line is this: the fact that we are seeing such pervasive sexual violence means that the **Russians are losing very badly**. In general, we don't expect that soldiers in an interstate war—especially soldiers from a state with as much advanced military capacity as Russia—will need to resort to these types of tactics in order to gain coercive leverage over their adversary. The fact that the Russians, who have myriad other military tools at their disposal, are

resorting to tactics that are this reckless and heinous should be taken as further evidence that they do not have a clear strategy for navigating the war.

A few months ago, a Ukrainian court convicted a Russian soldier for committing war crimes. Several investigators have suggested that there are numerous war crimes being committed in Ukraine; among them, the widespread use of sexual violence. The Ukrainian government is doing its best to find the perpetrators of these horrific acts and hold them to justice. But the West must do more.

Unfortunately, without actually putting boots on the ground, the West cannot prevent these atrocities. But just as the Russians are using rape to raise the costs of Ukrainian resistance, so too should the West raise the costs of using these inhumane weapons in conflict. This starts with drawing attention, again and again, on every platform, at every public meeting of Western leaders, and in private conversations, to this horrific violence. It means dedicating resources to investigating what is happening on the ground, and then making sure the rest of the world knows about it.

It must also include prosecuting sexual violence in Ukraine as a war crime. International norms, if not defended and upheld, will erode, and the erosion of the norm against using sexual violence in war is extremely dangerous. Some journalists who cover these issues have already pointed to the ways in which the information environment of the war in Ukraine lends itself to collecting evidence that may lead to war crimes prosecution.

Comment – As stated in numerous Updates, this type of heinous crime is not solely a Putin indictment, but of every Russian - in toto. They are all guilty and must be punished with the highest possible sentences. There may well be a (strategic) scaled series of reactions to Russian culpabilities and crimes of war, trying to always keep something in the “penalty” cupboard for future use, but protecting women and children needs to never be stored in this cupboard. It is too horrendous an act.

Tara is 100% correct. Make as much noise as possible, at every juncture and at every opportunity. Force a reaction from Putin and the Kremlin. Should they deny these atrocities after multiple and ongoing accusations, then their denials, in and of themselves, will stand the legal test of proven awareness of institutional military rape as a weapon of war.

Ukrainian forces used Russian soldiers' 'panicked' cell phone calls to pinpoint their locations and pick them off, report says - Russian soldiers in Ukraine made worried calls home as their efforts in Ukraine faltered — but their loved ones weren't the only ones listening.

Ukrainian forces used the cell phone calls by soldiers to locate them and wipe the troops out in large numbers, according to an investigation published by The New York Times that details Russia's blunders throughout the war.

"We listened to the soldiers as they panicked and called their friends and relatives," a Ukrainian official who leads the efforts to intercept the phone calls said. "They used ordinary phones to make decisions about their further moves."

Ukrainian authorities who monitor cell networks for criminal activity noticed that a large number of calls were being placed from foreign phone numbers in an area along the Ukraine and Belarus border. The officials deduced the unusual uptick in foreign numbers on the Ukrainian network were likely Russian soldiers.

Ukraine deployed teams of women to follow the soldiers' calls and alert the Ukrainian military, which would carry out attacks using the information. "We understood where the enemy was, what numbers they were using," the Ukrainian official told The Times.

At one point, Ukrainian forces used both the cell phone calls and a TikTok video to locate a unit of Chechen soldiers outside of Kyiv. Maj. Gen. Kyrylo Budanov, chief of Ukraine's military intelligence, told The Times the unit's location was confirmed only 40 minutes after the video was uploaded. Ukrainian forces then struck them with three missiles.

These intercepts are also passed on to US operators in order to confirm coordinates and fire instructions.

Weakened Russian military turning to 'inferior' Belarusian trainers: U.K. - The British MoD in an intelligence update yesterday said the "likely use" of Belarusian instructors by Putin's military to train troops is a sign that Moscow is experiencing a deficit of its own trainers.

They also offered an explanation for why Russia's training staff may be depleted. In its assessment, the ministry wrote "many" Russian military trainers are "deployed in Ukraine or have become casualties."

The UK's report added that while Russia and Belarus "prominently publicize" Russian units deployed in Belarus, training measures implemented by Belarusian instructors of Russian troops have been more covert, writing that armed forces of Belarus have taken on a "significant, but more discreet role in training thousands of newly mobilized Russian reservists."

Putin

Putin's Warning To U.S.: De-escalate Or Face 'Consequences' - The US is risking a direct confrontation with Russia over the war in Ukraine, two top Russian officials have said.

Moscow's ambassador to the U.S., Anatoly Antonov, said in an interview with Tass published Friday that "the risk of a clash between the two great powers is high."

Alexander Darchiyev, director of the Foreign Ministry's North American Department, made similar remarks in an interview with the same Russian state news agency.

Putin accuses US of fighting proxy war in Ukraine - The Kremlin has accused the United States of fighting a proxy war against Russia after Washington boosted military support for Ukraine and hosted President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on a historic visit.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters on Thursday that the latest US support package – which comes on top of some \$50bn already sent to Ukraine this year as Europe's biggest land conflict since World War II drags on – would not help end the more than 300-day-long conflict.

"This is not conducive to a speedy settlement, quite the contrary. And this cannot prevent the Russian Federation from achieving its goals during the special military operation," Peskov said, using Moscow's own term for its offensive.

Peskov added that there had been no calls for peace or signs of willingness to "listen to Russia's concerns" during Zelenskyy's visit, proving that the US was intent on fighting a proxy war with Russia "to the last Ukrainian."

Putin finally says the quiet part out loud - Putin made a significant statement this week as he called the conflict in Ukraine a "war" for the first time since he ordered a full-scale invasion into the neighboring country.

On Thursday, Putin advocated for an end to the "war," a word he has avoided using to describe what he and the Kremlin have otherwise insisted was a "special military operation" for the last 10 months.

"Our aim is not to fan the flames of this military conflict, on the contrary, it is to end this war," Putin told reporters.

Comment – This is significant and has drawn a reaction from a member of the Russian Duma. Putin has always called this a "special military operation" because he cannot call it a "war" under the Russian constitution. He can only do so once Russia is invaded – that its land has been subject to a foreign force entering to invade. This is clearly contained in their constitution. That is why he called it a "special military operation."

And so long as he cannot call it a "war," he is not allowed to mobilize, also contained in the constitution. So by now calling it what it is – a war – is he signaling what is generally accepted – a full-scale mobilization?

Secondly he authorized a law making it a crime punishable with up to 15 years imprisonment for anyone calling it a “war.” This law is still on the (Russian) books and has not yet been abrogated.

Technically, by calling it a “war” in contravention of that legislative statute, he is guilty of the very crime he ruled against. And this is what a member of the Duma has instituted – calling for an investigation by Russian authorities into his utterance.

Containment

UK sending Ukraine a new, longer-range missile that lets humans guide it all the way to the target - Ukraine is getting a new British missile with a more human touch.

The Brimstone 2 is a longer-range version of the original Brimstone air-launched anti-tank missile already issued to Ukrainian forces. Also among its new capabilities: It can be guided to its target by a human rather than homing in on its target, or what it thinks is the target, on its own.

The British MoD confirmed delivered to Ukraine in a delivery process and the

The first Brimstone, missile maker MBDA, is based tank missile. It was first in 2005 and was employed during the

Brimstone 1, a 6-foot-long missile with a range and-forget weapon. Equipped with a millimeter-wave without needing to be guided by the launch aircraft or helicopter.



the missiles were being video which detailed the missiles capabilities.

developed by European on the US-made Hellfire anti-deployed by the Royal Air Force wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya.

The Brimstone 2 still has fire-and-forget radar, but it's also equipped with a semi-active laser seeker that allows the missile to home in on a target that a human has illuminated with a laser designator. It also has a longer range, reportedly 25 to 37 miles.

US sending Patriot systems to Ukraine - Before addressing a joint meeting of Congress, Zelenskyy held a meeting with Biden at the White House, during which the US president pledged to deliver the Patriot system to Kyiv.

The Patriot is one of the most advanced US air defence systems, capable of intercepting threats, such as aircraft and ballistic missiles.

Ukrainian troops will learn how to use it in Germany, and it will be several months before they can deploy it on the battlefield.

Moscow has said that once deployed, the Patriot system will be a legitimate target for Russian bombardment.

SOCOM Orders Cropduster Attack Planes from L3Harris Technologies - U.S. Special Operations Command has chosen L3Harris Technologies to supply up to 75 attack planes based on a cropduster aircraft in a deal that could be worth \$3 billion. Are these headed to Ukraine?

Nimitz Carrier Strike Group departs San Diego for Pacific deployment - The Nimitz Carrier Strike Group left San Diego, California for a Western Pacific deployment, USNI News has learned.

The carrier is deploying with USS Bunker Hill (CG-52), the oldest cruiser in the fleet, the staff of Destroyer Squadron 9 and five guided-missile destroyers USS Decatur (DDG-73), USS Paul Hamilton (DDG-60), USS Chung-Hoon (DDG-93), USS Wayne E. Meyer (DDG-108) and USS Shoup (DDG-86).



Above are the latest US CSG (Carrier Strike Group) locations around the globe.

Russian Mobilization

Dying for citizenship - Some time ago, ads began to appear in Moscow public transport offering migrants to sign contracts with the Russian Defence Ministry for military service. And although this practice was quickly halted, it turned out that foreigners were actively recruited.

The first calls for foreigners to join Russia's armed forces appeared, as it turned out, on the eve of the outbreak of war.

On 20 February of this year, blogger Bahrom Ismailov, posted a video on his YouTube channel with an appeal to migrants to enroll in the Russian army promising Russian citizenship after six months of service.

"Immediately after the war began, I received an avalanche of calls with stories of foreigners from Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Armenia, etc. actively encouraged to join the Russian armed forces as volunteers," Valentina Chupik, human rights activist and lawyer for migrants, told Novaya Europe. "More than 300 people contacted me."

"The first to agree quickly found themselves in Ukraine. It was clear that people were being sent for slaughter.

In the summer, the Kremlin MoD declared that contract soldiers were recruited not to participate in hostilities, but for auxiliary work. Many migrants who came to work could not figure out the truth. Chupik dissuaded entire teams who planned to agree to such proposals in full. In September, Valentina learned the story of a Kyrgyz citizen who worked as a courier. He was delivering an order by bicycle in the centre of Moscow, was stopped by the police, and escorted to a special bus. There he was immediately beaten to the floor. He had two ribs and a collarbone broken. And they gave him a contract with the Defence Ministry. He understood what it was all about and refused to sign.

Then he was shocked with a stun gun on the genitals. He had to agree to everything. After the signature, he was thrown out into the street.

“We decided that the guy needed to be rescued urgently,” says Chupik. “We collected money for him and sent him to Kazakhstan.”

“A few days later, I was approached by an Uzbek citizen named Marufjon, renewing his work patent at the migration centre. After he signed everywhere, they stuck some kind of sticker with a tick on his passport and let him go.”

Later, Marufjon was stopped by a patrol on the street. The police, seeing the sticker, immediately said that the man had enlisted in the army, which meant he would be killed soon and there was no need to bother with deportation.

It soon became known that slipping Defence Ministry contracts for signing into other documents is a common practice for this migration centre. A woman who went there with her son to get a patent found such a contract in a common bundle of papers.

It turned out that the document was printed in very small font on two sheets. After the vigilant mother made a scandal and tore up this contract, the girl in the window explained that no one was forcing her to sign it.

It is not known how many people have signed such Defence Ministry contracts without looking. After all, hundreds and sometimes thousands of migrants pass through the migration centre every day.

Since October, all foreign men who wanted to get a patent for work have been brought into a separate office. There, a man in civilian clothes, but with a military bearing, put very strong psychological pressure on them, persuading them to sign a contract. At the same time, migrants were caught on the street outside shops and were also forced to sign contracts.

A group of Uzbek citizens were taken to a police station, handcuffed and chained to a grate for the whole night with their hands over their heads. They weren't allowed to go to the toilet, nor were they given water or allowed to make a phone call.

The migrants tried to refuse, explaining that in their country this falls under the article on mercenary activity and is a serious crime. But in the end, they had no other choice and had to sign the papers.

Comment – As mentioned before, these Russian conscripts are being sent to their demise like a cloud of grasshoppers.

Sanctions

Russian ally's oil stopped in Black Sea by Turkish insurer demands - Tankers bearing Russian oil were stalled on the Black Sea side of the Bosphorus, prevented from continuing to the Mediterranean by Turkey's demand for satisfactory insurance letters, reports Bloomberg.

Turkey's move was a response to EU sanctions against Russia that bar insurance of vessels if the oil they're carrying costs above US\$60 a barrel.

It has come under pressure from the US and UK and also the insurance industry to change its rules.

26 Tankers holding more than 23 million barrels of oil from Kazakhstan were unable to pass, according to one count.

But the Turkish Transport Ministry said the large number of vessels now waiting to navigate the straits shouldn't be used to pressure Ankara over rules requiring proof the tankers are insured, saying it would remove laden tankers without insurance letters from its waters, although it wasn't clear if its approach might actually free some of the blocked vessels.

Global shipping operators are shunning these vessels and their owners as any relationship will lead to embargoes on their ability to solicit backhaul shipments, severely imperiling their ability to viably operate.

Impacts

Russia's labor-starved economy pays price of Putin's call-up - Months after the Kremlin announced mobilization in late September, a record depletion of workers is fast spreading across a country already hobbled by an aging and shrinking population.

The call-up of men to fight in Ukraine has left labor so scarce in Russia that entire industries are in distress.

Months after the Kremlin announced the mobilization in late September, a record depletion of workers is fast spreading across a country already hobbled by an aging and shrinking population and with unemployment near the lowest ever. A study by the Gaidar Institute in Moscow in November found that up to a third of Russian industry may face a deficit of personnel because of the draft, the most severe crunch since 1993.

Agrokomplex, a large agricultural company in the south, now struggles to fill openings for tractor drivers and other workers, in addition to the specialists in areas like agronomy who've long been hard to find, said Irina Khmelevskaya, head of recruitment. The mobilization is partly to blame, she said.

The mobilization of 300,000 men, combined with an even bigger wave of emigration it triggered, will reduce the male labor pool by 2%. That's among the main reasons that Bloomberg Economics now puts Russia's potential economic growth rate at just 0.5% – or half its pre-war level. The threat that labor shortages will eventually bring inflationary pressure has already prompted the Bank of Russia to put interest-rate cuts on hold.

The call-up and the flight it caused cut across society, sweeping up urban white-collar professionals and people in rural areas alike.

In Novosibirsk, Siberia's most populous city, officials say they can field barely half the staff needed to clear streets of snow with so much of the seasonal workforce from the countryside caught up in the mobilization. More than 200 convicts will be employed at the state-run tank maker Uralvagonzavod.

A third of companies lost some employees to the call-up, with nearly a fifth saying they haven't yet been able to replace them, a November survey showed. Among infrastructure builders, the vast majority is experiencing an increasing lack of qualified labor and expects shortages to get worse in the coming quarters, according to a report.

The number of vacancies in IT and telecommunications grew 15% in October from the previous month, according to Russian online recruiter Superjob.

In the wake of the call-up, résumés from Russian citizens are flooding nations across much of the post-Soviet region and Turkey, with IT specialists accounting for a fifth of the total, according to HeadHunter, Russia's biggest online job-search platform.

Natalia Danina, chief of HeadHunter's analytical department, said demand for blue-collar workers is surging. The age group of 20 through 24 currently counts no more than 7 million people, a steep drop from over 12 million a decade ago, she said.

"These are terrifying numbers," Danina said. "Besides, many may have health problems because of the stress. There are physically not enough people left!"

The elderly, alongside women and teenagers, are also becoming an important source of workers, according to Danina. Migrants account for up to 10% of the local labor market, with Russia growing more reliant on them to expand the pool of low-skill labor. (**Comment** – See article below on how migrants are being pressganged into military service.

Migration outflows have meanwhile continued since the start of the year, according to official data published Wednesday, with the number of those leaving Russia in the first nine months more than doubling and rising by more than 323,000.

Russian forces have started demolishing a theatre in occupied Mariupol in southern Ukraine that was the site of a deadly airstrike believed to have killed hundreds of civilians, according to an aide to the city's exiled Ukrainian mayor. Ukraine's culture minister, Oleksandr Tkachenko, said the move was an "attempt to hide forever the evidence of the deliberate killing of Ukrainians by Russians."

Another Russian-appointed official bombed - Two people were injured after a car bomb exploded in the Russian-occupied city of Melitopol in south-eastern Ukraine, according to a local pro-Moscow official. Vladimir Rogov, a Russian-appointed official in Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia province, described the incident as a "terrorist attack" carried out by "militants of the Kyiv regime" to the Russian state media. Ivan Fedorov, the exiled mayor of Melitopol, wrote on Telegram that eyewitnesses reported a car was "blown up."

And yet another one blown up - A Russian-installed official in a part of Ukraine's southern Kherson region controlled by Russian forces was killed on Thursday in a car bomb attack, according to the pro-Moscow local administration. Andrei Shtepa, the pro-Russian head of the village of Lyubimovka in the Kherson region, reportedly died after a car blew up, it said, blaming "Ukrainian terrorists."

Ukraine takes credit for wounding Putin lackey Dmitry Rogozin - As Russia's former space chief floated conspiracy theories yesterday about what led to the "targeted" attack against him as he celebrated his birthday on stolen Ukrainian territory a day earlier, Ukrainian authorities offered a blunt response: Of course we fired at you, you moron, you never should've crossed the border. That was the gist of what Ukraine's Border Guard Service said in a statement on Dmitry Rogozin's shrapnel wounding. "The State Border Guard Service determined that Russian citizen Rogozin illegally crossed the Ukrainian border. We were unable to personally deliver the [written] protocol to the offender, why it was 'handed' to him during his birthday celebrations by concerned comrades," the agency wrote.

Rogozin, one of Putin's top cheerleaders in the war against Ukraine, was wounded along with another pro-Kremlin official when their hotel in occupied Donetsk was fired on by Ukrainian forces on Wednesday. One of his aides said Thursday that he'd been transferred to a military hospital in Russia's Rostov region. The 59-year-old Russian nationalist says he will have to undergo surgery after suffering a shrapnel injury to his back, which he is now blaming on an "information leak." "We lived in this hotel for months, and in eight years the enemy not once fired on this place," he said of the "targeted" strike.

And --- Military post in Moscow catches fire- A military post in Moscow caught fire last night, MSKAgency cites its source.

"The fire broke out in a garage bay, reportedly located inside a military post," a source within emergency services has told the media outlet.

Moscow's emergency services received a call regarding the fire at 23.45 local time on Thursday. The fire area was around 200 square metres, Baza says, and several fire brigades were used to put out the fire. No people were injured.

China LNG tanker orders rise, as Korean yards swamped - Chinese shipyards are posting rising numbers of orders for LNG tankers as South Korean yards are fully booked with orders of their own, reports Reuters.

Three Chinese yards - only one of them having experience building large LNG tankers - won nearly 30 per cent of this year's record orders for 163 new gas carriers, claiming ground in a sector where South Korea usually captures most of the business.

Comment – Another sign of China adapting to the new reality of sanctions on Russian exports. China is overwhelmingly dependent upon energy imports and these orders seem to indicate a looming switch in LNG sourcing. Read this together with a Chinese warming toward Australia and one might be forgiven for thinking that China is eyeing the new deep-sea LNG extraction to the north-west of Australia. The gas has to be shipped from out at sea to destination ports.

Of import here though is that if correct, this is another sign of a widening gap in Sino/Russo relations.

Russia has virtually lost Europe’s gas market - After agreeing on a Russian oil price cap in early January, the EU countries started discussing a similar mechanism on the gas market but have not reached any agreement so far.

The EU countries agreed on a price cap on Russia’s oil at \$60 per barrel recently. The cap is to be reviewed every two months. A similar mechanism is being discussed for natural gas now, but there is no consensus so far.

Those two mechanisms are of different nature. The oil price cap is a political mechanism used to control the sales of Russia’s oil to third countries, as well as the business of the EU-based service companies. This isn’t about the European market really. The gas price cap is a way to somehow hold down the gas price in Europe.

The conceptual difference is that EU countries agreed on an embargo on Russia’s oil, transported by sea, in advance. Therefore, Russia does not supply any oil to the EU anymore, and the price cap would only regulate its supplies to other countries and how the EU-based service companies would work with those supplies.

Those countries that did not back the oil price cap are not really tied to this decision, as it’s more of a political nature. Obviously, buyers are using it to pressure Russia and purchase oil at a lower price, but that’s as far as it goes.

The gas situation is different: no embargo is planned against Russia’s supply of natural gas to the EU so far.

The second difference is the proportion of Russia’s commodities. At the moment, the EU receives about 7% of all gas it consumes from Russia.

Currently, most of the gas supplies to Europe are of liquefied natural gas (LNG) from the US and Qatar, as well as from Norway and Algeria. None of these suppliers is going to settle for restrictions.

If the EU sets the price cap at, say, \$3,000/1,000 cubic metres, this will mean that no gas would be sold in Europe above that price. But then again, this isn’t a decision against Russia as it now only has a minor share among Europe’s gas supplies. Such a decision may trigger a negative response from the key suppliers in the US, Qatar, Norway, and Algeria.

Comment – We need to wait and see what transpires with the huge Australian gas deposits off its coast, exploitation of which could see the Aussies vault into the #1 or #2 global supplier position.

US sends warplanes to South Korea after Kim’s sister’s threats - The United States flew nuclear-capable bombers and advanced stealth jets in a show of force against North Korea on Tuesday, as the powerful sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un derided doubts about her country’s military and threatened a full-range intercontinental ballistic missile test.

The drills included F-35 and F-15 fighter jets from South Korea, and took place in the waters southwest of Jeju island, the ministry said. The U.S. F-22 jets were deployed in South Korea for the first time in four years and will stay throughout



this week for training with South Korean forces, it said.

The drills were held after NK claimed to have launched a test satellite for development of its first military spy satellite and tested a solid-fueled motor to be used on a more mobile intercontinental ballistic missile in the past several days.

Comment – Aside from the obvious tactical decision to show force against NK threats, it simultaneously sends a message to China and Russia of the US ability to mount multiple fronts.

US Colonel says troops watching outside Ukraine 'Ready if the call comes' - American troops in the 101st Airborne Division positioned near Ukraine are prepared to respond if the war with Russia reaches allied territory, U.S. Army Colonel Ed Matthaideess recently said.

The troops are positioned in a way that allows their artillery to be within easy range of Ukraine. The proximity also allows members of the division to gather intelligence and monitor fighters around the Black Sea, according to Stars and Stripes, a U.S. military news organization. Matthaideess said on Monday that troops are "ready if the call comes."

Functioning as the division's first operational mission in Europe since World War II, the 2nd Brigade Combat Team includes nearly 5,000 soldiers along NATO's southeastern flank, with many positioned at strategic locations near Romania's coastline.

Zelensky poised to collect massive US military aid

Biden announced an additional \$1.8 billion in security assistance to Ukraine during the visit, with the coveted Patriot missile systems as part of that package, a US official told CNN's Phil Mattingly. Washington also plans to send Ukraine precision bomb kits to convert less sophisticated munitions into "smart bombs" that could help it target Russian defensive lines, sources told CNN's Pentagon team. Zelensky's visit also comes as Congress is poised to sign off on another \$45 billion in aid for Ukraine and NATO allies, deepening the commitment that has helped Kyiv's forces inflict an unexpectedly bloody price on Putin's forces.

The decision on Patriots, which would satisfy a long-standing Ukrainian request, reflects a US process of matching its aid to the shifting strategy of Russia's assault. The system would help Kyiv better counter Russia's brutal missile attacks on cities and electricity installations, which it has mounted in an effective attempt to weaponize bitter winter weather to break the will of Ukrainian civilians. The meeting held between Biden and Zelensky, who have spoken multiple times by phone and video link-ups but have not met in person since the invasion, comes at a vital moment in the war.

Biden has for months cautiously calibrated US shipments of arms and weapons systems in a way designed to save Ukraine but to avoid escalating the conflict into a disastrous direct clash between NATO and Russia. He rejected Ukrainian calls for the West to enforce a no-fly zone over the country. The Patriots – a long range-aerial defense system – would represent the deepest US dive into the conflict so far.

Former NATO Supreme Allied Commander, Europe, Wesley Clark said Zelensky's trip reflects a critical moment when the destiny of a war that Ukraine cannot win without upgraded US support could be decided before Russia can regroup.

"This is a window of opportunity for Ukraine and a window of danger as well," Clark told CNN's John Berman on "AC360" on Tuesday.

"Russia's weak, (but) Russia will be stronger. This is a period where the US needs to pour in the support. This is the window, Zelensky knows it – if he is going to defeat, with US support, the Russian aggression in Ukraine," Clark said.

"Wait until the summer and it will be an entirely different battlefield."

Five foreign policy stories to watch in 2023

2022 had its fair share of big news stories. The same will be true of 2023. Some of the events that will make the news will surprise. Here are five that won't. Each of them figures to make headlines in 2023—and to absorb the time and energy of policymakers in the United States and abroad. (CFR Article).

1. **The War in Ukraine.** Many policymakers and experts a year ago dismissed US and British intelligence reports that Russia would invade Ukraine. Almost everyone expected a quick Russian victory if it did. As 2022 ended, Ukraine had not only turned back the Russian military offensive but gained the upper hand in the fighting. Rather than seeking a face-saving diplomatic exit from his grievous miscalculation, Putin doubled down on his brazen aggression by deliberately targeting Ukraine's civilian infrastructure. The specter of a brutal winter appears not to have shaken Ukrainian resolve.

Western support for Ukraine also appears to be holding, even as European publics recoil at the war's economic fallout. For his part, Putin has suppressed domestic criticism of his war, dashing hopes that his ouster from office might bring peace. So bitter fighting is likely to continue throughout the winter, even if the prospects for significant breakthroughs on the ground seem slim. That could change in the spring, either because Russia launches a new military offensive, perhaps with Belarus's support, or Ukraine seeks to reclaim Crimea. Major advances on the ground by either side might create space for diplomacy. But such advances could also spur escalation. Putin has not renounced his implicit threat to use nuclear weapons. Meanwhile, fighting in Ukraine will continue to roil global markets, driving up energy prices and heightening food insecurity across the Global South. One sobering possibility is that the world will live under the shadow of the war in Ukraine for years to come.

2. **The Axis of the Aggrieved.** President Biden came to office insisting that the contest between democracies and autocracies is the defining division in world affairs. Regardless of whether that framing is the best one for US foreign policy, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has helped solidify what might be called the "axis of the aggrieved"—authoritarian powers that resent U.S. preeminence and Western influence more broadly.

On the eve of the 2022 Winter Olympics, Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping affirmed what they called a "friendship without limits." While Beijing declined to help Moscow rebuild its depleted weapons stocks as its war in Ukraine faltered, it has failed to criticize the Russian invasion and instead has used its media power to blame the West for the war. North Korea moved closer to both China and Russia, including by selling rockets and artillery to help Moscow sustain its war in Ukraine. Iran similarly deepened its military ties with Russia, first by selling Moscow drones and then by selling other advanced military systems and parts. Whether and how these ties deepen remains an open question. Mutual contempt of the U.S.-dominated world order may not provide the firmest foundation for collaboration. China's support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine helps make the Biden administration's case that US friends and partners should limit China's rise. Likewise, North Korea's nuclear weapons program complicates life for Beijing in northeast Asia. And Iran worries China may find Saudi Arabia a more appealing Middle Eastern partner.

3. **Tensions Over Taiwan.** President Xi has vowed to reunify what China regards as the wayward province of Taiwan. He has not yet set forth a timetable for accomplishing this goal or ruled out using force to achieve it. The US Chief of Naval Operations is among the experts warning that China might invade Taiwan before 2024. On balance, that seems unlikely. Mounting a successful amphibious invasion of an island that sits one hundred miles off the mainland is a daunting task, especially for a military not seeing significant combat in more than four decades.

President Biden has said the US will defend Taiwan in the event of an attack, even though no treaty obligates it to do so. Washington clearly would prefer not to have made good on that vow. Some war games show the US losing any fight over Taiwan; others show it winning. Either way, the costs would be ruinous for all involved. But an outright invasion is only one possibility. China could also accelerate "grey-zone activities" that probe Taiwan's

defenses and pressure Taipei. China did just that in retaliation for US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's August 2022 visit to Taiwan. The next House Speaker may repeat Pelosi's visit, which will give Beijing justification to step up pressure on Taiwan. A gradual intensification of Chinese grey-zone activities could present the United States with escalatory dilemmas where the challenge becomes conveying resolve without triggering a clash between Chinese and U.S. forces. A controversy is already brewing in Washington over whether promised military aid is getting to Taiwan fast enough to deter Beijing—or possibly defeat it.

4. **Turmoil in Iran.** Will the Islamic Republic of Iran still exist on December 31, 2023? The mullahs who have governed Iran for four decades now face the most significant domestic challenge to their rule. The immediate cause of the protests buffeting the regime is the September 2022 death in police custody of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish-Iranian woman. The reason for her arrest? She wasn't wearing the required hijab properly.

Her death touched a nerve in a country already angry about a stagnant economy, high inequality, government corruption, and growing climate-related challenges. The government has responded to demonstrators chanting "Women, life, freedom!" with more repression. However, shooting some demonstrators in the street and publicly executing others after sham trials has only fueled public opposition. The regime may continue to double down on repression, fearing that conciliatory gestures will just generate more demands.

But more repression could also lead the EU and others to toughen sanctions on Iran. A wild card is the health of eighty-three-year-old Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, rumored to be ill. A leadership change in the midst of nationwide protests may split the regime. The protests have likely extinguished the already dim prospects for reviving the 2015 Iran nuclear deal.

Iran blames the US and Israel for engineering the protests, and the Biden administration isn't likely to sign any agreements while the regime is shooting protesters in the street. The question preoccupying the White House is whether Iran might try to distract attention from its problems at home by acting more malignly abroad.

5. **The Biden Administration's America First Economic Policy.** When 2022 started, geopolitical divisions buffeted the West. European leaders dismissed the Biden administration's warning that Russia was preparing to invade Ukraine, and experts worried that a Russia attack limited to the Donbass might split the transatlantic alliance.

But Putin ordered a large-scale invasion that united the West in opposition. Despite predictions that Western solidarity would quickly crumble, it held up. But as 2022 ended, a new dividing line emerged between the United States and its closest allies: economic policy.

Contrary to the hopes of most U.S. trading partners, President Biden left many of Trump's tariffs in place. In 2022 Congress passed, and Biden signed into law, the Inflation Reduction Act and the CHIPS and Science Act, subsidizing US industries and discriminating against producers outside of North America. French President Emmanuel Macron warned that the two laws might "fragment the West."

Many other U.S. allies were equally scathing in criticizing the US embrace of industrial policy. Biden admitted that the Inflation Reduction Act had "glitches" and spoke of making "tweaks" to the law. However, Congress isn't likely to revise its handiwork. The Biden administration also banned the export of advanced semiconductor chips and equipment that use US technology to China, forcing US trade partners to choose between complying or losing critical export opportunities. US actions came as the war in Ukraine rocked the European economy, prompting some leading European officials to complain Washington was championing the Ukrainian cause only because the US economy was profiting from the fighting.

Putin's ambitions put Finland's troops and tanks back in vogue

For much of the last 30 years Finland's armed forces have looked a little old fashioned, still configured to fight a major land campaign in Europe as though the Cold War never ended. No more.

As Finland readies to join NATO against the backdrop of Europe's bloodiest war since 1945, the Nordic nation's military is back in vogue. Its commanders are also well aware of what they bring to the table in a potential fight.

"We have significant defensive ability to wage the kind of war that's now taking place in Ukraine," Finland's top commander General Kivinen said in an interview. "On a per capita basis, we have the most fire power in Europe."

Finnish officials admit to frustration that the country has yet to join NATO six months after the alliance issued its invitation. That has left both Finland and fellow-invitee Sweden in a so-called "gray" zone between abandoning military nonalignment and gaining NATO's Article 5 collective defense protections.

"We already fulfill the military criteria for membership, and looking at our defense expenditure, we comply with the 2% of GDP criterion," Kivinen said.

Despite a population of just 5.5 million, Finland has more artillery than France and Germany combined and can call on as many as 280,000 troops. Though most of those are trained reserves, the figure is larger than that of the U.K.

Finland's fleet of F/A-18 Hornets armed with advanced U.S. missiles will soon be replaced by 64 Lockheed Martin F-35A aircraft joint strike fighters. At sea, there are elaborate coastal defenses and a shallow water navy tailored for the rocky coasts of the Baltic, plus a capability for fighting in the Arctic and, in Lapland, Europe's biggest training area for air combat across the three Nordic countries.

The memory of past invasions from the east has given Finland a powerful incentive to retain the means to defend its 835 mile-border with Russia even after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Other European nations dismantled their territorial defenses in the belief that a state-on-state war on the continent had become inconceivable.

All but two of NATO's 30 member countries have ratified accession for the Nordic nations, with Hungary and Turkey as holdouts. Hungary recently said it will not put ratification to parliament until next year. Turkey continues to stall, alleging Sweden harbors supporters of Kurdish terrorist organizations.

NATO diplomats and officials are convinced both Hungary and Turkey will ultimately come on board and note the ratification process is still likely to be one of the fastest in the organization's history. And while Finland isn't yet fully covered by Article 5, the security risk is mitigated by commitments from the U.K., U.S. and others to defend the Nordic nations if they are attacked before becoming full members.

The delay is also causing anxiety in the three Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The addition of Finland and Sweden to NATO is seen as a significant improvement to security for the hard-to-defend ex-Soviet territories, solidifying alliance control over the Baltic Sea at their backs.

But doubling NATO's land border with Russia brings new liabilities — officials in Moscow have said they will respond. It is hard to see what they could do though because the Finland section is already defended and any Russian response would involve a dispersal of resources from other theaters.

According to Kivinen the war in Ukraine has confirmed the growing importance of air defenses in modern warfare. Finland has invested far beyond the 11 unmanned aerial vehicles listed in the Military Balance, he said, referring to a database of global military capabilities maintained by the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies.

The .S State Department has approved the sale of \$323 million of air-to-air and air-to-surface missiles for use with Finland's fighter jets, saying the country "will have no difficulty absorbing this equipment into its armed forces."

But the conflict has also underscored the importance of artillery, and Finland is beefing up its already large arsenal. The US has signed off on a deal that could be worth as much as \$535 million to provide munitions for Finland's fleet of M-270 multiple rocket launchers, a larger, tracked version of the wheeled HIMARs systems that have proved so effective in Ukraine. The Nordic nation is also adding to its fleet of 155 millimeter self-propelled howitzers.

These old school capabilities in artillery and infantry make Finland stand out among NATO allies. Many countries in Europe abandoned the territorial defense doctrines of the Cold War during the 1990s and early 2000s. Tanks were scrapped, field guns mothballed, head counts and defense budgets slashed.

Those countries that retained a meaningful combat capacity turned to slimmer, more mobile, all-professional forces. France ended general conscription by 2001, Sweden in 2010, and Germany in 2011. Defense spending as a percentage of the economy fell by as much as two thirds from the height of the Cold War, in the 1970s and 80s, to 2014, in NATO members such as Germany.

Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea began a reversal in those trends. Sweden restored conscription in 2018, while France will restart in 2024. Germany this year created a special €100 billion (\$107 billion) fund to top up defense spending in the years ahead, avoiding constitutional debt limits.

That's a circular journey Finland never took, largely because it gained independence from Russia only in 1917 and then lost 11% of its territory to a brutal Soviet invasion that began in 1939.

"Finns are more prepared," Kivinen said, "but it's because of our history."