

# Conflict Update Day 373

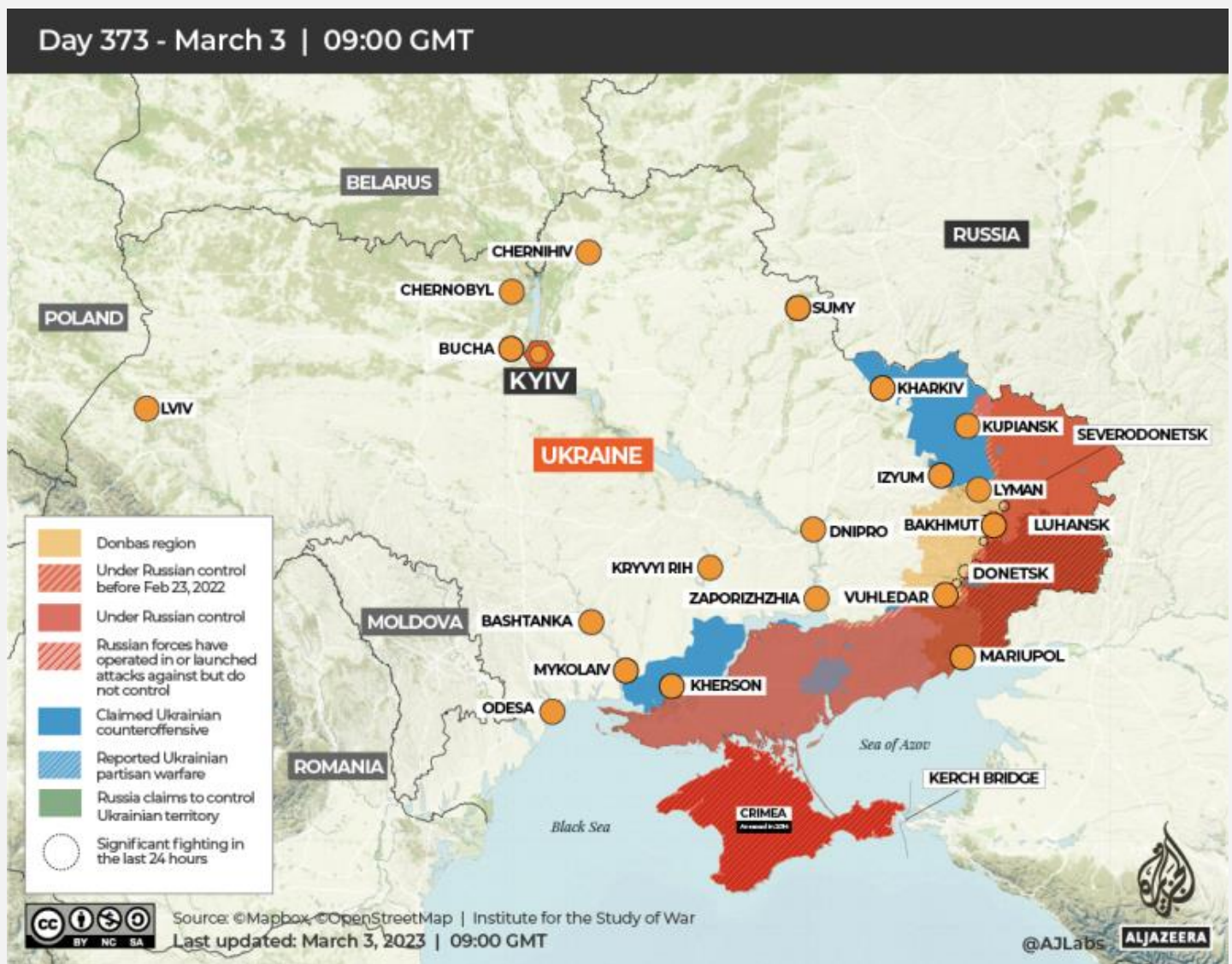
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## Conflict Assessment

**Russian losses** – 151,370 (765) soldiers killed, 3,405 (+8) enemy tanks, 6,673 (+15) armored combat vehicles, 2,402 (+4) artillery systems, 484 (4) MLRS systems, 244 (+0) air defense systems, 301 (+1) warplanes, 289 (+1) helicopters, 2,061 (+3) UAVs of the operational-tactical level, 873 (+0) cruise missiles, 18 (+0) warships/cutters, 5,281 (+17) trucks and tankers, 4 Iskander Missile Launchers (+0), 239 fuel bowsers (+0) and 230 (+0) units of equipment.

## Key Takeaways



**Bakhmut ‘practically surrounded’, says Wagner chief** - Yevgeny Prigozhin, head of Russia’s Wagner mercenary force, says his fighters surrounded the eastern Ukrainian city of Bakhmut and that Kyiv’s troops had only one road left.

**Ukrainian authorities unearth people** who were hastily buried in makeshift graves during Russia's brief occupation of villages and towns near Kyiv, to identify victims and investigate alleged war crimes.

**Cheap drones that are expendable but send a message?** – Studying footage of downed Ukrainian drones inside Russia shows them to be the cheap kind one can purchase on AliBaba and other commercial websites.

Leads one to wonder whether Kyiv is sending these to raise Russian awareness of the vulnerability of their airspace to drone assault?

If so, it has certainly had its desired effect, with Putin personally – again – entering the fray and ordering enhanced security measures in and around Russian towns and borders – because of drone attacks!

For Ukraine it is a simple equation – cheap drones at around \$3,000 to \$5,000 apiece in exchange for huge propaganda successes in Russia.

**Zelenskyy promises consequences** - A Russian missile hit a five-storey building in Ukraine's southern city of Zaporizhzhia, killing at least four people, Ukraine's police say.

'Ukraine is keeping records and intends to one day prosecute those responsible, up to Putin.' Columnist Alain Frachon writes that since the beginning of the war, Ukrainian authorities have been investigating attacks against civilians to bring those responsible before international justice.

"We cannot allow this tragedy to be trivialized," said Ukraine's prosecutor general, Andriy Kostin, as his office investigated a bombing in the northeast of the country on February 10. Russia had just fired 36 missiles at the city of Kharkiv. Kostin, a composed man who chooses his words carefully, continued with facts and figures, even as the long and insistent sound of an alarm siren blared. Since the start of the Russian aggression, Ukraine has been thoroughly investigating all attacks against civilians, making this war the most documented in the history of armed conflicts.

**A network of at least 20 torture chambers** in the recently liberated southern Ukrainian region of Kherson is "planned and directly financed by the Russian state," war crimes investigators say, citing new evidence.

**In the past 24 hours**, Ukrainian forces have repelled more than 170 attacks on the five principal sectors of the front line, Ukrainian military analyst Oleh Zhdanov said.

**Bakhmut may fall amid possible Ukraine withdrawal** - The war-ravaged eastern city of Bakhmut may fall to Russian forces, with Kyiv officials saying its military is contemplating pulling troops back from the city that has become a symbol of Ukrainian resistance.

Alexander Rodnyansky, an economic adviser to Ukrainian President Zelensky, told CNN Kyiv's military is "obviously going to weigh all of the options." "So far, they've held the city, but if need be, they will strategically pull back," he said.

**Comment** – Kyiv has achieved their winter objective of containing Russian forces in this and other eastern areas marginal to overall war outcomes. Winter has now come and gone and the Kremlin has lost countless thousands of soldiers and vast numbers of equipment in attacking Bakhmut and Vuhledar.

What Russia has achieved is its singular method of conducting war by absolutely leveling any city in its path. One needs only look at Mariupol and Kharkiv as cities suffering this way – **Genocide** by any definition.

No-one has any idea of true civilian death tolls in these two cities alone, as there are a huge number of bodies still buried under rubble in both.

**Ukrainian military analyst Oleh Zhdanov said Russian forces were trying to encircle the city of Bakhmut** from the north, east and south and he said that on western approaches to the city “this is probably the only part of the Bakhmut sector where our forces, rather than the Russian occupiers, have the initiative.”

**Comment** – The Kremlin is throwing thousands and thousands of their men into the conflict, irrespective of the casualty rate, hoping to flood Ukrainian defenses.

**Why Putin is sacrificing the Russian military to take Bakhmut in Ukraine** - For the better part of seven months, the Russian forces have been trying to breach the Ukrainian defenses and capture the town.

Russian President Vladimir Putin is desperately looking for some success in Ukraine.

And the capture of Bakhmut would give him a much-needed political victory.

Last week, Zelenskyy stated the Ukrainian military would continue to hold on to Bakhmut but also indicated that if the conditions become impossible, their forces will pull back.

He and his advisers are looking to avoid another Mariupol, which held a large number of Russian troops but at a high cost in Ukrainian lives.

Bakhmut continues to buy Ukraine time. And as the spring and summer approach, Kyiv will be ready to launch its own large-scale counteroffensive with new Western weapon systems, including the Challenger 2, Leopard 2, and M1 Abrams main battle tanks. (**Comment** – As we have been detailing for months now).

**Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov** accuses the US of providing intelligence on the location of strategic sites inside Russia to Ukraine, for it to attack them with drones. Washington says that was nonsense. **Comment** – this is precisely what Russia and China do with their satellites.

**Rising temperatures and a sea of mud** - Temperatures in Ukraine have been rising, and that is complicating operations in and around the Ukrainian towns in the Donbas.

Rasputitsa, or Bezdorizhzhia, as the Ukrainians call the sea of mud that covers the country at the start of every spring, has arrived, and no vehicle can move freely cross country.

Although the two main highways that lead into the town of Bakhmut are still under Ukrainian control, Russian forces are very close and have the routes under fire. Ukrainian military can still use the highways to transfer men and ammunition, but any resupply runs are precarious.

There are smaller dirt roads that lead to the town too, but they are almost inoperable because of the mud.

Indeed, even tracked vehicles are having trouble on these roads.

These conditions severely hamper Russian offensive moves in that everything at present is reduced to foot travel. But this doesn't appear to have hampered Kremlin troops in and around the city, Moscow throwing thousands of soldiers to certain death along the northern stretches of Ukrainian defense.

“It is almost certain that by late-March, cross-country movement will be at its worst following the final thaw. This will add further friction to ground operations and hamper the off-road movement of heavier armored vehicles, especially over churned-up ground in the Bakhmut sector,” British Military Intelligence added.

Normally, these weather conditions offer some advantage to the defender. Russian forces will also have a difficulty moving forces and ammunition closer to the frontline.

And because the Ukrainian military has been devastatingly effective with how it uses its long-range fires, especially the M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) and M270 Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS), the Russian military is now forced to use large numbers of trucks to transport troops and ammunition to the frontline as opposed to establishing big ammo depots and barracks close to the contact line.

This is why the Kremlin has been desperate to achieve some form of “success” in these regions.

**Video shows Ukraine wipe out Russian armored vehicles** – A video released by the Ukrainian military shows a single Ukrainian tank assaulting a column of Russian armored vehicles in the embattled region of Donetsk.

Ukraine's MoD yesterday shared the video with Twitter. The 27-second clip shows the tank firing on an approaching Russian convoy, with the vehicles being turned into fiery infernos one-by-one.

## Containment

**Washington will announce a new \$400m aid package for the Kyiv government**, and is expected to be a main topic between Biden and Scholz when they meet at the White House on Friday, officials say.

**Australian drones helping Ukraine against Russia** - At least 100 drones a month are being supplied to Ukraine, aiding those on the front line to either drop bombs, deliver supplies or undertake vital reconnaissance missions.

The drones are made from cardboard and rubber bands by Melbourne-based company Sypaq.

The Australian Defence Force is yet to make any domestic orders for the drones, however the Defence Minister said it has a high degree of value.

**Kremlin warns against more western arms for Ukraine ahead of Biden, Scholz meeting** - The Kremlin today warned Western countries against providing more arms to Ukraine as key Kyiv backers Biden and Scholz were set to meet in Washington.

"(Arms deliveries) place a significant burden on the economies of these countries and negatively affect the well-being of citizens of these countries, including Germany," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters. "It is obvious that this will prolong the conflict and have sad consequences for the Ukrainian people," he added.

**Germany is taking key role in weapons delivery: Ukrainian official** - Ukraine's envoy to Berlin said Germany is taking more of a leadership role in organizing deliveries of weapons and has stopped making what he referred to as excuses to avoid sending arms.

In January, Berlin agreed to send Leopard tanks after being reluctant to send arms in fear it might escalate the conflict.

"What has changed in the last few months is we are not just discussing the current order of the day but we are strategically planning according to what is needed and what can be delivered," Ukrainian Ambassador Oleksii Makeiev told the Reuters news agency.

"There are no more excuses now but facts that we talk about."

The envoy said the military items Kyiv most needed were air defence systems, battle tanks, artillery and ammunition.

**Russia pressures Serbia over alleged arms for Ukraine** - Moscow has demanded an official explanation from Belgrade about reports that Serbia, one of Russia's traditional allies, had delivered a batch of rockets to Ukraine.

Russian FM spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said yesterday Moscow was “deeply concerned” about the reports, carried by media in Russia and Serbia.

“We are following this story. The incoming information has caused our deepest concern. This is too serious a question, including from the point of view of Russian-Serbian relations, to react on the merits right now, it is necessary to rely on facts,” she said in a statement posted on the ministry’s website.

“We have asked Belgrade for an explanation.”

Media reported that Serbia had secretly delivered 3,500 Grad G-2000 rockets, manufactured by Krušik, an arms producer from the Serbian town of Valjevo.

According to Serbian media, Russian news portal mash.ru said the 122 mm rockets were flown from Serbia to Turkey and then to Slovakia, from where they were transported to Ukraine.

Krušik denied any involvement. Serbian Defence Minister Miloš Vučević also denied during a parliamentary debate that Serbia was exporting arms to Ukraine but added: “If private companies buy arms in third countries’ markets, and then sell them to other companies in other countries, that is not a question for Serbia. That is international trade.” (Comment – Precisely what Russia is doing).

Croatia daily Telegram, citing Serbian sources, reported that the contingent of the state-of-the-art rockets came from the war reserves of the Serbian armed forces and not from Krušik.

### Putin tells security council to increase ‘anti-terrorism’ measures

- Putin told his Security Council they needed to discuss additional “anti-terrorism measures” to safeguard facilities controlled by law enforcement bodies.

On Thursday, he said Russia had been hit by a “terrorist attack” in the southern Bryansk region and pledged to crush a sabotage group that fired at civilians.

Ukraine has accused Russia of staging a false “provocation.”

**Don’t forget** – Putin personally ordered relocation of S300 and S400 anti-aircraft batteries from front lines to Moscow and St. Petersburg because he was afraid after previous drone attacks close to the former city. He exposed front line positions to enhanced Ukrainian assault by these defensive system transfers.

### Russia accuses Ukraine of Bryansk attack

President Vladimir Putin has said Russia was hit by a “terrorist attack” in the southern Bryansk region bordering Ukraine. Kyiv denies the claim, and has accused Russia of staging a false “provocation”.



**Ukraine ‘not involved’ in internal Russian conflicts, official says on Bryansk** - Ukrainian presidential adviser, Mikhail Podolyak, said Ukraine is “not involved in internal conflicts” in Russia, referring to the Bryansk attack.

Podolyak tweeted, “Explosions at critical facilities; unidentified drones attacking RF’s [Russian Federation] regions; clashes of gangs; partisans attacking populated areas – all these are direct consequences of the loss of control inside RF. And consequences of war ... Ukraine is not involved in internal conflicts in RF...”

**The Kremlin accused Ukraine of conducting a border incursion in Bryansk Oblast, Russia on March 2** — a claim Ukrainian officials denied. Bryansk Oblast Governor Alexander Bogomaz claimed “several dozen” Ukrainian saboteurs conducted an armed incursion into the villages of Lyubenchane and Sushany on the international border.

The Russian FSB doubled down on Bogomaz’s accusation, claiming National Guard (Rosgvardia) conducted an operation to “eliminate” Ukrainian saboteurs who reportedly killed one individual and took up to six individuals hostage.

Russian milbloggers and news aggregators offered differing information about the number of casualties and hostages, including that Ukrainian saboteurs fired on a school bus.

Putin then **responded unusually quickly** to these claims, alleging that “neo-Nazis and their owners” carried out a “terrorist attack” against Bryansk Oblast. He did not directly name Ukraine as the perpetrator of the attack in his televised statement, prompting Russian state media to later clarify that Putin meant “Ukrainian neo-Nazis.”

He also claimed Russia will “crush” neo-Nazis that have consistently aimed to deprive Russia of its history, killed the daughter of Russian nationalist ideolog Alexander Dugin, and “killed people in Donbas.”

Ukrainian officials denied the Kremlin’s accusations of involvement, claiming Russian officials might be facing problems with increasing partisan activity in Russia. Ukrainian Presidential Adviser Podolyak stated Russian accusations are a deliberate “provocation” aimed at scaring the Russian people into believing Russia needs to continue in Ukraine.

**The Bryansk incident has generated speculation** by Russian officials and ultranationalist groups about Moscow’s response. Kremlin Spokesperson Peskov refused to comment on questions regarding any change of the “special military operation” status to “war” because of the incident.

Wagner Group’s Prigozhin sarcastically observed Russia had been allowing Ukraine to violate its “red lines” and used the opportunity to promote Wagner mercenaries.

Russian officials such as Crimean occupation head Sergey Aksyonov and Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov along with milbloggers called on the Kremlin to expand security measures and conduct retaliatory operations.

**Comment - Read between the lines** – Russian commanders and governors are getting nervous. Questions continue to remain over a series of deadly bombings of Russian apartment blocks during the early years of Putin’s control over Russia, which were attributed to separatists but some claim were staged by security services as cover for further military intervention in Chechnya.

Then there was the Beslan school slaughter of 330 students. Beslan, a town of about 35,000 people in the republic of North Ossetia–Alania in Russia's Caucasus was besieged, reportedly by terrorists disguised as repairmen.

Putin's firm response to the crises boosted his popularity among the wider public and helped him move from acting president to elected leader, with 53 percent of the vote.

Putin was desperate to bolster his reputation and enhance his standing when he was sinking in Russian polls, not that this bothered him untowardly.

He succeeded, and learnt a huge amount about manipulating public opinion and swaying Russian opinions in his favor.

Sense a similarity in approach here? Attack your own people and blame an enemy to justify harsh retaliation?

## Comments, Updates, Developments and Reports

**US, Ukraine foreign ministers discuss Lavrov meeting** - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke to his Ukrainian counterpart and discussed Blinken's brief conversation with Russia's Sergey Lavrov, US spokesperson Ned Price said.

"The secretary underscored to foreign minister Kuleba the United States's enduring support for Ukraine as it defends itself against Russia's brutal attacks, including the ongoing targeting of civilian infrastructure and resulting civilian casualties," Price added.

The US and Russian diplomats spoke on Thursday for roughly 10 minutes on the sidelines of the G20 conference in New Delhi, India.

"I told the foreign minister what I and so many others said last week at the United Nations and what so many G20 foreign ministers said today: End this war of aggression Engage in meaningful diplomacy that can produce a just and durable peace," Blinken said.

**Scholz, Biden to meet in Washington and discuss support for Kyiv** - US President Biden hosts German Chancellor Scholz in Washington today for talks about support for Ukraine after friction over tank deliveries to Kyiv.

"I think the two of them are now more concerned about the way ahead — what will the next months in Ukraine look like? What does that mean for the support allies can organize for Ukraine?" said Scholz's spokesman Steffen Hebestreit.

They will "certainly discuss one or two other topics," he said, declining to elaborate.

**Orbán: I hate to imagine what would happen if Russia lost the war** - Hungary is "being dragged into war" but its leadership is strong enough to keep the country away from the conflict, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said in an interview with the Swiss daily Weltwoche. Hungary was hit hard by the sanctions imposed on Russia by the European Union, Orbán said in the interview published on Thursday. The sanctions have driven up the price of oil and gas, and the cost of supplying the growing energy needs of Hungary's industry has risen from 7 billion euros in 2021 to 17 billion in 2022, he said.

"We are under constant pressure. They want to drag us into the war with every possible means. So far, we have managed to resist... Hungary's political leadership is strong enough to keep our homeland away from the war," he said.

"The decisions made in Brussels [regarding Ukraine] mirror American interests more often than European ones," Orbán said. This war "cannot be won," Orbán said. "Ukraine is facing a nuclear power with 140 million inhabitants. Russia is facing the entire NATO... this is a stalemate, which could easily devolve into world war," he said.

Orbán quoted Putin as saying at their last meeting two weeks before the war started that "he had no problem with Hungary's NATO membership, only with that of Ukraine and Georgia. Putin told me his problem was with the American missile bases in Poland and Romania, and a possible NATO expansion in Ukraine and Georgia to station weapons there."

"The Americans also withdrew from important disarmament agreements," Orbán added. "I understand what Putin said. I do not accept what he did," Orbán said.

Orbán said European political norms do not work in Russia, and Europe had to find a way to live together with a "large, dangerous power in our neighborhood."

On the possibility of Russia losing the war, Orbán said: “Russia is a nuclear power. It would be a geopolitical shock, a global, potentially disastrous earthquake, much worse than the collapse of the former Yugoslavia. The fact that the West takes that scenario so lightly shows a frightening blindness towards the risks inherent in our policies,” he said.

Europe should be able to defend itself, “the solution would be a European NATO,” he said.

While the West is lacking the will to broker peace, China, India, the Arab countries, Turkey and Brazil want just that, Orbán said. “The West has lost its ability to unite the world behind a cause.” Hungary is “showing an alternative, should our friends and allies decide to give up their pro-war stance,” he said.

**Comment** – Although he adopts a relatively pacifist approach, he has ignored Russia’s ongoing aggressive and invasive approach to local politics in Eastern European and Central Asian theaters. Moscow will not suddenly stop at Ukraine’s western borders, yearning as Putin does for the glory of erstwhile Soviet hegemony.

To me Orbán’s approach is understandable, but naïve geopolitically, which is in itself strange, given the Hungarian experience of October 1956, and his close proximity to the Russian menace. Or perhaps there is something more sinister afoot, something of a Béla Kun mentality?

## Sanctions

**US charges two men suspected of selling tech to Russia** - The US Department of Justice arrested two men on allegations that the pair illegally exported technology to Russia and provided repair services for aviation equipment.

Cyril Gregory Buyanovsky and Douglas Robertson were charged with conspiracy, exporting controlled goods without a license, falsifying and failing to file electronic export information and smuggling goods violating US law.

The Department of Justice says Buyanovsky and Robertson owned and operated KanRus Trading Co, which allegedly supplied aircraft electronics to Russian companies and provided repair services for equipment used in Russian-manufactured aircraft.

The charges come as the US has ramped up sanctions and financial penalties on Russia as punishment for the invasion of Ukraine.

## Putin & Russia

**Putin signs decree to ensure defence contracts are met** - Putin signed a decree enabling the state to suspend the directors and shareholders of companies that fail to meet state defence contracts under martial law conditions.

The new decree would apply to companies that “violate their obligations under a state contract, including failing to take measures to guarantee production deliveries.”

In October, Putin said he was introducing martial law in four regions of Ukraine that Moscow has partly seized control of and claimed as its territory, a move condemned as illegal by most countries.

A year into the war with Ukraine, the economy is on a war footing, with defence factories working around the clock in three shifts to meet the army’s needs.

**Comment** – We previously wrote about Russian military industrialization and deployment. Russian maintenance and manufacturing facilities have been loath to enjoin in the “special military operation” for fear of not being paid, something the Kremlin apparently does all too frequently. So they opt out, to the annoyance of the Kremlin and Putin.

Hence this decree forcing compliance, enhancing legislation from last year in response to their problem.



## Putin's reign



## China's Peace Plan for Ukraine Could Have Dangerous Consequences

With its 12-point plan to end the war in Ukraine, China has taken a significant step toward center stage in international politics. In the past, it has avoided the risks and responsibilities that come with a leadership role on foreign policy questions that aren't directly relevant to China's national security. Now that Xi Jinping has consolidated vast power at home, he's ready to assert his country's influence in new ways. Yet, direct intervention in Russia's war on Ukraine is fraught with risk for China, its relations with America and Europe, and the entire global economy.

What's in China's peace plan? Despite Western suspicions the proposal is designed mainly to help Russia, it calls for formal respect for Ukraine's sovereignty, protections for Ukrainian civilians, an end to interference with the flow of humanitarian aid into the country, and condemnation of the possible use of nuclear weapons. The plan also reflects the views of those around the world whose primary interest in the war is economic, by calling for a ceasefire, an end to sanctions, and the opening of peace talks that might help ease pressure on food and fuel prices.

Though Ukraine's President Zelenskyy pledged to consider the plan, it has no chance of moving forward, because it does not require Russia's invading army to leave Ukraine, does not promise a return of Ukrainian land now illegally occupied by Russian forces, and provides nothing tangible for reconstruction of the country. An immediate ceasefire

would freeze Russian gains in place, forcing Ukraine to try to persuade Putin to voluntarily give back land. In truth, no peace plan is likely to succeed at this stage of the war because neither the Russian nor Ukrainian governments can afford to lose.

In addition, though Beijing has rejected the charge, Western governments continue to warn that China may still be thinking of providing weapons for Russia. Direct accusations from senior U.S. officials that China is considering the idea make clear that Washington is watching closely and that serious consequences will come if China presses ahead. For that reason, Beijing is unlikely to send Russia weapons or ammunition, but it surely hopes the threat alone will move NATO to push Ukraine to the negotiating table.

So, what else does China hope its plan can achieve? It can promote China as a global problem-solver and peacemaker with a blueprint most of the world can support. Though developing countries in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East question Putin's motives, they see themselves more directly damaged by Western determination to make this war the most urgent priority in a world suffering from global crises like slow economic recovery from the pandemic, food and fuel inflation, unsustainable developing world debt, refugees, and climate change.

China's peace plan implicitly presents the U.S. as a warmonger and NATO as the tool it uses to make an awful war last longer and cost more. It also allows Xi to interact with Putin—and even to visit Moscow in coming months—as a mediator rather than as an ally of the man who ordered the invasion. China may also be hoping to drive political wedges within America and Europe by creating an “off-ramp” for those on both sides of the Atlantic who question the wisdom of open-ended support for Ukraine.

Make no mistake; China is playing a dangerous game. Any provision of weapons to Russia would instantly make an already fractious U.S.-China relationship much worse. The aftershocks from that quake would be felt around the world. But even if China continues to limit its involvement to the role of Kremlin apologist and gadfly would-be peacemaker, the impact on tensions between America and China may help ensure the war in Ukraine continues to expand in ways no one can control.

**Comment** – There is also the factor that Russia is heading to defeat, something unacceptable to China as Moscow is its foremost ally in creating their new bi-polar global world order – particular by the time of their planned 2049 100<sup>th</sup>-year Great March celebration

*Article from Ian Bremmer in artwatalab News.*

## How Close is the World to a Wider Conflict?

The Western challenge is to ensure that Putin is defeated in Ukraine, but without allowing the conflict to spread beyond Ukraine's borders – to Taiwan, Korea, Iran, the Baltic states or Russia itself.

'How did the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand lead to the First World War?' Even with the benefit of hindsight it is hard to identify the various links in the chain of causality. How did the Moroccan crises of 1905 and 1911, the Italian invasion of Libya in 1911, the Austro-Hungarian annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1908, and the complexity of asymmetric military mobilisation schedules lead to a Western Front stretching from Belgium to Switzerland for over four years and the deaths of 3.5 million soldiers?

By contrast, it is remarkably easy to see how Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine could lead to a wider international conflict.

China might decide that the Western provision of Leopard tanks to Ukraine and talk of sending fighter jets have tipped the argument in favour of arming Putin. The possibility is sufficiently real for US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken to

warn China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi of 'serious consequences' at the recent Munich Security Conference. Wang Yi was on his way to Moscow to meet Putin.

China could decide to take advantage of the West's focus on Ukraine to invade Taiwan. At present, the balance of probability is that Beijing will wait to see the outcome of Taiwan's 2024 election, by which time more of its amphibious landing ships may have been completed. But, at any time, those calculations might change. The rapid decline in US-China relations caused by an alleged surveillance balloon entering US airspace is the sort of extraneous issue which could, however irrationally, tip the scales, as could the possible visit to Taiwan of Kevin McCarthy, the new Speaker of the US House of Representatives.

North Korea has launched a number of ballistic missiles in recent months, but these provocations are not getting the customary Western attention. However, a South Korean political leader has hinted at the need for the South to acquire its own nuclear weapons, and Kim Jong-un's sister, Kim Yo-jong, blamed the US presence in the region for recent tension and referred mysteriously to 'using the Pacific as our firing range'. North Korea has a long history of mounting imaginative provocations against its southern neighbour and might well be amenable to doing so at Moscow's behest.

Israel's new right-wing government could see advantage in attacking Iran at a time when the Islamic Republic has been under pressure from internal unrest, and when the Iran nuclear deal looks moribund. Netanyahu might calculate that an attack against Iran could be more acceptable to the West because of Iran's provision of large quantities of drones to Russia for use in Ukraine. There was an unexplained drone strike on a factory in Isfahan on 28 January, Iran blamed on Israel. Any Iranian response (either direct or using proxies such as Lebanese Hezbollah) could lead to a spiral of escalation.

Meanwhile, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov continues to travel widely and successfully preach his narrative of Western aggression. Recently, he has been in Africa, where Russian influence has been at its highest since the days when the Soviet Union supported liberation movements in the 1970s and 1980s. The high costs of fertilizer due to the Ukraine war have hit Africa hard. There are real dangers in the West ceding influence across the continent to Russia and China.

If the war continues to go badly for Russia, Putin could attempt to internationalize the conflict as a means of giving oxygen to those, such as French President Macron, who wish to bring an end to the fighting soon on the basis of a negotiated solution – one in which Russia would probably keep Crimea and doubtless avoid a war crimes tribunal and reparations. 'Stray' missiles hitting a town in Poland or Romania, the 'unexplained' cutting of undersea communications cables, a shallow incursion from Kaliningrad or Belarus into Lithuania or from Russia into Estonia, or shooting down a Western surveillance aircraft close to Russian airspace are a few of many ideas that may have been considered. At the other end of the scale are potential uses of nuclear weapons (or a nuclear 'test') if Putin fears imminent military defeat.

Internationalization of the conflict does not necessarily mean world war. Nobody wants world war in 2023. What Sarajevo provided in 1914 **was the accelerant** that made all the other factors suddenly appear relevant, leading to a chain of seemingly unstoppable actions and reactions.

One inevitable consequence of pointing to the dangers of a severe escalation of the conflict is the risk of playing into Putin's hands by deterring already-nervous Western allies from providing Ukraine with the armaments needed to defend itself against a likely spring offensive. This need not be the case. Western decisions need to be made on the basis of a full understanding of the risks. At present, the best outcome would be the defeat of Putin's reckless Ukrainian gamble. Western governments need to devise strategies to ensure that the war does not spread beyond Ukraine's borders, and they need to be equally clear about their objectives, which should be confined to restoring sovereign government over Ukraine's territory. Whether that should include Crimea needs to be agreed, but all talk of regime change in Moscow should stop. Leave that to the Russian people to decide.

*Article in RUSI dated today*