

**After Russia withdraws from Kherson & territory west of Dnipro, Macron calls for talks, U.S. warns against nuclear response, and Russia launches heaviest missile attack of the war**



UK Defence Intelligence update on Russian attacks and troop locations as of today.

On February 24, three days after recognizing the independence of the “people’s republics” created by pro-Russian separatists in portions of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in eastern Ukraine and signing treaties of friendship, cooperation and mutual assistance with both, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced a “special military operation” to “protect people who, for eight years now, have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kiev regime. To this end we will seek to demilitarize and denazify Ukraine.” The “special military operation” was in fact a full-fledged attack on Ukraine, focused not only on the Donbas but also on Kyiv and its surrounding region, the territory between Kyiv and Kharkiv, and southern Ukraine adjacent to Crimea. While the attention of the world was focused initially on Russia’s attack on Kyiv and the surrounding region and then on the destruction of Mariupol in Donetsk region, Russian forces advanced quickly in eastern Ukraine, taking much of Kharkiv region, all of Luhansk region and more than half of Donetsk region, and much of southeastern Ukraine as well, including Kherson, a city of some 280,000, and most of Kherson region. Last month, Russia formally annexed that region along with the regions of Donetsk, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia.

But beginning in August, Ukraine, making good use of the substantial military assistance provided by the U.S. and other western states, began to drive back the Russian forces. By late September, Ukraine had taken back almost all of Kharkiv region, had stopped Russia’s advance toward Mykolaiv in the south, and had taken back territory on the western edge of the Donbas. And by late October, Ukrainian forces had taken back a significant amount of the territory in

Kherson region west of the Dnipro River and were threatening the city of Kherson. Indeed, in late October, the Russian administration in Kherson moved its offices from the city, which is on the west bank of the Dnipro, to the east bank and organized a large-scale evacuation of civilians from Kherson and surrounding towns in what it called an “organized, gradual displacement.” With Ukrainian forces steadily advancing toward the city of Kherson from the west and north, Gen. Sergey Surovikin, who in early October was appointed overall commander of Russian forces in Ukraine, warned of an imminent attack on Kherson and urged the residents to evacuate to Russian-controlled areas on the eastern bank. And last Wednesday, Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu, acting on Surovikin’s recommendation, ordered the withdrawal of all Russian troops from the city of Kherson and, indeed, from all of Kherson region west of the Dnipro. Despite the logistical difficulties of moving a large military force across a large river over bridges that have been either badly damaged or destroyed, the withdrawal was completed this past weekend. As a result, as today’s map of Russian attacks and troop locations issued by British Defence Intelligence indicates (above), Ukraine now controls the city of Kherson and all the territory of that region west of the Dnipro.

But the fact that Ukraine has taken back the city of Kherson and the territory of that region west of the Dnipro has substantially increased the threat of further escalation in the war for an obvious reason: After the October annexation of the four regions, however illegal that annexation was and remains in international law, Ukraine has now taken territory that Russia now regards as part of the Russian Federation. It was perhaps with that fear in mind that French President Emmanuel Macron, while calling for continued support of Ukraine, including military assistance, called on Monday for intensifying the efforts to find a diplomatic solution to the crisis by bringing the two sides to the negotiating table. And it was no doubt the same concern that led to the meeting in Ankara Monday between CIA Director William J. Burns and Sergey Naryshkin, the Director of Russia’s Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR). According to a White House spokesperson, Burns, who speaks Russian and previously served as U.S. ambassador to Russia, conveyed “a message on the consequences of the use of nuclear weapons by Russia, and the risks of escalation to strategic stability.”

Russia has not – at least not yet – formally declared war on Ukraine, although that could happen after this week’s meeting of Russia’s high-level Security Council. But in the meantime, yesterday Russia responded with a wave of missile strikes – more than 100, the most in one day since the war began – on cities throughout Ukraine – Kyiv, Lviv in the west, Kharkiv in the northeast, Odessa and Mykolaiv in the south, and many others, striking the energy infrastructure and causing the loss of electricity, water, heat, and communications in substantial portions of those and other cities. And as if an illustration of the risk of escalation were needed, there were reports that two people were killed in a Polish village on the border with Ukraine about 50 miles north of Lviv by some type of projectile, which prompted some in Poland and elsewhere in Europe to suggest that Articles 4 and/or 5 of the NATO charter – calling for urgent consultations and declaring that an attack on one is an attack on all – should be invoked. That won’t happen; this morning NATO and Polish officials reported the missile was Ukrainian, part of its air defense system. Nevertheless, it is the case that, as the war continues, the risk of a serious strategic escalation, whether deliberate or accidental, will inevitably increase.

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