Russia’s War in Ukraine: Military and Intelligence Aspects

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Russia’s renewed invasion of neighboring Ukraine in February 2022 marked the start of Europe’s deadliest armed conflict in decades. After a steady buildup of military forces along Ukraine’s borders since 2021, Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, with Russian ground forces attacking from multiple directions.

Initially, Russian forces made gains along all lines of advance. However, Russian forces ran into effective and likely unexpected levels of Ukrainian resistance from the invasion’s outset. In addition, many analysts and officials assess that during this first stage of the war the Russian military performed poorly overall and was hindered by specific tactical choices, poor logistics, ineffective communications, and command-and-control issues. The Ukrainian military, while at a quantitative and qualitative disadvantage in personnel, equipment, and resources, has proven more resilient and adaptive than Russia appeared to expect, including via the effective use of guerrilla tactics.

Over the course of the first several weeks of the war, Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Russian military had to adjust to various setbacks and other developments on the ground. With many of its advances stalled, in late March 2022, Russian defense officials announced that Russian military operations would focus on eastern Ukraine, including the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk (collectively known as the Donbas, where Russian-led separatists have been fighting since 2014) and that Russia would withdraw its forces around Kyiv and Chernihiv in the north.

Russia has been accused of repeated war crimes by Ukraine, nongovernmental organizations, the United Nations, multiple states, and the Biden Administration. Russian forces allegedly have targeted and bombed civilian targets, including a maternity hospital in Mariupol. Russian forces also have been accused of causing indiscriminate killings, particularly after the discovery of mass graves and apparently executed civilians following the Russian military’s withdrawal from the Kyiv suburb of Bucha.

In the latest phase of the war, Russia has reconsolidated its forces in preparation for an offensive to surround and cut off Ukrainian forces in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of eastern Ukraine. President Putin recalibrated his stated war aims to emphasize helping “the people in the Donbas, who feel their unbreakable bond with Russia.” The southern coastal city of Mariupol (in the Donetsk region) has been a key target for the Russian military. At the same time, as Russia shifts forces and focus to the Donbas, Russian units in the southwest may be exposed and vulnerable to Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF) counterattacks. It is unclear whether Russia has the necessary forces to achieve its recalibrated objectives, considering losses of personnel and equipment. The Russian military will likely rely increasingly on massed airpower and artillery to compensate for a lack of maneuver units.

Congress is likely to continue to track these developments closely, especially as it considers U.S. and international efforts to support Ukraine militarily and respond to events on the ground. For more, see CRS Report R47054, Russia’s 2022 Invasion of Ukraine: Related CRS Products.
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Introduction

Russia’s renewed invasion of neighboring Ukraine in February 2022 marked the start of Europe’s deadliest armed conflict in decades. It also prompted intensive international efforts to respond to the war. Multiple Members of Congress have engaged with U.S. and international measures, including by supporting sanctions against Russia, providing assistance to Ukraine, and bolstering support to neighboring NATO countries. The immediate and long-term implications of the war are likely to be far-reaching, affecting numerous policy dimensions of concern to Congress.

This report addresses Russian and Ukrainian military and intelligence aspects of the war, which are of interest to many in Congress as Congress considers various legislative measures and conducts oversight of U.S. policy. It provides an overview of the conflict, including the run-up to the invasion, the performance and conduct of the Russian and Ukrainian militaries, possible Russian intentions, and recent developments on the ground. For other CRS products related to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, including U.S. policy dimensions, see CRS Report R47054, Russia’s 2022 Invasion of Ukraine: Related CRS Products.

Prelude to Invasion: Military Buildup and Force Posture

In mid-October 2021, social media and news outlets began to report significant movement by Russian military forces, with limited Russian transparency, on or near the Ukrainian border and within Ukraine’s occupied Crimea region. The buildup came after a sustained increase in Russia’s permanent force posture on the Ukrainian border. Since 2014, Russia has created two new Combined Arms Armies (CAAs), one in the Western Military District (20th CAA, headquartered in Voronezh) and one in the Southern Military District (8th CAA, headquartered in Rostov-on-Don and Novocherkassk) bordering Ukraine. Russia created these CAAs to oversee, coordinate, and manage command and control of units transported to the border. The 8th CAA also reportedly commands the separatist units in two Russia-controlled areas in eastern Ukraine (the so-called Donbass and Luhansk People’s Republics, or DNR/LNR).

Throughout December 2021, Russia continued to build up its forces in the region. Prior to the February 2022 invasion, Russia had mobilized between 150,000 and 190,000 personnel and 120 Battalion Tactical Groups (BTGs) on its border with Ukraine, in Belarus, and in Ukraine’s occupied Crimea region, according to U.S. government estimates.

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1 Michael Kofman, “Putin’s Wager in Russia’s Standoff with the West,” War on the Rocks, January 24, 2022.

2 Battalion Tactical Groups (BTGs) are ad hoc, task-specific formations designed to operate autonomously as combined arms formations. BTGs are built around infantry and armor units, with supporting air defense, artillery, and other units. BTGs comprise the higher readiness units of the Russian military and are staffed by professional (also known as contract) personnel. Each Russian regiment or brigade is intended to generate two BTGs. In August 2021, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu stated the Russian military had 168 BTGs. Lester W. Grau and Charles K. Bartles, The Russian Way of War: Force Structure, Tactics and Modernization of the Russian Ground Forces (Leavenworth, KS: Foreign Military Studies Office, 2016), pp. 34-40; Tass, “Russian Army Operates Around 170 Battalion Tactical Groups—Defense Chief,” August 20, 2021; Sebastien Roblin, “Russian Battalion Groups Are Assembling Around Ukraine. What Is Putin Up To?” 19FortyFive, December 17, 2021; Conflict Intelligence Team, “Almost All Contract Soldiers Are Going to the Border:’ Comments on Social Media Shed Light on Russian Troop Transfer,” January 19, 2022.

During this buildup, analysts and observers documented the movement of Russian units from across Russia toward Ukraine. The 41st and 22nd CAAs moved from the Central Military District into Belarus and to Ukraine’s northeast border with Russia; the 1st Guards Tank Army and the 6th CAA moved from the Western Military District to Ukraine’s eastern border with Russia; the 49th and 58th CAAs moved from the Southern Military District to occupied Crimea and to Ukraine’s southeast border with Russia; and the 35th and 36th CAAs (and elements of the 29th and 5th CAAs) moved from the Eastern Military District to Belarus (see Figure 1). In addition, Russia deployed elite units—such as Russian Airborne (VDV), Naval Infantry, and spetsnaz (elite light infantry units used for reconnaissance and direct action)—around Ukraine’s borders.

These forces included the full range of Russian military capabilities, including artillery and support systems. The ground forces included air defense, artillery and rocket artillery, long-range precision missile systems (Iskander-M short-range ballistic missile [SRBM] systems), electronic warfare, support, and logistics units. Additionally, by February 2022, Russia had mobilized large numbers of Aerospace Forces (VKS) fighter, fighter-bomber, and helicopter squadrons, which some observers believed would play a key role in the initial invasion.

On February 21, 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that Russia would recognize the independence of the DNR and LNR. Russian recognition appeared to include the entire regions of Donetsk and Luhansk (collectively known as the Donbas), most of which had remained under Ukrainian control since Russia’s first invasion of Ukraine in 2014, and not just territory controlled by DNR/LNR.

Shortly after February 21, Putin announced Russia would send “peacekeepers” into the DNR/LNR, claiming they were to defend against Ukrainian plans for invasion and sabotage attempts. These Russian charges had no basis in fact. Despite denials from Russian officials, Russia had spent months amassing a significant portion of its military capabilities around Ukraine.

On February 24—following months of warning and concern from the Biden Administration, European allies, NATO, and some Members of Congress—Russia invaded Ukraine. Russia claimed its invasion was to conduct a “special military operation” to protect the civilian

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4 For more on the Russian military buildup, see CRS Insight IN11806, Russian Military Buildup Along the Ukrainian Border, by Andrew S. Bowen.

5 Units from all 11 Combined Arms Armies (CAAs) and one Tank Army (as well as the 14th and 22nd Army Corps) were present on the borders of Ukraine in the run-up to the invasion. For more, see Konrad Muzyka, “Tracking Russian Deployments near Ukraine—Autumn-Winter 2021-22,” Rochan Consulting, November 15, 2021; Dmitry Gorenburg and Michael Kofman, “Here’s What We Know About Russia’s Military Buildup near Ukraine,” Washington Post, January 15, 2022.

6 VDV include elite paratroop and air assault forces. VDV act as Russia’s elite rapid response forces. For more on Russian military capabilities and structure see CRS In Focus IF11589, Russian Armed Forces: Capabilities, by Andrew S. Bowen; Christian Haimet, “Russian Troop Buildup Continues on Ukrainian Borders,” Jane’s IHS, February 21, 2022.


population and to “demilitarize” and “de-Nazify” Ukraine; many observers understood the latter term as a false pretext for overthrowing the democratically elected Ukrainian government.\(^{10}\)

**Initial Invasion**

On February 24, 2022, hours after Putin’s televised address announcing a “special military operation,” Russia invaded Ukraine with an air and missile attack, using precision-guided munitions (PGMs) against key targets. These early targets included logistics centers, naval installations, command and control centers, air defenses, and critical infrastructure.\(^{11}\) In the opening stages of the attack, the Pentagon assessed that Russia launched over 100 SRBMs, including Iskander-M SRBMs, and air- and sea-launched cruise missiles.\(^{12}\)

Some observers believe Russia’s initial strategy was (or was intended) to achieve air superiority, degrade Ukrainian air defenses, and undermine the Ukrainian military’s ability to coordinate defenses and counterattacks. This initial bombardment, however, was more limited in duration and scale than some analysts expected.\(^{13}\) In particular, analysts noted that the Russian air forces (VKS) failed to conduct effective suppression of enemy air defense missions, either because of an unwillingness to act or because of a lack of capability. Russia’s failure to degrade the Ukrainian air force and air defenses, as well as Ukrainian command and control capabilities, allowed the Ukrainian military to respond more successfully to Russia’s invasion than most observers expected, both at the outset and subsequently.\(^{14}\)

After the air assault, Russian ground forces attacked from multiple directions: north from occupied Crimea in the direction of Kherson; limited incursions west from DNR/LNR; from Russia’s Belgorod and Kursk toward Ukraine’s cities of Kharkiv and Sumy; and a strong two-pronged thrust toward the capital of Kyiv from Belarus (see Figure 1).\(^{15}\)

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\(^{13}\) Michael Kofman and Jeffrey Edmonds, “Russia’s Shock and Awe: Moscow’s Use of Overwhelming Force Against Ukraine,” *Foreign Affairs*, February 22, 2022.

\(^{14}\) Some analysts speculate that this result was due to Ukraine’s decision, possibly influenced by U.S. and Western intelligence, to activate and disperse most of its units from their permanent bases in preparation for a possible Russian invasion. Warren P. Strobel and Michael R. Gordon, “Biden Administration Altered Rules for Sharing Intelligence with Ukraine,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 8, 2022.

\(^{15}\) Nicholas Fiorenza, Huw Williams, and Thomas Bullock, “Ukraine Conflict: Russia Launches Multipronged Attack on Ukraine,” *Janes IHS*, February 24, 2022.
Kyiv was an initial key Russian military target.\textsuperscript{16} Led by elite, but comparatively lightly equipped, VDV, spetsnaz, and reconnaissance units, Russian forces advanced along the western side of Kyiv and reached the outskirts of the city within days.\textsuperscript{17} In the early hours of the invasion, Russian VDV units conducted a risky air assault to seize the Antonov International Airport in Hostomel, on the outskirts of Kyiv.\textsuperscript{18} Analysts have argued that the Russian attack to seize the airport was intended to allow the rapid introduction of follow-on VDV units to surround and seize the Ukrainian capital.\textsuperscript{19} Ukrainian forces, however, responded and repulsed the attack, reportedly causing heavy Russian casualties and shooting down several helicopters.\textsuperscript{20}

Initially, Russian forces made gains along all lines of advance.\textsuperscript{21} Russia made the most progress in the south from occupied Crimea, reportedly imposing significant casualties on Ukrainian forces in the region. Russian forces advanced quickly toward Kherson (which they captured on March 2,


\textsuperscript{17} Mark Galeotti, “Russian Airborne Forces Retool for an Expanded Role,” \textit{Janes IHS}, October 25, 2021.


\textsuperscript{21} CRS Insight IN11872, \textit{Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine: Military and Intelligence Issues and Aspects}, by Andrew S. Bowen.
2022) and eventually turned toward the Ukrainian coastal city of Mariupol. Analysts argue that Russian advances in the south were successful in part because they involved some of Russia’s most modern and professional units from the Southern Military District and had better logistical support than other units, due to rail access from Crimea. In other regions, Russia made slow but initially steady progress, seeking to encircle rather than capture major urban centers such as Sumy, Kharkiv, and Chernihiv. Logistics issues and other factors soon stalled most Russian advances.

Russian forces ran into effective Ukrainian resistance from the invasion’s outset. Despite not announcing a general mobilization until February 25, after the invasion began, the Ukrainian military immediately hindered, deflected, and imposed costs on Russian forces in personnel and equipment. The Ukrainian military appeared to exploit numerous tactical and operational deficiencies of Russian forces (which were overextended in many cases), allowing the Ukrainian military to conduct ambushes and counterattacks. In addition, many analysts point to the role of significant security assistance from the United States and other Western countries (including weapons and equipment as well as military advice and training) in improving the Ukrainian military’s capacity to defend against Russia’s invasion.

Analysis of Russia’s Initial Military Performance

Despite Russian forces launching heavy attacks and advancing across Ukraine, the Russian military overall performed poorly during the initial phases of the invasion, surprising many observers and analysts. Reports indicated that Russia’s military and political leadership appeared surprised by the military’s lack of progress and the level of resistance from Ukrainian forces. As Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines stated to Congress in early March, “We assess Moscow underestimated the strength of Ukraine’s resistance and the degree of internal military challenges we are observing, which include an ill-constructed plan, morale issues and considerable logistical issues.”

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28 CRS In Focus IF12040, U.S. Security Assistance to Ukraine, by Christina L. Arabia, Andrew S. Bowen, and Cory Welt. In addition to the significant levels of security assistance, Western training for the Ukrainian military, specifically Ukrainian special operations forces, has played a key role in defending against Russia’s invasion. For more, see Andrew White, “Ukraine Conflict: Ukrainian Special Operations Forces in Focus,” Janes IHS, March 4, 2022.

Some Russian forces invaded with apparently little preparation. Captured Russian soldiers and intercepted communications revealed that many units were unaware they were to invade Ukraine until shortly beforehand. Reports also indicated that many in the Russian military were operating with poor morale, soon compounded by increasing casualties, poor leadership, and a lack of supplies.

According to Russian law, conscripts cannot be used in combat operations unless Russia declares a national emergency and mobilization. Nevertheless, on March 9, 2022, the Russian Ministry of Defense stated that conscripts had been involved in the invasion, contradicting Putin’s claim that no conscripts would see combat.

Russian units were operating with very little tactical sophistication and not as combined arms formations, leaving units exposed and unprepared for Ukrainian resistance, according to observers and analysts. For example, elite but relatively lightly equipped units, such as VDV and spetsnaz, conducted operations they were not trained or equipped to conduct, such as advancing into urban areas, where they appeared to suffer heavy casualties due to the lack of heavy armored support. Additionally, armored units advanced without infantry support in numerous instances. In another example, Russian National Guard (Rosgvardiya) units reportedly advanced alongside, and sometimes in front of, Russian military forces, apparently with little coordination.

During the initial phases of the invasion, the Russian military appeared not to use many of the systems and capabilities it had amassed prior to the invasion. Observers noted little evidence of Russia conducting electronic warfare or using advanced intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets, such as unmanned aerial vehicles. Additionally, despite having significant artillery, rocket artillery, and air capabilities, Russian forces appeared restrained in their use of these systems and capabilities during the initial phases of the invasion. Some analysts speculated that this occurred because the Russian military underestimated the level of

33 Currently, Russia states it is conducting a “special military operation.”
34 Sarah Dean and Rob Picheta, “Russia Admits Conscripts Have Been Fighting in Ukraine, Despite Putin’s Previous Denials,” CNN, March 9, 2022.
37 Rosgvardiya units are key internal security troops, neither equipped nor trained for conventional combat and likely sent into Ukraine early in the invasion to prevent protests against any new pro-Russian Ukrainian leadership. See CRS In Focus IF11647, Russian Law Enforcement and Internal Security Agencies, by Andrew S. Bowen; Vladimir Sevrinovsky, “Refusing to Kill People Isn’t a Crime: The Russian National Guard Is Firing Officers Who Refuse to Join the War in Ukraine,” Meduza, March 29, 2022; Tim Ripley, “Russian National Guard Deployed Across Ukraine,” Jane’s IHS, April 4, 2022.
Ukrainian resistance, and that it indicated an initial hesitation to inflict collateral damage on civilian targets.\textsuperscript{40}

In particular, many analysts were surprised at the apparently limited role the VKS played at the outset of the invasion, beyond the initial bombardment.\textsuperscript{41} Russian ground forces appeared to have limited air cover, with Russia primarily relying on Iskander-M SRBMs or air-launched cruise missiles launched from VKS bombers inside Belarus and Russia, especially to target Ukrainian infrastructure and other targets in western Ukraine (see Figure 2).\textsuperscript{42} The Ukrainian air force continued to operate over western Ukraine, and its air defenses shot down Russian aircraft and challenged Russian air superiority.\textsuperscript{43} Specifically, Ukrainian forces used Turkish-manufactured TB2 unmanned combat aerial vehicles in reconnaissance, targeting, and attack missions against Russian forces.\textsuperscript{44}


\textsuperscript{43} Media reports have documented the loss of Su-25 (SM/SM3), Su-30SM, and Su-34 fighters and fighter-bombers, as well as numerous Mi-8, Mi-24, Mi-35, Mi-28N, and Ka-52 helicopters. Jack Siminski, “What the Air Campaign in Ukraine Tells Us About the Current State of the Russian Air Force,” \textit{Aviationist}, March 4, 2022.

The Russian military also appeared unprepared for many other critical aspects of the conflict. Observers documented Russian units operating without encrypted communications, often using civilian equipment to communicate. The lack of encrypted communications hampered the Russian military’s ability to coordinate its operations and allowed the Ukrainian military to listen and exploit intercepted information.

The Russian military’s logistics issues limited its offensives in almost all sectors. Russian units appeared poorly supplied (for example, some captured Russian food reportedly was expired and inedible) and seemed to advance past available logistics support. Available logistics appeared too limited to sustain multiple simultaneous offensives. For example, a 40-mile-long Russian supply convoy on its way to Kyiv stalled, which undermined Russian advances on the Ukrainian

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capital.\textsuperscript{49} Moreover, the Ukrainian military appeared to prioritize ambushing Russian supply columns, exacerbating Russian logistics issues.\textsuperscript{50}

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\textbf{Reported Russian Casualties} \\
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Estimates of Russian casualties vary widely and may not be considered reliable. Due to the continuing state of war, verifying exact numbers of Russian casualties is nearly impossible. Below are some of the estimates that had been mentioned in various press reports by the end of April 2022. \\

\textbf{Russia:} Officially, the Russian government stated in late March that 1,351 soldiers had died and another 3,850 had been wounded. On March 20, 2022, the pro-Kremlin newspaper Komsomolskaya Pravda appeared to publish Russian Ministry of Defense figures that listed 9,861 deaths. This figure remains unconfirmed, and the newspaper deleted the report and stated that it had been hacked. \\

\textbf{United States:} The U.S. government has largely declined to release specific estimates, but U.S. Under Secretary of State Victoria Nuland stated in an interview on March 29, 2022, that Russia had sustained “incredible” losses and “by our estimates, more than 10,000 Russians dead.” \\

\textbf{NATO:} NATO estimated that anywhere from 7,000 to 15,000 Russian soldiers had been killed. \\
\textbf{Ukraine:} Ukraine estimated that it had killed over 20,000 Russian troops since the war began. \\
\textbf{United Kingdom:} On April 25, British Defense Secretary Ben Wallace told the British House of Commons an estimated 15,000 Russian military personnel had been killed. \\
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In addition, analysts have noted that the Russian military appears to have issues with command and control, both at the tactical and the operational levels. Russian commanders appeared unprepared for many aspects of the invasion, as evidenced by a lack of coordination among branches (such as VKS and Rosgvardiya) and between units.\textsuperscript{51} Reporting indicates that communication problems compounded these command and control issues, contributing to higher-ranking officers moving closer to the frontlines.\textsuperscript{52} This exposure reportedly has led to a significant number of casualties among high-ranking officers, and especially mid-ranking officers, who are crucial to tactical-level operations.\textsuperscript{53} Additionally, reports indicate there was no overall Russian operational commander.\textsuperscript{54} As a result, it appears each CAA and axis of advance was operating independently, with questionable levels of coordination.\textsuperscript{55} Recently, reports indicate that General


\textsuperscript{52} Compared with Western militaries, Russian commanders have smaller staffs to assist command and generally are closer to the frontlines, which makes casualties among Russian officers more likely. Many analysts, however, have been surprised by the number and ranks of officers killed. The high number likely indicates that problems forced Russian commanders to accept greater levels of exposure. Jack Detsch, “‘Winging It’: Russia Is Getting Its Generals Killed on the Front Lines,” Foreign Policy, March 21, 2022.

\textsuperscript{53} Some reports indicate that Ukrainian forces specifically targeted Russian commanders by exploiting their use of unsecured communications, possibly contributing to the high fatality rate. Alex Horton and Shane Harris, “Russian Troops’ Tendency to Talk on Unsecured Lines Is Proving Costly,” Washington Post, March 27, 2022.


\textsuperscript{55} Reportedly, each CAA brought and set up its own headquarters structure rather than integrating under the command
Alexander Dvornikov, head of the Southern Military District, was given operational command of Russia’s war to help streamline command and control.\footnote{56}

**Analysis of Ukraine’s Initial Military Performance**

Many observers and analysts have been surprised and impressed by Ukraine’s military resistance. Despite having a smaller military than Russia, and a quantitative and qualitative disadvantage in equipment and resources, the Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF) have proven resilient and adaptive.\footnote{57} Analysts note the UAF has demonstrated greater flexibility than the Russian military and a willingness to adapt to changing conditions to exploit Russian missteps and weaknesses.\footnote{58} The UAF also has been benefiting from high levels of motivation and recruitment.\footnote{59}

Initially, the UAF traded space to draw Russian forces in, as Russian units advanced without sufficient convoy protection and logistical support. As Russian units advanced, Ukraine emphasized guerrilla strategies, such as hit and run or ambushes, to attack supply lines.\footnote{60} Ukraine also isolated Russian units in an effort to tire and deplete Russian forces. Ukraine leveraged key capabilities (such as the TB2 unmanned combat aerial vehicle for direct attack and targeting for artillery strikes), security assistance, and knowledge to stymie Russian advances and undermine Russian advantages, such as airpower.\footnote{61} Easily deployable weapons systems (including foreign and domestic anti-tank and anti-air systems) have been effective at stopping Russian forces and imposing losses in Russian personnel and equipment.\footnote{62} The UAF also appears to have adopted a diffuse command structure, allowing each operational command to coordinate and initiate operations according to local conditions.

Observers have been less clear on the state of Ukrainian losses, although most agree Ukraine has suffered significant personnel and equipment losses.\footnote{63} Ukraine has operated air defenses that play a crucial role in the conflict, especially around Kyiv, but documented losses of strategic air-defense systems have occurred. Other losses include tank, artillery, and rocket artillery systems. Although Ukraine has effectively exploited person-operated weaponry and guerrilla tactics against Russia, Ukrainian officials have pressed other countries to supply needed armor, artillery, and rocket artillery systems to enable Ukraine to conduct larger-scale counteroffensives against...
the Russian military. In addition, Ukraine will likely need logistics and supplies not only to replace losses but also to sustain continued combat operations.

Possible Russian Intentions and Expectations

Observers continue to speculate about Russia’s initial objectives and plans in launching its offensive against Ukraine. Many analysts believe Russia’s expectations were based on faulty assumptions that undermined Russia’s conduct of the invasion. If this is the case, these incorrect political assumptions possibly determined and imposed unrealistic objectives and timetables onto the Russian military. This in turn may partially explain the Russian military’s unpreparedness and initial poor performance.

On February 25, 2022, the Pentagon assessed that Russia had committed one-third of its available troops into Ukraine. U.S. officials and some analysts believe Russia’s initial operation was to “decapitate” the Ukrainian government and rely on fast-moving, elite units to quickly seize key junctures, similar to Russia’s seizure of Ukraine’s Crimea region in 2014. Some analysts speculate that Russia may have based such a strategy on assumptions that the Ukrainian military would be ineffective and the Ukrainian political leadership could be easily replaced. As Central Intelligence Agency Director William J. Burns testified before the House Intelligence Committee in early March 2022, Putin “was confident that he had modernized his military and they were capable of a quick, decisive victory at minimal cost. He’s been proven wrong on every count. Those assumptions have proven to be profoundly flawed over the last 12 days of conflict.”

Analysts speculate that Putin and other Russian policymakers may have held these faulty assumptions in part due to poor intelligence and a willingness by subordinates to convey only positive information to Russian decisionmakers. Reportedly, several Russian intelligence and security officers have been arrested, which some analysts suspect occurred in response to the officers’ poor or misleading provision of intelligence. Additionally, many observers speculate a relatively small circle of advisers may have outsized influence on Putin and may have contributed

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Observers believe this circle includes Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu, who may have overstated the Russian military’s capabilities.73

Subsequent Developments: March-April 2022

Since early March 2022, Russian forces attempted to adapt to the reality of effective Ukrainian resistance. Analysts noted some changes in Russian military operations, including more coordination between units and a greater capacity to operate as combined arms formations, increased air support, and significantly higher levels of artillery and rocket artillery fire.74 Russian forces made slow incremental advances but continued to suffer heavy losses in both personnel and equipment.75 By March 7, 2022, U.S. officials believed Russia had committed “nearly 100 percent” of its available forces into Ukraine.76 Observers also noted that the Russian VKS increased its number of sorties and operations, although most missions appeared to employ unguided weaponry rather than PGMs.77 The increased sortie rate also meant heavier losses for the VKS, including some of its most advanced helicopter, fighter, and fighter-bombers.78

At this stage of the conflict, instead of concentrating on one area of operations, the Russian military appeared to continue multiple lines of advance.79 In the north, Russian forces attempted to break through Ukrainian defenses around Kyiv, from both the northwest and the east. In the east, Russian forces surrounded Kharkiv and attacked toward Izyum. In the south, Russian forces conducted an offensive to seize Mykolaiv in the southwest and Mariupol in the southeast.80 Each advance appeared to compete against the others for increasingly limited reinforcements, logistics, and air support. Gradually, most Russian offensives began to stall due to a number of factors, including continued logistics issues, mounting casualties and a lack of available reinforcements, and increasing Ukrainian counterattacks.81

79 For specific tracking of the conflict, see Konrad Muzyka, “Ukraine Conflict Monitor,” Rochan Consulting.
81 John Paul Rathbone, Sam Jones, and Daniel Dombey, “Why Russia Is Deploying More Troops to Ukraine,” Financial Times, March 17, 2022; Andrew E. Kramer, “Ukraine’s Troops Begin a Counteroffensive That Alters Shape
Throughout mid-March 2022, however, the Ukrainian military conducted effective counterattacks across most axes of advance, defeating repeated Russian offensives outside of Kyiv, outside of Kharkiv and Sunny, and in Mykolaiv. Ukraine also attacked captured infrastructure, such as an airbase in Kherson and the port of Berdyansk, and destroyed key Russian assets.

Russia has been accused of repeated war crimes by Ukraine, nongovernmental organizations, multiple states, and the Biden Administration. Russian forces allegedly have targeted and bombed civilian targets, including by early April 2022 a maternity hospital and theater in Mariupol, regional administration offices in Mykolaiv, and a railway station in Kramatorsk. Russian forces also have been accused of indiscriminate killings, particularly after the discovery of mass graves and murdered civilians following the Russian military’s withdrawal from the Kyiv suburb of Bucha. Although it is not yet possible to tally the total number of Ukrainian civilians killed, dozens and sometimes hundreds of victims reportedly have been identified at various targeted locations or mass graves. Ukrainian officials say that in Mariupol, which has been under sustained attack, civilian deaths could number up to 20,000.

Russian Shift in Objectives and Operations

Toward the end of March 2022, Russian offensives around Kyiv stalled. Ukrainian forces launched multiple sustained counteroffensives and pushed back Russian forces. Observers noted that, after failing to achieve a decisive victory quickly, Russia was reevaluating its objectives and strategy toward achieving territorial gains in the south and east of Ukraine. On March 25, the Russian Ministry of Defense held a press conference asserting that Russia had mostly met its initial objectives and would move on to the second phase of the operation, focusing on eastern...
Ukraine, including the Donbas. Russia soon announced it was withdrawing forces from around Kyiv and Chernihiv; analysts speculated that this was aimed at allowing the redeployment of units for further offensives in the east. U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan stated on April 4, 2022, “Russia is repositioning its forces to concentrate its offensive operations in eastern and parts of southern Ukraine.... All indications are that Russia will seek to surround and overwhelm Ukrainian forces in eastern Ukraine.”

Observers have noted that Russia has redirected forces to support operations in the east to cut off Ukrainian military units in the Donbas. On April 12, President Putin stated that Russia’s “military operation will continue until its full completion” but said, “Our goal is to help the people in the Donbas, who feel their unbreakable bond with Russia.” The terrain favors Russian forces, with its advantages in armored and artillery units, and makes it more difficult for Ukrainian forces to conduct guerrilla-style attacks.

A key Russian military objective has been the coastal city of Mariupol, in the Donetsk region. Russian forces gradually surrounded and advanced into Mariupol against stiff Ukrainian resistance. Russia’s effort to seize the city has benefited from Russia shifting operations away

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Sinking of the Moskva

On April 13, 2022, the flagship of Russia’s Black Sea Fleet, the Slava class missile cruiser Moskva, reportedly was struck by two Ukrainian R-360 Neptune anti-ship missiles. Initially, Russia denied the Moskva was hit by missiles, said it sunk in a storm after an accidental fire, and attempted to tow the heavily damaged cruiser back to port in Sevastopol; the damage was catastrophic, however, and the ship eventually sank. Reports indicate the Moskva was blockading Odessa and providing air defense support to Russian units in the southwest near Kherson when it was struck. The sinking provided a morale boost to Ukrainian forces and undermined Russian efforts to threaten an amphibious assault against Odessa, potentially freeing up Ukrainian forces defending the city to conduct counteroffensives against Russian forces near Kherson.


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92 The Joint Forces Operation (JFO) is Ukraine’s term for its military operation against the Russian-controlled Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics. Most analysts consider Ukrainian military forces in the JFO to be Ukraine’s best units. Barbara Starr et al., “Russia Shifting Focus to Show a Victory by Early May in Eastern Ukraine, U.S. Officials Say,” CNN, April 2, 2022.
95 Alan Cullison, Brett Forrest, and Bojan Pancevski, “Russia Ramps Up Ukraine Attacks in Effort to Seize Strategically Key Port City,” Wall Street Journal, March 10, 2022.
from attempting to seize all of the Kherson region (which includes Mykolaiv). After weeks of bombardment and fighting, Ukrainian military forces and large numbers of civilians were isolated in the Azovstal iron and steel plant. On April 21, Putin announced that Russia had seized Mariupol and that Russian forces would not assault the Azovstal plant but would surround and seal it off, despite Ukrainian forces continuing to resist. Reports of attacks on Azovstal have continued as Russian forces continue to seize total control of the city.

**Latest Phase of War**

Russia has increased its use of long-range PGMs against targets in western Ukraine, but analysts have not seen indications of the VKS attempting to impose further air superiority beyond eastern Ukraine. Russia continues to conduct long-range PGM strikes against what Russian officials say are the Ukrainian defense industry and infrastructure targets in an attempt to cripple and undermine the Ukrainian military’s long-term capability.

Russia’s redeployment of forces away from Kyiv and toward eastern Ukraine likely indicates the Russian military’s need to rest and resupply after using most of its combat-effective units. Analysts question whether Russia has enough combat-effective units to achieve its political objectives without a national mobilization, the calling up of reserves, and the further use of conscripts in combat. Reports indicate Russia has been forced to deploy units from several foreign bases, including units from the 201st Military Base in Tajikistan, 7th Military Base in Russia-occupied Abkhazia (Georgia), and 4th Military Base in Russia-occupied South Ossetia (Georgia) to support operations in Ukraine. Russia also reportedly has deployed private military companies to support operations, primarily to oversee and support Russian-led forces from the DNR/LNR. Analysts speculate that Russia will continue, and likely increase, its use of indiscriminate bombing, using both airpower and missile strikes, to compensate for losses among ground forces, likely leading to continued civilian casualties and accusations of war crimes.

In the near term, Russia is likely to continue to reconsolidate its forces for an offensive to surround and cut off Ukrainian forces in the east. U.S. officials have estimated that Russia has 85 BTGs in the Donbas and continues to move in key capabilities such as helicopters, artillery, and command and control assets. On April 18, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said

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Russia had begun its offensive in the Donbas after a barrage of Russian missile strikes across Ukraine. U.S. officials, however, stated they believed Russia was conducting “shaping operations” to prepare for larger offensive operations. Russian forces have conducted slow and gradual probing attacks against Ukrainian forces, including the use of heavy artillery and rocket artillery to support operations. Russia is likely concentrating on pressing Ukrainian forces south of Izyum and west from Severodonetsk toward Kramatorsk and Slovyansk, and north from southern Ukraine to either distract or surround the UAF. Russia appears to be pushing north from Mariupol, as well as toward Zaporizhia.

Analysts continue to debate whether Russia has enough combat capable forces to conduct a full encirclement and how available forces will dictate the extent of Russian offensives. Additionally, analysts note that Russian units have been reorganizing and attempting to improve persistent weaknesses demonstrated during the conflict, but the extent or ability of Russian forces to remedy these failures after significant losses is unclear. Russian units continue to suffer from logistics issues, complicated by persistent Ukrainian counterattacks outside of Kharkiv targeting Russian supply lines.

Ukraine has reinforced units in the Donbas and southwest in Mykolaiv, including fresh units from Odessa that were kept in reserve against a potential amphibious landing. Benefiting from shorter internal supply lines, the UAF has conducted counterattacks outside Kharkiv and the southwest towards Kherson. In Kherson and west of the Dnipro River, Russian units are exposed and reportedly have suffered significant casualties. As Russia shifts forces and focus to the Donbas, Russian units in the southwest may be exposed and vulnerable to UAF counterattacks.

Analysts continue to speculate on the composition and structure of Russian forces. Some units appear to be operating as independent BTGs, whereas others appear to be operating as larger formations, sometimes composed of multiple units after suffering heavy losses. Lester W. Grau and Charles K. Bartles, “Getting to Know the Battalion Tactical Group,” RUSI, April 14, 2022.

112 Emily Ferris, “Russia’s Military Has a Railroad Problem,” Foreign Policy, April 21, 2022.
115 On April 23, Ukraine’s Ministry of Defense Intelligence Agency announced it had successfully struck a Russian command post of the 49th Combined Arms Army, killing multiple Russian officers, including two generals.
116 Some reports indicate Russian forces may be reorganizing to advance north from Kherson towards Kryvyi Rih, but Ukrainian counterattacks and a lack of available maneuver units may undermine any further Russian advances and overextend supply lines.
Outlook

Few observers expect Russia to agree to a political settlement or cease-fire unless it believes it has realized enough territorial gains to achieve its revised objectives and present a victorious narrative to domestic audiences. On April 22, 2022, Major General Rustam Minnekayev, the deputy commander of the Central Military District, said in an interview that Russia wanted to take full control of eastern and southern Ukraine, including a possible land bridge to Transnistria, a Russia-supported breakaway territory in Moldova. Many observers believe this statement reflects larger Russian political objectives over the medium to long term, since Russian military force constraints prevent a serious offensive to capture Odessa and link up with Transnistria. Observers continue to speculate whether Russia has the military capabilities to achieve a decisive outcome or if the UAF will be able to fight Russian forces to a standstill.

Some have speculated about the potential for Russia to use nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons if Russian policymakers perceive inadequate military advances or to demonstrate capability. Most analysts, however, believe the likelihood of Russia’s use of nuclear weapons remains low. Central Intelligence Agency Director Bill Burns said the United States has not “seen a lot of practical evidence of the kind of deployments or military dispositions that would reinforce that concern.”

Ukraine continues to defend, and in some areas, push back Russian forces. As the conflict shifts to the Donbas, the UAF likely needs continued support to replace lost equipment and systems critical for a conventional conflict. The conflict has consumed significant amounts of ammunition, and the UAF likely needs replenishment of small arms and artillery ammunition. Ukrainian leaders have continued to press western governments for prompt and expansive military assistance and supplies. Observers continue to highlight the potential for further war crimes due to denials by Russian officials and an unwillingness to address accusations. Satellite images have uncovered possible mass grave sites near Mariupol. One unit alleged to have participated in war crimes in the Kyiv suburb of Bucha was honored by President Putin for its actions in Ukraine.

Congress is likely to continue to track these developments closely, especially as it considers U.S. and international efforts to support Ukraine militarily and respond to events on the ground.

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121 Such as tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, reconnaissance and surveillance systems, medium-range air defenses, and mobile artillery. CRS In Focus IF12040, U.S. Security Assistance to Ukraine, by Christina L. Arabia, Andrew S. Bowen, and Cory Welt.
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