

Conflict Update # 25

April 9th, 2022

Conflict Assessment

Ukrainian forces under training - reports are coming in that Ukrainian force members are in the US for training on advanced weaponry such as the Patriot missile system. They are also in various NATO countries receiving training on further defensive weapon systems.

The US Department of Defense (DoD) reported on April 8 that the Russian armed forces have lost 15-20 percent of the “combat power” they had arrayed against Ukraine before the invasion.

Reconstituting these units to restore any notable fraction of their nominal power would take months. The Russian military would have to incorporate new soldiers bringing the units back up toward full strength and then allow those soldiers time to integrate into the units. It would also have to allow those units to conduct some unit training, because a unit is more than the sum of individual soldiers and vehicles.

The Russian armed forces likely have few or no full-strength units in reserve to deploy to fight in Ukraine because of a flawed mobilization scheme that cannot be fixed in the course of a short war.

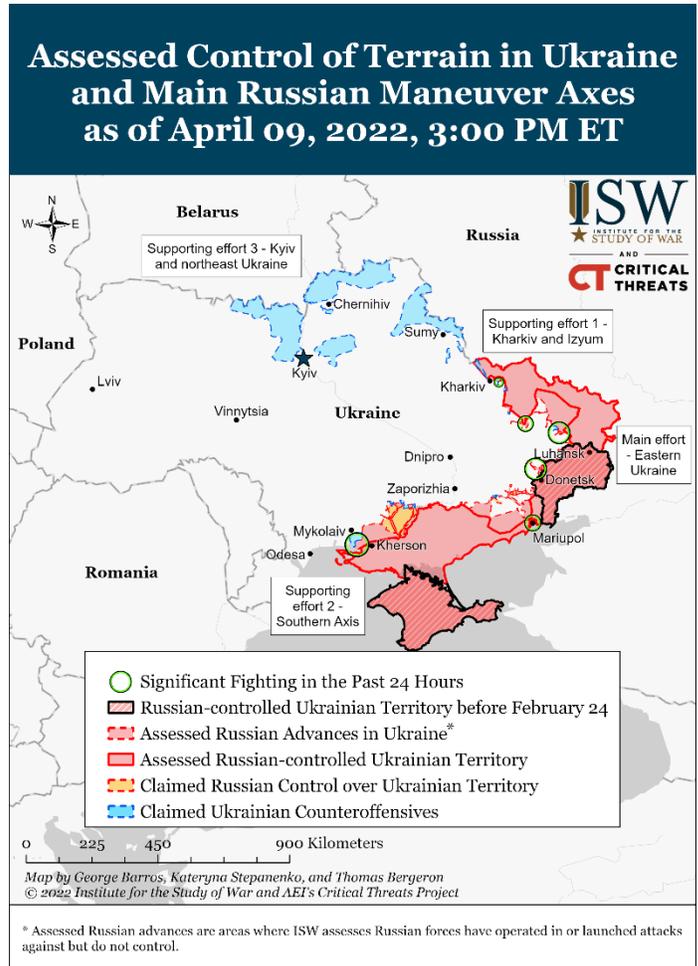
S300 – the Slovak government is now delivering their S300 anti-aircraft systems to Ukraine.

Eastern Front – Russia is massing on the eastern front for a full-on assault in the Donbas region. If reports of the low sophistication weaponry at their disposal for deployment are true, then it appears it will be a mass tank and artillery approach, similar to the Battle of Kursk in WWII. In that battle, Russia held a vast majority of backup forces to literally “ride over the bodies of dead Russians” to keep at the Germans.

That does not appear to hold this time. They will have a large number of pieces of equipment and a larger army force but will be up against a higher level of technology with anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons aligned against them.

They will need to command the air space, something which they have to date not accomplished, NATO is re-supplying Ukraine with the latest anti-aircraft missile systems, so it is difficult to see how Russia achieves this need.

A mass attack with a broad front of artillery and armored columns presents a large target for smart weapons. US intelligence, coupled with smart weapons, will be able to home in on very specific elements of Russian advances. Stopping them or slowing down any progress, renders their remaining columns and forces vulnerable to terrible attack.



Should Russia fail to succeed, watch for Ukrainian forces to advance and begin forcing existing Russian strongholds back towards Russia.

Increasingly, reports are being received of a mass “mutiny” by Russian conscripts and “Elite Forces.” It appears, if these reports are true, that those who have experienced infighting against Ukrainian forces, have no desire to reenter the battle, anywhere.

With the current conscript enlistment still under way, new troops will be raw and relatively untrained. 60,000 mobilized reservists will be fed into the battle, but they too are in need of re-training and deployment.

Russian field commands have proven wanting at best, and Putin has this morning replaced his Ukrainian Commander. But that in and of itself, does not provide improved field command and communications.

As mentioned above and in a previous Update, NATO has recognized the change in Russian tactics and is expediting Ukrainian replenishment and supply in order to meet and repel such attacks.

The looming battle is of cardinal import to Ukraine and NATO, so we can expect to see an all-out defense and attack mode in place.

Ukraine’s success against the Russian invasion shows the character of war is changing. More agile, fleetfooted and mobile, Ukrainian forces have also been more adept at;

- **Striking light vehicles to impede larger units** – Ukrainians attacked light vehicles with thin “skins” such as petrol bowlers and supply trucks, without which the large advance ground to a halt, rendering them “sitting ducks” for shoulder-mounted weaponry. They singled out these vehicles and stopped Russia’s advance in its tracks in certain fronts.
- **Shoot and Scoot** – Ukrainians have been extremely mobile, shooting and scooting as they go, this makes it confusing for defending troops to track where to shoot in response.
- **Chaos infliction** – Attacking Russian tanks with NLAW and Javelin missiles saw catastrophic damage and carnage to targeted vehicles, causing utter chaos in surrounding vehicles which could not escape by veering sideways or reversing. Ukrainians changed road signs and sent Russians columns into “kill zones,” attacking them at will. With such damage, raw and untrained soldiers tried to escape the carnage, only to fall into either a killing field or captivity.
- **Airwave hacking** – Russian forces destroyed repeat towers and relay stations as they initially progressed on February 24th – leaving them without field communications. So, they resorted to cell phones and unsafe radio signaling, much of which was picked up by Ukrainian hackers and listening posts, leading the Ukrainians directly to their source(s).

Coupled to this is the use by Ukrainian signals troops of the Cold War short-wave radio network. Post-Soviet collapse, old style short wave comms systems were discontinued, but not destroyed or even dismantled. Ukrainian networks have re-deployed these to connect into Russian systems which have not been updated or replaced – allowing them to listen into enemy commands and battle instructions. Perhaps why so many senior Russian field officers have been “eliminated.”

- **Flights of the Drones** – Ukrainians have deployed huge numbers of commercial drones around battle fronts, flown by amateur controllers who plot Russian movements, positions and bulges, reporting these to home forces. These identified coordinates are then bombed and attacked. Russians have literally “nowhere to hide” as these amateurs, mounted on bicycles and motorcycles, traverse the countryside seeking out any movement.

- **Being Smart** – Ukrainian forces are equipped with the latest NATO smart weapons, ideal for targeting a lumbering mass movement of armored columns such as favored by Russian tacticians. We can expect to see these deployed in the looming eastern front, in order to halt leading Russian vehicles.
- **Anti-amphibious landings** – Russia has collected amphibious landing forces in the Black Sea and Sea of Azov. These vehicles, whilst in the water, are particularly vulnerable to attack. Ukraine has received large stocks of anti-ship smart missiles from NATO which will likely see deployment against these amphibious attack forces around Odessa.
- **Rise of the Urbanites** – Ukraine has historically been an easy terrain to cross, no mountains, wide plains and open terrain. But now there are urban areas, ideal for defensive positions. The Russians arrived in armored vehicles, easy to pick off from higher vantage points in an urban setting, being particularly vulnerable from above. Urbanization dramatically reshapes the battle ground. As far back as the sixth century B.C., warrior-sage Sun Tzu warned against attacking cities, calling it the worst of strategies. This is one reason perhaps why Russians continue shelling cities from afar.
- **Talk to the masses** – Ukraine has very adroitly used cell phone networks to rally troops and mobilizations. One of the first things captor Russians do is confiscate Ukrainian phones, if not to prevent this tactic then certainly for self-gain.
- **Era of the scarecrows** – just as transpired in age-ago conflicts, where defenders used smoke signals to send messages, today Ukraine has stationed “listening posts” and observation posts, like scarecrows in the wheat fields around the country, which report back on continuing Russian movements, to a central control post.
- **National Identity** – Zelenskyy has rallied the country as opposed to fleeing as Russia initially anticipated. This has fostered their national identity, led by a “fearless leader.”

Financial

Russia's ruble has bounced back to pre-invasion levels, but the country's economy is still in a dire state. The surge in the ruble is less a reflection of the strength of Russia's economy, than of the government's strict capital controls.

NATO

Boris Johnson visits Kyiv – UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson today visited Zelenskyy in Kyiv and promised further material support, over and above that committed to yesterday.

Finland preparing for Russian ‘consequences’ if it joins NATO: - By all signs, Finland is heading towards a decision on joining the NATO alliance within the next few months, if not weeks. And in the process, a top Finnish defense official tells Breaking Defense, the country has to prepare for the reality of a furious, but unpredictable response from Moscow.

“Of course, Russia will react, but we don’t know how. And we need to be prepared” should Finland decide to join NATO, said Esa Pulkkinen, the permanent secretary at Finland’s Ministry of Defense.

Boxer Armored Vehicles – the UK is bolstering its number of Boxer vehicles by another 100 units. These are combat vehicles ready for easy and rapid redeployment to conflict zones. These vehicles are a joint development between the UK and Germany and are the vanguard of ground forces advancing into battle.



Widening of Conflict

Putin might turn to weapons of mass destruction if Russia doesn't win in eastern Ukraine – Russian President Vladimir Putin might resort to weapons of mass destruction, like chemical and tactical nuclear weapons, if he fails to achieve a “conventional forces victory” in eastern Ukraine, says Niall Ferguson, a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University.

If it becomes clear over the next few weeks that Russian forces are too weary to pull off a decisive victory in the Donbas, Ferguson said Putin might find himself in an “extremely difficult” situation without an obvious offramp.

He noted Putin has already shown himself willing to perpetrate “horrific destruction” with conventional forces like cruise missiles.

However, Phillips O'Brien of the University of St. Andrews thinks it is “unlikely, if not impossible” for Putin to resort to WMDs. Using WMDs could lead to even greater support for Ukraine internationally, in terms of weapons and sanctions against Russia, O'Brien said, adding it is also not clear how such weapons would help Russia achieve its political objectives.

“They might kill people in some cities — but how does that help them win the war?” he added.

O'Brien also said there is a “good chance” Moscow will fail to take and hold the south and east of Ukraine.

Ukraine War Sparks Suspicion Over Russia's Designs On Kazakhstan – For all its years of independence, Kazakhstan has worried about Russian irredentist dreams of Kazakh territory. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, such concerns seem well-founded. They have heard such threats coming from Russian officials and some Russians in Kazakhstan for all the years that Kazakhstan has been independent.

On March 26, 2022, Sergei Savostyanov, a deputy in the Moscow City Duma (Council), released a statement supporting Russia's invasion of Ukraine as necessary to “denazify” and “demilitarize” Ukraine. Savostyanov said Russia should further ensure its security by taking similar measures in the Baltic states, Poland, Moldova, and Kazakhstan. Some would consider Savostyanov's comments ludicrous, but Kazakh officials take such remarks seriously since Russian designs on Kazakhstan have been repeated for 30 years.

In a May 1992 interview with the Russian daily Nezavisimaya Gazeta, Kazakhstan's first president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, addressed comments from a congress of Russian people's deputies in Moscow that Kazakhstan's Guryev Province (now called Atyrau) and Tselinograd Province (now called Akmola) were “ancient Russian territories.” Nazarbayev said, “Any border claims on Kazakhstan, and indeed any other (former Soviet) republic mean inevitable bloodshed.” Nazarbayev added that he would never allow any part of Kazakhstan's territory to be “removed.”

Sanctions

Ordinary Russians abroad - are using foreign bank accounts after sanctions. Since it invaded Ukraine, Russia has been a pariah state, with many sectors of its economy sanctioned by the international community. Its network of wealthy oligarchs have had their assets frozen, their overseas properties raided, and their yachts seized.

But ordinary Russians are feeling the impact too, with the ruble plummeting in the early days of the invasion, one of the worst-performing currencies of the year so far. Major Russian lenders have been banned from SWIFT, the international system of payment used by thousands of banks worldwide. And for Russians abroad like Maria, the decision by Mastercard and Visa to suspend their Russian operations, has meant money troubles since their cards are now negligible abroad.

Russian Crude Exports Are Not Declining As Much As Expected - Russian crude exports are not falling anywhere close to the early estimates. First week of April shows flat week-over-week crude exports. Early preliminary shows a drop of ~800k b/d.

Because the IEA assumed ~3 mb/d production loss and the reality looks to be less than ~1 mb/d, the global oil market balance will tip into a small surplus in-Q2/Q3.

U.S. Ends Normal Trade Ties - The U.S. Congress voted Thursday to end normal trade relations with Moscow and codify the ban on Russian oil, as the White House ratchets up pressure on President Vladimir Putin over his invasion of Ukraine.

The legislation — which also applies to Russia's ally Belarus — enables President Joe Biden to inflict steep tariff hikes on imports from both countries.

“Terrorist State” — is the US and EU considering terming Russia and Belarus as “Terrorist States”? — if so, it brings with it huge implications insofar as trade, communications and transactions are concerned.

Swiss have frozen \$8 billion in assets under Russia sanctions - Switzerland has so far frozen some 7.5 billion Swiss francs in funds and assets under sanctions against Russians to punish Moscow’s invasion of Ukraine. The assets included money in frozen bank accounts and properties in four Swiss cantons.

In a sharp deviation from the country’s traditional neutrality, Switzerland on February 28 adopted European Union sanctions against Russians involved in Moscow’s invasion of Ukraine. It is adopting other EU sanctions as well.

Impacts

Special Tribunal for the Punishment of the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine – It appears that traction in creating a Tribunal for prosecuting war crimes in Ukraine is gathering speed. Any war criminal investigations normally take years to pursue and execute, so movement here will be extended and long-winded.

How to overthrow Putin? – an overthrow can only come from within. Not through oligarchs, protests or individual officers.

There will need to be a huge groundswell in uprising from the Russian people itself. Returning soldiers, death notices, mutinous rejections of conscriptions and a growing awareness of the folly of the war may lead to such a movement.

Once mothers in Russia start realizing they have been duped, that loved ones were consigned to “hot spots” in contravention of promises and military contracts, that they are not returning or those that do return with tales of horror, as is currently happening, serve to circulate stories of true events and defeats, we can expect to see a change in domestic dynamics.

Putin is already circling the wagons around him, but this only pertains to those around him. Should there be a growing swell of dissent by grieving families, together with mothers of newly-conscripted soldiers, there may well be a foundation for officers and politicians to stage a palace revolution, not for the first time in Russian history following military defeat or casualties.

Oligarchs do not like this war, it is interfering in their money-making ability, bank officials do not like this war, it is disrupting the economy, economists do not like this war, the intelligentsia do not like this war. But they are all afraid.

Once the genie is out of the “Russian mother” bottle, change may rapidly ensue.

April 1st is the start of the next conscription year. Those in the previous year – 2021/2022 – are now returning home. Those killed or missing in action will cause mothers to react, as has previously been the case in Russia (see below) – this has yet to drip down into Russian inner society, concentrated as it is in the west of the country.

Putin knows this, which is why he has more frequently than for any other reason, addressed the Russian people – to calm down the mothers.

The Russian mother - Cracks in the idealized image of military service were becoming visible by the time Gorbachev came to power in 1985; by the end of his rule, the image was on the point of shattering altogether.

In the erosion of the legitimacy of the universal military service and of the Soviet military itself, the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia (CSMR) played a crucial role. Under Gorbachev, the Committee emerged as a mass movement aimed at exposing and eradicating the violence endemic in the Soviet military.

In particular, the Committee played an important role in drawing public attention to *dedovshchina* — the widespread systems of informal power hierarchies that operate in Soviet barracks, and the associated violence in which senior conscripts bullied and victimized new recruits.

Revelations about *dedovshchina* ushered in a dramatic shift in public perceptions of Russian military service. Official rhetoric on the beneficial nature of military service for young men's physical and moral development was displaced by widespread acknowledgement that for many conscripts, military service was in fact a profoundly damaging and traumatic experience. By the same token, the validity of the hitherto unquestioned notion that it was every male Soviet citizen's 'sacred duty' to undergo military service was eroded, as the controversy over *dedovshchina* brought into question the legitimacy of the state's claim to exact military service from its male citizens. For many, in fact, *dedovshchina* provided a reasonable justification for draft evasion, and was one of the causes of the conscription crisis of the late 1980s-early 1990s.

There isn't anybody who knows this problem better than the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers. Because we come into contact with this problem every day. We live and breathe these military units, we know their routines, we know what goes on there, because the boys tell us much more than they tell their own parents. — CSM member Liudmila N. Zinchenko

Hundreds of mothers organised by CSMR went to Chechnya to take their sons away from the war. They negotiated with the Chechen army and obtained the release of 'prisoners of war'. CSMR organised a remarkable 'March of Mothers' Compassion', bombarded the Russian government with statements and petitions, and campaigned for the young men who refused to serve in Chechnya, declaring themselves conscientious objectors. Most controversially, they started a campaign encouraging mothers to support the right of their sons to refuse military service - and they travelled abroad to support the idea of an International Tribunal on Chechnya.

Soldiers from all over Russia are being sent against their will to fight in Ukraine, said Valentina Melnikova earlier this month. Valentina works with the Union of Committees of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia. The mothers represented by the organization are horrified by Russia's actions in Ukraine, while also fearing for the lives of their children taken as soldiers. According to Melnikova, the mothers and other family members often have to rely on Ukrainian sources to receive information about Russian soldiers. She said

"Ukraine fulfils the Geneva Convention and carefully maintains and publishes lists of those captured and those who died when information is available. We have learned how to work in this new information reality. I have many friends, many of them are journalists, and they are helping me with technical solutions to get around restrictions in Russia."

Svetlana Golub's phone had not stopped ringing since Thursday. At the other end of the line, tearful family members across Russia frantically tried to figure out the fate of their sons, brothers and husbands fighting in Russia's bloody war in Ukraine.

"It is crazy," said Golub, pointing to her glowing phone. "We are getting hundreds and hundreds of calls. It's just a sea of tears." Golub is the head of the Soldiers' Mothers Committee, an NGO advocating for soldiers' rights that has become the main contact point for the worried relatives of Russian soldiers. "I know the situation is really bad when the families tell me they can't reach the soldiers anymore," Golub said.

In peacetime, the group usually stands up for the rights of soldiers. But now its efforts are completely focused on the war in Ukraine. Golub said her organization uses its own database to locate soldiers, sending requests to officials as to their whereabouts and status.

Throughout the morning, Golub received calls from relatives saying their loved ones were unwilling to fight in Ukraine. Golub and independent military experts believe the country could be underplaying the real death toll.

"Wars always lead to deaths. From the many conversations I have been sent between soldiers and their families, I believe many Russians have already died," Golub said.

She said other information too points to the possibility that Russia could be facing heavy losses. Ukrainian officials have been posting graphic photographs on Telegram, showing what were said to be the bodies of Russian troops killed in action.

Watch this space.

