

# Conflict Update # 356

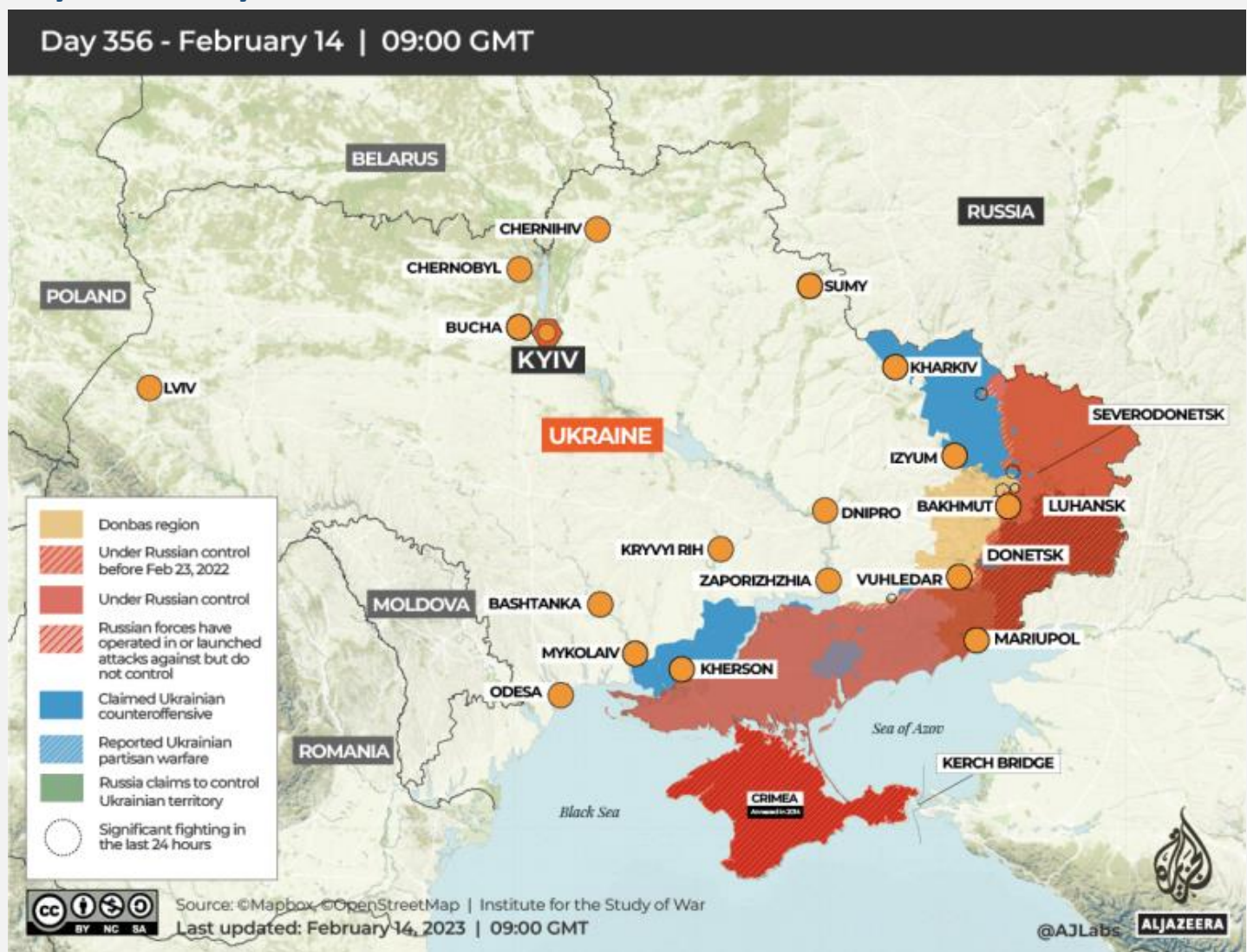
February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2023

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## Conflict Assessment

**Russian losses** – 139,080 (740) soldiers killed, 3,286 (+3) enemy tanks, 6,500 (+8) armored combat vehicles, 2,299 (+9) artillery systems, 466 (+1) MLRS systems, 234 (+0) air defense systems, 298 (+2) warplanes, 286 (+0) helicopters, 2,011 (+4) UAVs of the operational-tactical level, 857 (+0) cruise missiles, 18 (+0) warships/cutters, 5,155 (+5) trucks and tankers, 4 Iskander Missile Launchers (+0), 239 fuel bowsers (+0) and 218 (+1) units of equipment.

## Key Takeaways



**Russia just suffered a crushing defeat and lost an entire elite brigade** - Online military bloggers like Reporting from Ukraine, claimed Russia lost an entire tank battalion based on video evidence of the situation released by Ukrainian marines.

Ukrainian officials claim huge numbers of enemy troops have been killed, wounded and captured in failed attempts to seize the Donetsk hamlet of Vuhledar.

They say that one marine brigade of 5,000 men was almost entirely destroyed, for the third time since the Kremlin launched the full-scale invasion nearly a year ago.

It's the third time this particular unit has suffered devastating losses at the hands of Ukrainian forces, Oleksiy Dmytrashkivskyi, head of the united press center of the Tavriskiy District of Ukrainian defense forces, told Politico.

"A large number of enemy forces, including the command staff, were destroyed near Vuhledar and Mariyinka in Donetsk Oblast," Dmytrashkivskyi said.



He said that Russian forces were losing 150-300 marines a day near Vuhledar.

"The 155th brigade already had to be restaffed three times," he added.

"The first time after Irpin and Bucha; the second time they were defeated near Donetsk – they recovered again. And now almost the entire brigade has already been destroyed near Vuhledar."

He estimated that the brigade had had about 5,000 soldiers.

He added the enemy had lost about 130 units of equipment, including 36 tanks, over the past week.

According to Dmytrashkivskyi, Russian invaders use the so-called "Zhukov's tactic" near Vuhledar, i.e., attacking in waves, when a platoon of up to 30 people, with the support of armored vehicles, is sent forward in a head-on attack through open terrain and, consequently, are killed.

The colonel also noted that a large number of Russian soldiers had surrendered into Ukrainian captivity: in particular, Wagnerites and marines of the 40th and 155th Brigades of Russia.

As the prisoners of war say, the training and preparedness of the personnel were not taken into account when manning these units. For example, the 155th Marine Brigade consists of ordinary sailors. There are also many AIDS-infected people and drug addicts among the Wagnerites.

**Kremlin 'exaggerating' scale of Bakhmut victories to divide West—ISW** - U.S. think tank has said the Kremlin is "exaggerating" minor victories in its efforts to capture the Ukrainian city of Bakhmut in a bid to divide the West.

The industrial city of Bakhmut in the Donetsk region remains a focal point in the ongoing war, as Russia seeks to secure its first battlefield victory since the summer of 2022. While many analysts say the city has little military significance, it has remained the scene of some of the war's most intense fighting. So far, Russian forces and fighters from the Wagner Group have failed to make any strategic advances in attempts to capture Bakhmut.



The Institute for the Study of War (ISW), a think tank based in Washington D.C., noted in its daily assessment of the conflict on Sunday that Russia continues to conduct information campaigns that "support a continuous strategic objective of deterring or slowing the West's provision of material support to Ukraine."

**Russian troops target Donetsk front line** - Russian forces have been targeting Ukrainian positions along the front line in the Donetsk region, according to local officials.

There is not a single square metre in Bakhmut that is safe or that is not in range of enemy fire or drones," regional Governor Pavlo Kyrylenko told Ukraine's national broadcaster.

Only about 5,000 civilians are left in the city out of a pre-war population of about 70,000, Kyrylenko said.

He added that Russian artillery was hitting targets all along the front lines in Donetsk, which along with the Luhansk region, makes up the Donbas, Ukraine's industrial heartland and a main objective for the Russians.

**Top retired Russian general says Putin is leading his country to defeat and humiliation in Ukraine and blames the President for uniting the West with disastrous invasion** - Putin is leading Russia to defeat and humiliation in Ukraine, according to one of Moscow's

most respected military figures, who also blames the President for uniting the West with his

disastrous invasion.

Retired army colonel-general Leonid Ivashov had ago before the war started over a 'criminal' policy it would trigger disaster.

called for the president's resignation a year in 'provoking' an 'artificial' conflict, foreseeing

Now he says the carnage across the border is

worse than he imagined.

Ivashov, chairman of the Assembly and a former top aide to lambasted Putin, declaring: 'We mistakes, wrong actions during



independent All-Russian Officers' a famous Soviet defence minister, did not expect such a series of this military operation.'

'What happened in the end? Basically what we expected, but much worse,' said the general, a key figure in the Soviet-era Red Army and later the Russian military, in an interview with Republic independent media.

**Russia has 'lost,' top US general says** - Top US general Mark Milley has said that Russia failed to achieve its aims in Ukraine, as the country remains independent.

"In short, Russia has lost," Milley said. "They've lost strategically, operationally and tactically."

He added that Russian forces are paying "an enormous price" on the battlefield and have resorted to sending "conscripts and prisoners to imminent death" in recent months.

"But until Putin ends his war of choice, the international community will continue to support Ukraine with the equipment and capabilities it needs to defend itself," Milley said.

**Dutch F-35s intercept three Russian military aircraft near Poland - Netherlands' defence ministry** - Two Dutch F-35 fighters intercepted a formation of three Russian military aircraft near Poland and escorted them out, the Netherlands' defence ministry said in a statement late on Monday.

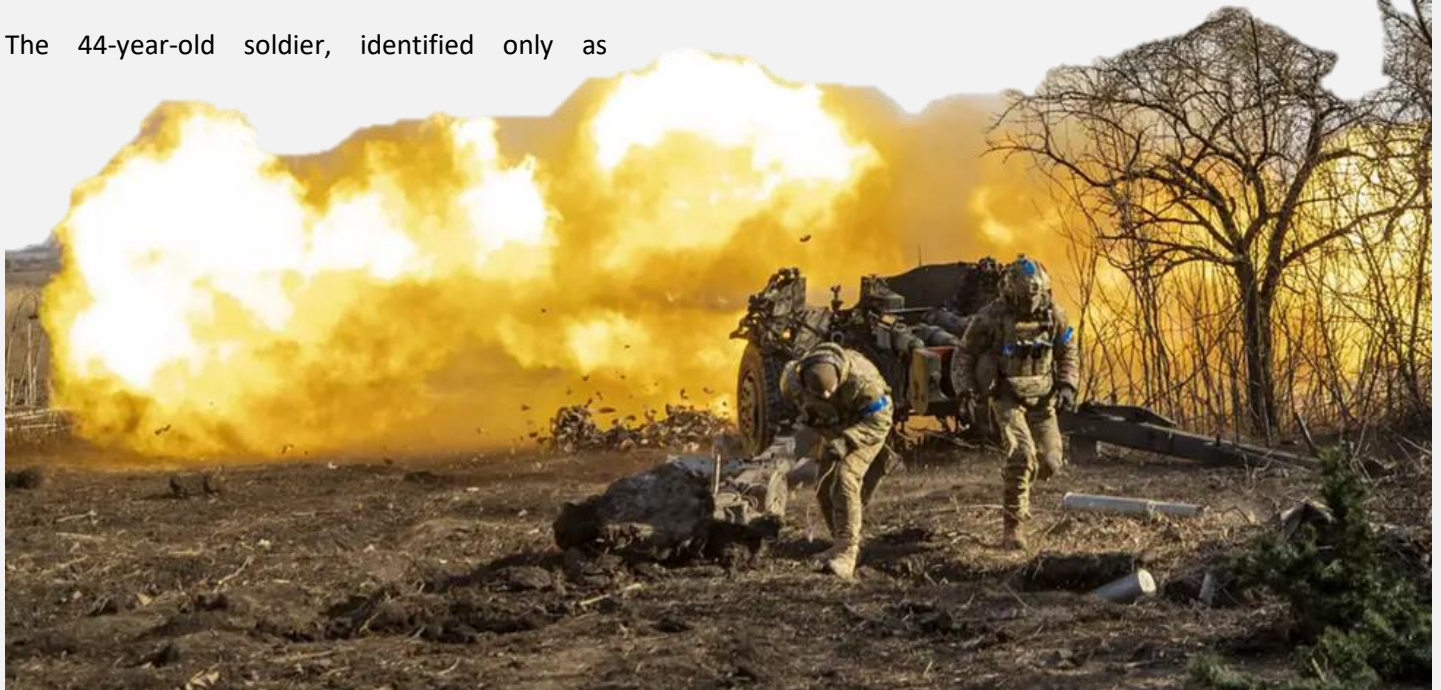
"The then unknown aircraft approached the Polish NATO area of responsibility from Kaliningrad," according to Reuters' translation of the ministry's statement.

Kaliningrad is a Russian Baltic coast enclave located between NATO and EU members Poland and Lithuania.

"After identification, it turned out to be three aircraft: a Russian IL-20M Coot-A that was escorted by two Su-27 Flankers. The Dutch F-35s escorted the formation from a distance and handed over the escort to NATO partners."

**Russian prisoner-turned-soldier says he was brought to the front line without training and told to charge 'as far as we could go' into Ukrainian gunfire** – A Russian prisoner-turned-soldier told the New York Times that he and other convicts were thrown onto the front line of Russia's war against Ukraine with no training and told to charge "as far as we could go" into Ukrainian gunfire.

The 44-year-old soldier, identified only as



Aleksandr, told the Times that he joined the Wagner Group, a Russian private military contractor with close ties to the Kremlin, to reduce his prison sentence by three years. He had been convicted for illegal logging, according to the Times.

The Times reported that Aleksandr — and other prisoners like him who joined the Wagner Group in exchange for pardons — told The Times that they were essentially used as human sacrifices to advance the Russian position into Ukrainian-controlled areas.

Without training and with minimal weaponry, these groups of soldiers are forced to run into Ukrainian gunfire to help Russian forces determine where the opposition is located, according to the Times.

Aleksandr told the Times that his commanders "brought us to a basement, divided us into five-person groups and, though we hadn't been trained, told us to run ahead, as far as we could go."

The soldiers were also told that if they refused orders to advance, they'd be shot, the Times reported.

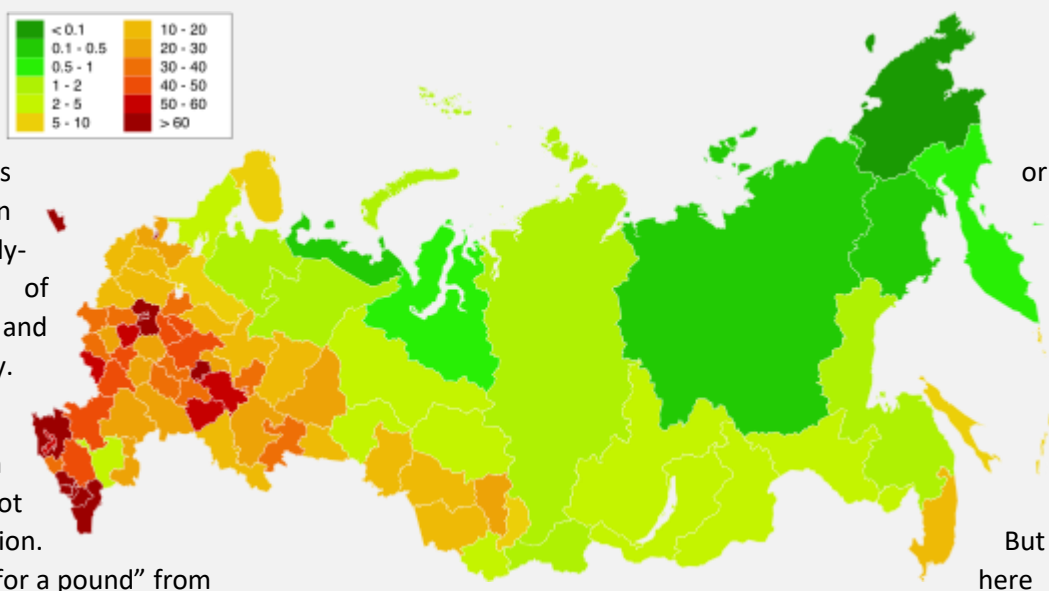
When it was his time to rush toward enemy lines, Aleksandr was captured along with one other soldier. The other three in his group were killed in the gunfire, according to the Times.

**Comment** – Putin just doesn't care about losing hundreds of thousands of men and women in war. It's the Russian way. They have been conducting war this way for centuries. Just so long as they can impede and slow down enemy movement and advancement.

Their challenge though is that they have run out of "meat grinder" bodies to feed to the front(s) and will shortly be turning to St. Petersburg and Moscow for recruits.

Referring to the chart to the right, the Kremlin has drawn heavily from the green and light beige areas, although not exclusively. Once body bags unaccountable losses begin registering across the heavily-populated western regions of Russia, public opinion and resentment will rapidly multiply.

Putin is keenly aware of this, one of his primary drivers in rushing his offensive and not pursuing a full-blown mobilization. as they say, "In for a penny, in for a pound" from on out,



## Containment

**Pentagon chief vows to back Ukraine 'as long as it takes'** - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin has said that the United States and NATO will remain united in backing Ukraine, accusing Russia of inflicting a year of "tragedy and terror" on the country as the war's first anniversary approaches.

"We stand united in our support for Ukraine's fight for freedom," Austin said.

"And we will stand together, united and resolute for as long as it takes."

**Talks on fighter jets just need ‘pressure’: Poland** - The Polish defence minister said that discussions on supplying F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine would likely be fruitful, but pressure must be applied.

“We are aware that our potential in this area is limited, because we have only 48 F-16 aircraft, but the allies have much more potential, so I think that this conversation will ... end with positive decisions,” Mariusz Blaszczak told reporters in Brussels.

“You just have to apply pressure.”

**Norway to send eight Leopard 2 tanks to Ukraine** - The Norwegian government will send eight Leopard 2 battle tanks and other equipment to Ukraine to aid in the war with Russia.

“It is more crucial than ever to support Ukraine’s fight for freedom,” Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Stoere said in a statement.

The Nordic country added that it would also send four special-purpose tanks from its armored engineering division, depending on what Ukraine needs the most.

The defence ministry said Norway would also set aside funds for ammunition and spare parts.

Norway, which shares a border with Russia in the Arctic, has 36 Leopard 2 tanks.

**NATO discusses arms to Ukraine, plan to speed up ammo production** - Ukraine urgently needs more military aid, the United States and the NATO military alliance pledged.

Western defence chiefs met in Brussels to discuss new arms provisions to Kyiv and maintaining existing supplies.

“Ukraine has urgent requirements to help it meet this crucial moment in the course of the war,” US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said at a meeting of the so-called Ramstein group of allies.

“The Kremlin is still betting it can wait us out but one year on we are as united as ever. That shared resolve will help sustain Ukraine’s momentum in the crucial weeks ahead.”

NATO plans to increase targets for stockpiling ammunition as Kyiv uses them much faster than Western countries can produce them, leaving stocks badly depleted.

**Germany to restart production of Gepard ammunition for Ukraine, minister says** - Germany has signed contracts with Rheinmetall to restart the production of ammunition for the Gepard anti-aircraft guns it has delivered to Kyiv, German Defense minister Boris Pistorius said on Tuesday.

## Comments, Developments and Reports

**Moldova temporarily closes air space** - Moldova has temporarily closed its air space, the country’s airline said.

“Dear passengers, at this moment, the airspace of the Republic of Moldova is closed. We are waiting for the resumption of flights,” Air Moldova said on Facebook.

The announcement comes as tensions between the former Soviet republic and Russia increased after Chisinau claimed that Russia is planning to interfere in Moldova.

**EU to consider using frozen Russian assets to rebuild Ukraine** - Tomorrow the EU will launch an ad hoc group to investigate how frozen Russian funds, including central bank reserves, can be used for reconstruction work in Ukraine, the Swedish government said.

“The mandate is to contribute to mapping which funds have been frozen in the European Union ... and secondly how to legally proceed to access those funds,” Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson told a news conference in Stockholm.

He said that no prior model exists for handling Russian assets, and the EU must establish appropriate legal procedures.

“It’s Russian tax payers, not all other tax payers, who must bear the cost of the necessary reconstruction work,” Kristersson added.

The ad hoc group will be headed by Anders Ahnlid, the head of Sweden’s National Board of Trade, a government agency.

**Wagner head admits to founding ‘troll farm’** - Wagner Group chief, Yevgeny Prigozhin, said that he founded and financed the Internet Research Agency, a company Washington says is a “troll farm” which meddled in the 2016 US presidential election.

Prigozhin, Putin’s ally, spent years operating on behalf of the Kremlin in the shadows but, in recent months, has become one of the most high-profile figures connected with Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

“I was never just the financier of the Internet Research Agency. I thought it up, I created it, I managed it for a long time,” Prigozhin said in a post shared on social media by the press service of his Concord catering group.

“It was created to protect the Russian information space from the West’s boorish and aggressive anti-Russian propaganda,” Prigozhin said.

## Putin & Russia

**Russian General dies in alleged suicide weeks after being fired** - The Former Russian Ministry of the Interior is now the latest in a string of mysterious suicides tied to Vladimir Putin and his regime.

Former Russian Minister of the Interior Gen. Makarov was found dead in a suburb near Moscow after an apparent suicide weeks after he was relieved of his post by Putin, Russian state news agency TASS reported.

Makarov, previously deputy head of the Main Directorate for Combating Extremism and was known for suppressing dissent, was found dead with a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head, Russian-language news outlet SOTA reported.

After his reported sudden dismissal last month, Makarov had fallen into a “deep depression” and did not know how to proceed with his career after a lifetime of military service, relatives told the VChK-OGPU Telegram channel.

As shown in the picture above, when Putin says “shhhh” he means “shhhh.”



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**Russia faces crucial decision that could decide Putin's future** - Russia is facing a crucial decision that could determine the fate of Putin as the Ukraine war approaches its one-year mark.

Putin is facing a "central dilemma" as his military, which for months has struggled to make progress against Ukraine, appears to be building up fortifications in the Zaporizhzhia oblast, according to the British MoD. Moscow must decide whether to prioritize preventing a Ukrainian breakthrough in the region or mitigating their successes in Luhansk, which plays a central role in Putin's justification for the war, as it is among two oblasts that make up the Donbas.

Putin has said he launched the Ukraine "special military operation" to "liberate" the Donbas, but his military has become more concerned with guarding "the extremities of its extended front line" in Zaporizhzhia, home to Europe's largest nuclear power plant, according to the British defense ministry.

Whichever region Putin decides to prioritize could determine his fate as president of Russia, Matthew Schmidt, director of international affairs at the University of New Haven and senior consultant to Blue Ink Global, told Newsweek.

Schmidt explained that whether Russia prioritizes Luhansk or Zaporizhzhia depends on "what their own strategic plan is in response."

**Putin is shaking with rage: his offensive against Ukraine is a failure** - The anticipated large-scale Russian offensive is likely underway, according to Ukrainian officials.

However, it isn't going well, which is why the Kremlin hasn't said anything.

Meanwhile, the conflict is just ten days away (today is day 355 of the war) from its one-year anniversary.

Casualty figures are a reliable way to determine whether a combatant is attacking or defending.

We know that Ukraine isn't attacking, so the large numbers of Russian casualties over the past few days are likely the result of an offensive operation.

Overall, the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense claimed that as of Monday, Ukrainian forces have killed approximately 138,340 (**Comment** – yesterday's number). Russian troops (and wounded approximately twice to thrice that number).

In conjunction with repeated assaults in the Donbas in the direction of Bakhmut over the last four months, the Russian military has also been digging in and constructing extensive defenses.

**NATO is 'hostile' to Russia, says Kremlin** - The Kremlin says NATO demonstrates its hostility towards Russia daily and is becoming increasingly involved in the conflict.

"NATO is an organisation which is hostile to us and which proves this hostility every day," spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

"It is trying its best to make its involvement in the conflict around Ukraine as clear as possible," Peskov said.

Russia says weapons supplies to Ukraine by NATO countries are dragging out the conflict and raising the possibility of a further escalation.

The Ukrainian government and the West say deliveries of weapons are crucial in helping Ukraine defend itself.

**Russia rejects Moldova's claims of interference plot** - The Russian foreign ministry has rejected an accusation by Moldova's President Maia Sandu, who said on Monday that Moscow was planning to use agents to bring down her leadership and stop her country from joining the European Union.

"Such claims are completely unfounded and unsubstantiated," the ministry said.

It blamed Ukraine for stirring tension between Russia and Moldova, saying Kyiv was trying to draw the Moldovan government "into a tough confrontation with Russia."

Last week, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said his country had uncovered a Russian intelligence plan "for the destruction of Moldova."

Moldova is one of the western gateways into Russia, identified as such and as a prominent threat in Kremlin thinking, in their attempt to resurrect Soviet days of old in plugging this strategic gap as well as others such as they view Ukraine.



## Diplomacy

**Sweden, Finland should join NATO ‘hand in hand’, says German minister** - NATO partners should swiftly admit Sweden and Finland to the defence alliance, Germany’s foreign minister said, adding that Sweden had taken tangible steps to address Turkey’s concerns.

“It was right and important that [Sweden] responded regarding the concerns of Turkey, approached Ankara and undertook tangible steps to confront those concerns,” Annalena Baerbock told reporters during a visit to Stockholm.

Baerbock said it was up to all NATO states to act so that Sweden and Finland could join “hand in hand”.

She added that this was in those countries’ interests and the alliances.

**Trying to make sense of the senseless — South Africa’s bizarre fealty to Russia** - The South African government appears to mistakenly believe that it can continue to side with Russia in the Ukraine conflict without any repercussions from an increasingly unified and clear-sighted West. This may be a grave miscalculation with long-term consequences.

Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the ANC government’s foreign policy has been a seemingly bewildering display of hubris, contradiction, and blatant double-speak.

Initially, South African Minister Naledi Pandor’s public statements were neutral, even referring to the “Special Military Operation” as a “Russian invasion”. But soon after President Cyril Ramaphosa phoned Putin “to get his perspective on the Ukrainian situation” (ignoring calls to contact Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky), the government’s stance shifted towards accommodation of Russia’s view.

When President Ramaphosa eventually did contact president Zelensky, the call was more to explain South Africa’s position than to gain insight into the conflict.

Soon thereafter, in March 2022, members of the UN deliberated and voted on a resolution calling on Russia to halt its invasion and withdraw its forces from Ukraine. African countries cast 28% of all the UN votes. The majority (28) of African countries voted in favour of the resolution while 17 countries abstained (including South Africa), and only Eritrea voted against.

In early August 2022, Minister Pandor met with US Secretary of State Blinken in Pretoria. South Africa’s relationship with the US has been tetchy for many years and it is therefore not surprising that the pronouncements by Blinken and Pandor were replete with the usual banalities of “strategic partnerships, common values and interests, peace and prosperity” etc.

Nevertheless, a week later, Minister of Defence and Military Veterans Thandi Modise attended the 10th Moscow Conference on International Security along with the military leaders of Burundi, Cameroon, Chad, Ethiopia, Guinea, Mali, Sudan, and Uganda.

Here the platitudes of Blinken’s visit were replaced with wondrous double-speak with Modise’s spokesperson boasting that South Africa is “ready to work with all peace-loving nations”, and even more bizarrely, Minister Modise stating that “through our own silence, inaction and selective morality, we have allowed warlords to reign supreme across the world. The world can no longer afford to be held to ransom by warmongers. They must be dragged kicking and screaming to the table of peace and multilateralism.”

Russian General Sergei Shoigu ironically opined that “it is very encouraging that prominent military commanders from our friendly states — and the Republic of South Africa” were “holding their own” against the “return to the order and rules of engagement typical of the colonial period.”

A few months later (in early December 2022), there was the curious docking of the Lady R, a Russian Federation-flagged cargo vessel that has been sanctioned by the US and EU for illicitly shipping weapons.

It’s unclear whether the visit was related to Modise’s Russia trip and why the vessel docked at the South African naval base in Simon’s Town instead of at the commercial docks at the Table Bay Harbour, what the purpose of the visit was, why there was the need to switch off the vessels AIS, and why she unloaded and loaded her cargo in the dead of night during rolling blackouts?

No sooner had the Lady R steamed off than any pretense of neutrality was finally abandoned with Minister Pandor’s fawning over Russia Foreign Minister Lavrov during his visit to Pretoria in January 2023.

During this visit, it was proudly announced that Russia, China, and South Africa would hold joint naval exercises off Durban in February. Given the sorry state of the South African navy, it’s unclear how South Africa will benefit from these drills, which Minister Pandor described as “military exercises with friends worldwide.”

This has all made many wonder whether “the Russians have some kompromat on SA decision-makers; they’re paying them off; or SA decision-makers are incompetent and lacking any awareness of the objective of international relations and diplomacy. Or it could be a combination of the above.”

However, to make sense of the situation, one must ask: what does the ANC government hope to gain from Russia? To answer this question, it’s first necessary to look at SA’s post-apartheid relationship with Russia, and then consider what Russia has been up to on the African continent.

### **South Africa’s relationship with Russia**

Most of SA’s pronouncements on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine reference Soviet support for the exiled ANC during apartheid. However, much of this “special relationship” is romanticism of history and is relatively recent phenomenon.

Although the Soviet Union did provide political education, financial support and military training during the apartheid years, the close association did not continue after South Africa’s democratic transition.

During the presidency of Nelson Mandela, the ANC government was ambivalent to the post-Soviet Boris Yeltsin government, seeking instead to foster multilateral cooperation with European countries, the US, and China. This tentatively started to change after then-deputy president Thabo Mbeki visited Moscow along with five Cabinet ministers in 1998.

A year later, president Mandela made his first visit to Moscow (in April 1999), mainly to thank Russia for Soviet support during the liberation Struggle but also to sign the Treaty on Principles of Friendly Relations and Partnership (which didn’t happen).

After president Putin’s visit to South Africa in 2006, the nascent ties between Russia and South Africa began to strengthen. The Treaty of 1999 was finally signed, facilitating economic cooperation in the mining and energy sectors, and Russia (along with China) began lobbying for South Africa to join the BRIC group, finally achieved in 2010.

South Africa’s “bromance” with Russia really gathered steam with the ascension of president Zuma in 2007, and especially during the State Capture years of 2013 to 2017. It was during the 5th BRICS summit in Durban in March 2013 that president Zuma and president Putin held meetings to facilitate Russian support for South Africa’s infamous \$76-billion nuclear energy programme.

This was followed by frequent visits by president Zuma and numerous Cabinet ministers to meet with Putin in Russia. The court-sanctioned end of the nuclear delusion in April 2017 and Zuma's resignation in May 2018 were a significant blow to Putin's ambitions in South Africa.

Yet this does not mean that Putin has given up on potential South African entanglement, and it has been claimed that Russia is still actively gathering information that will aid its ability to manipulate the media and politicians in the future.

South Africa's closer ties with Russia have however not translated into increased trade. During 2006, South Africa's exports to Russia were just \$99-million whereas exports to Japan were \$6.2-billion, the US were \$6-billion, the UK were \$4.6-billion, Germany were \$3.9-billion, and the Netherlands were \$2.7-billion.

By the time president Zuma left the Union Buildings in 2018, exports to Russia had increased to \$403-million but exports to South Africa's main trading partners were \$8.5-billion to China, \$6.7-billion to Germany, \$6.4-billion to the US, \$5.9-billion to Japan, and \$4.8-billion to the UK.

Therefore, trade with Russia is still relatively inconsequential, suggesting that the relationship between Russia and South Africa is primarily political rather than economic.

### **ANC government's ideological double-speak.**

It is claimed that South Africa's foreign policy is based on the principles of Pan-Africanism, South-South solidarity, non-alignment, independence, and progressive internationalism.

Yet, over the last two decades, South Africa has increasingly become a foreign policy delinquent rather than a champion of human rights and democracy. This can be seen from former president Mbeki's policy of "quiet diplomacy" towards Zimbabwe since 2000 and former president Zuma's U-turn on Libya in 2011, when South Africa initially voted for a flight ban to protect civilians from attacks by the Libyan air force but then reneged and instead called for international nations to respect Libya's territorial integrity.

In 2015, Zuma infamously allowed president Omar al-Bashir of Sudan to attend the AU summit in Johannesburg even though Al-Bashir was a "wanted war criminal" by the ICC for genocide in Darfur. Zuma was ordered by the South African courts to arrest Al-Bashir but instead accepted Al-Bashir's invitation to visit Sudan.

South Africa's UN voting record also clearly shows that the government has been unwilling to condemn human rights abuses in authoritarian regimes in Zimbabwe (2000 – 2008), Sudan (2007), North Korea (2014), Iran (2015, 2016), Burundi (2016), Syria (2015, 2016, 2018), Belarus (2017), and Myanmar (2017).

In addition, South Africa voted against resolutions that would condemn ethnic cleansing and rape (2007), prevent and counter extreme violence (2015), protect peaceful protests (2016), against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation (2016), and to protect civil society targeted by authoritarian governments (2016).

No wonder The Economist has described South Africa's foreign policy as "clueless and immoral."

### **Friends with benefits**

Based on the discussion above, it seems that the ANC government believes that cozying up to Russia can benefit South Africa politically, economically, and electorally.

### **Politically**

Although being a BRICS member has had limited benefits for South Africa, the government adheres to the ideology that BRICS is a multi-polar counterbalance to Western (G7) hegemony. Consequently, following the invasion of Ukraine, SA has attempted to portray itself as a brawny BRICS champion, rather than the sickly back-bencher it actually is.

In addition, SA has \$35-billion invested in the BRICS's New Development Bank, set up in 2014, and is therefore unlikely to choose a path that may alienate China or India, both of which have significant trade and investment with SA.

### **Economically**

South Africa has significant mineral, metal, and gas deposits that are of interest to Russia. Already, the Russian company, Norilsk Nickel's joint venture with Rainbow Minerals is the largest mining partnership in the world.

With the ANC being technically bankrupt, the only source of income for the party is via the party's in-house investment company Chancellor House, the largest investment of which is in South Africa's fourth-largest manganese mine, United Manganese of Kalahari, part-owned by the Russian oligarch Viktor Vekselberg's Renova Group.

Then there is the prospect for nuclear energy investment. South Africa is planning to build a new 2,500MW nuclear power plant to replace the Safari-1 research reactor with a Multi-Purpose Reactor (MPR) after 2030.

Mineral Resources and Energy Minister Gwede Mantashe denies that South Africa is engaging with Russia on the nuclear build and after State Capture, it is likely that any Russian involvement in South Africa's nuclear build programme would be challenged by civil society.

Yet, Minister Mantashe has shown a willingness to use the powers that the National Nuclear Regulator Act gives him to try to bend the nuclear regulator to his whims. As Mantashe recently stated: "If you resist nuclear and you are a board member, I fire you, simple. You can't be in a board of something you're not advocating for."

With no end in sight for South Africa's worsening rolling blackouts, the pressure for nuclear energy is likely to become ever more pressing; and appetizing for loot-hungry politicians and the opportunistic Putin regime.

### **Conclusion**

South Africa's pronouncements since the Russian invasion of Ukraine are less about human rights and international peace and security, and more about trying to balance its position in the increasingly illiberal BRICS group on the one side against the West on the other.

It is however apparent that South Africa has largely failed at this task, and its clumsy attempts to punch above its weight in an ever-more complex global environment are proving risky and potentially very expensive.

SA appears to mistakenly believe that it can continue to side with Russia in the Ukraine conflict (despite China and India questioning Putin's rationale) without any repercussions from an increasingly unified and clear-sighted West.

This may be a grave miscalculation because the Ukraine invasion has highlighted South Africa's ongoing infatuation with autocracies. The consequences will become apparent in coming years but it's likely that, except for AU mediation in some localized conflicts, the country will find it impossible to portray itself as a neutral mediator, further diminishing South Africa's role and status in foreign affairs.

Economically, Russia is relatively small, and after the invasion of Ukraine, is increasingly disconnected from the international financial system.

Furthermore, Russia does not provide significant investment or trade to South Africa — comprising just 0.4% of South Africa's total trade. Consequently, any decline in trade or investment from South Africa's Western partners cannot be offset by Russia, which would instead make South Africa more dependent on trade with China and India.

Over the course of the last decade, South Africa has sacrificed its values of democracy and human rights in favour of securing its place among the increasingly nationalistic and undemocratic BRICS group.

The government's response to the Russian invasion is therefore not confused or contradictory, it's just a tragic abandonment of South Africa's founding principles in favour of BRICS realpolitik.

*Article by Sean Gossel in the Daily Maverick dated February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2023.*