



Russia-Ukraine Warning Update: Initial Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment

Mason Clark, George Barros, and Kateryna Stepanenko
February 24, 3:00 pm EST

Russian President Vladimir Putin began a large-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24 likely aimed at full regime change and the occupation of Ukraine. His claimed objective to “demilitarize” and “de-nazify” Ukraine is a transparent cover for an unprovoked war of aggression to occupy a neighboring state. Putin and Kremlin media continue to deny that the Russian invasion is a war, instead describing it as a special military operation.¹ Putin’s messaging is likely aimed at a domestic Russian audience, which the Kremlin has not fully prepared for the costs of a war against Ukraine. Russian officials and state media have been denying and mocking Western warnings of the impending Russian invasion for months and as recently as February 23.² Russian forces remain much larger and more capable than Ukraine’s conventional military. Russia will likely defeat Ukrainian regular military forces and secure their territorial objectives at some point in the coming days or weeks if Putin is determined to do so and willing to pay the cost in blood and treasure.

Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian forces are successfully slowing Russian offensives on all axes of advance other than a Russian breakout from the Crimean Peninsula. Russian failure to ground the Ukrainian air force or cripple Ukrainian command and control is likely enabling these initial Ukrainian successes.
- Ukrainian forces are contesting the Hostomel military airport, 20 km northwest of Kyiv, as of 9:30 pm local time.³ Russian VDV (Airborne) troops landed at Hostomel and have also failed to capture the Boryspil airport southeast of Kyiv. Ukraine’s contestation of the airport deprives Russian forces of any location to airlift forces onto Kyiv’s western flank overnight.
- Russian forces are rapidly advancing north from Crimea, securing Kherson city. Their deepest penetration to date is about 60 kilometers.
- Russian forces are advancing on Kyiv from Belarus on both sides of the Dnipro River. Russian forces secured the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone (on the west bank) at 7:30 pm local time, but Ukrainian forces have slowed Russian advances east of the Dnipro at Chernihiv.
- Russian forces likely seek to cut off Ukrainian troops on the line of contact in Donbas using an envelopment behind the Ukrainian front lines through Luhansk Oblast. Russian frontal assaults have taken little territory in Donetsk and Luhansk at this time.

Russian military operations began with a short and incomplete air campaign on February 24 around 4:00 am local time targeting Ukrainian air defenses, supply depots, and airfields across unoccupied Ukraine. However, portions of the Ukrainian Air Force remain operational and Ukrainian command and control appears intact.

- US defense officials estimate initial strikes comprised over 100 missiles including a mix of short and medium-range ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and sea-launched missiles.⁴ An estimated 75 Russian bombers participated in the attack.⁵
- Russia did not successfully ground the Ukrainian air force or cripple the Ukrainian armed forces, enabling several Ukrainian successes on February 24. ISW incorrectly forecasted that any Russian offensive would begin with a concentrated air and missile campaign to cripple Ukrainian command and control and infrastructure.

- The Russian failure to comprehensively strike key Ukrainian assets is a surprising break from expected Russian operations and has likely enabled stiffer Ukrainian defense. The Ukrainian military has shot down seven Russian aircraft and seven helicopters as of 8:00 pm local time, February 24.⁶
- Russia has not demonstrated its full air and missile capabilities and will likely conduct further waves of strikes in the coming days aimed at degrading Ukraine's command and control and ability to redeploy forces.

Ukrainian forces are currently contesting the Hostomel military airport, 20 km northwest of Kyiv, against Russian VDV (airborne) troops likely from the 31st Guards Air Assault Brigade as of 9:30 pm local time after several unsuccessful counterattacks earlier in the day.⁷ Russian airborne forces were additionally unable to secure the Boryspil airport (Kyiv's primary international airport), southeast of Kyiv.⁸ Ukraine's contestation of the airport prevents Russia from airlifting reinforcements to isolate Kyiv from western Ukraine, as feared earlier in the day.

Russian ground forces are advancing on four primary axes, discussed in turn below:

1. Belarus/Kyiv;
2. Kharkiv;
3. Donbas; and
4. Crimea-Kherson.

1) Belarus/Kyiv axis: Russian forces in Belarus are advancing on Kyiv along both sides of the Dnipro River, likely seeking to isolate Kyiv. Russian forces have made greater progress west of the Dnipro, successfully securing the Chernobyl exclusion zone.

- Ukrainian forces reported halting Russia's offensive by elements of the 36th Combined Arms Army into Kyiv Oblast from Belarus at Chernihiv, roughly 120 km northeast of Kyiv, including capturing an entire reconnaissance platoon of the Russian 74th Motor Rifle Brigade.⁹
- Russian forces secured the Chernobyl exclusion zone as of 7:30 pm local time.¹⁰ Russian forces likely intend to cut Kyiv off from western Ukraine through a drive down the western bank of the Dnipro River. The failure of Russian airborne forces to secure the Hostomel airport will impede this envelopment.
- No Belarusian forces are confirmed to be participating in operations in Ukraine as of this time. Belarusian President Lukashenko claimed Belarusian forces will not participate in operations in Ukraine and instead cover the "western operational direction" against Poland and Lithuania.¹¹

2) Kharkiv axis: Russian forces, including confirmed elements of the 1st Guards Tank Army, are conducting a frontal assault on Kharkiv from northeastern Ukraine.¹² Ukrainian forces are temporarily halting Russian advances but Russian forces will likely enter Kharkiv before the end of the day.

- Heavy fighting is currently ongoing on key roads leading from Russia to Kharkiv. Ukrainian forces are inflicting casualties on Russian tanks using US-provided Javelin antitank systems.¹³ Elements of the 1st Guards Tank Army entered the outskirts of Kharkiv at 2:00 pm local time.¹⁴ ISW cannot confirm at this time the extent of Russian advances into Kharkiv.
- Russian forces have additionally crossed the northeastern Ukrainian border at several points. Ukrainian forces appear to be conducting fighting withdrawals. Ukrainian forces halted Russian forces northwest of Kharkiv in Sumy Oblast.¹⁵

3) Donbas axis: Russian forces, likely elements of the 8th Combined Arms Army, are conducting an envelopment through Luhansk Oblast rather than a frontal assault from the Russian-occupied Donbas. Russian forces likely seek to cut off Ukrainian forces on the line of contact and/or drive them out of their prepared defensive positions, forcing them to fight in the open.

- Russian forces made achieved limited advances in northern Luhansk Oblast.
- Russian forces have likely not secured a breakthrough along the line of contact in Donbas but claim to have done so. The Russian Ministry of Defense claimed at 7:00 pm local time that Russian proxy troops with Russian air and artillery support broke through the line of contact in unspecified locations to a depth

of 6-8 km.¹⁶ The UK Ministry of Defense reported at 8:30 pm EET (Ukraine local time) that Russian forces have **not** achieved a breakthrough.¹⁷ Ukrainian forces last reported they were holding firm along the entire line of contact at 5:00 pm local time.¹⁸ ISW cannot confirm Russian MoD claims that proxy forces—rather than Russia’s 8th Combined Arms Army—are conducting frontal assaults in Donbas, though a decision not to deploy Russian frontline troops into occupied Donbas in advance of the invasion may explain limited Russian success. Russian forces have reportedly been unable to secure terrain in a frontal assault from Donetsk toward Mariupol as of 7:00 pm local time.¹⁹

4) Russian forces are making their greatest territorial gains advancing north from Crimea. Russian forces have reportedly penetrated to a depth of at least 60 km and captured Kherson city, securing access to the Crimean Canal.²⁰ President Zelensky identified the attack from Crimea as the “most problematic situation.”²¹

- Elements of the 7th VDV (airborne) Division and unknown elements of the 58th Combined Arms Army are conducting the breakout operation. Russian forces are advancing both east (toward Melitopol) and west (toward Odesa).²²
- **ISW cannot confirm reports of any Russian amphibious landings in Odesa or Mariupol. Initial reports of such landings appear to be incorrect. Russia may wait until forces from Crimea have secured crossings over the Dnipro River before attempting to seize Odesa by air and sea.**

Immediate items to watch

- Russian Naval Infantry have not yet conducted amphibious landings but retain the capability to do so against the Odesa or the Azov Sea coasts or both.
- Russian Airborne forces may successfully secure the Hostomel military airport overnight, enabling Russia to airlift additional forces onto Kyiv’s western flank.
- Russia will likely conduct additional rounds of air and missile strikes in the coming 24 hours. Russian operations will likely steadily wear down Ukrainian air capabilities and eventually take the Ukrainian air force out of the fight.
- Russian forces have not yet attempted the decapitation strike several analysts and outlets have forecasted and may attempt to do so in the near future.
- It remains unclear how much of its total strength the Russian military has committed at this time.
- Russia has sufficient conventional military power to reinforce each of its current axes of advance and overpower the conventional Ukrainian forces defending them.

¹ <http://kremlin dot ru/events/president/news/67843>.

² <https://tass dot ru/politika/13822327>.

³ https://twitter.com/Global_Mil_Info/status/1496929026790899715?s=20&t=ID-NG5BnNN4J3I3DRJr4qg.

⁴ https://twitter.com/beverstine/status/1496869155420934153?s=20&t=IIXtoiyFgu5kUQz2eL_Vog

⁵ https://twitter.com/beverstine/status/1496869156720988168?s=20&t=IIXtoiyFgu5kUQz2eL_Vog

⁶ <https://twitter.com/NotWoofers/status/1496909242946965505?s=20&t=eewCamzBVVJ2fhTWMhhqVQ>.

⁷ https://twitter.com/Global_Mil_Info/status/1496929026790899715?s=20&t=ID-NG5BnNN4J3I3DRJr4qg.

⁸ https://www.zsu.gov dot ua/new_page/6217ae6b4909af0013065b7e;

<https://twitter.com/ArmedForcesUkr/status/1496871477026508804>;

<https://twitter.com/myroslavapetsa/status/1496903032327577601>;

<https://twitter.com/KofmanMichael/status/1496850009261813761>.

⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/CinCAFU/posts/254902746805218>; https://www.zsu.gov dot ua/new_page/6217ae6b4909af0013065b7e; <https://twitter.com/Danspiun/status/1496788882121240580>.

¹⁰ <https://twitter.com/ChristopherJM/status/1496900307288272899?s=20&t=eewCamzBVVJ2fhTWMhhqVQ>;

<https://twitter.com/KyivIndependent/status/1496901424449564680?s=20&t=L7Q2SGkmKmEE7ZJoX8huRA>.

¹¹ <https://president.gov dot by/ru/events/operativnoe-soveshchanie-s-voennymi>; <https://president.gov dot by/ru/events/telefonnyy-razgovor-s-prezidentom-rossii-vladimirom-putinym-1645679905>.

¹² <https://twitter.com/Danspiun/status/1496799918685519872>;

https://twitter.com/konrad_muzyka/status/1496808152527998978;

<https://www.facebook.com/CinCAFU/posts/254659590162867>;
https://twitter.com/CITeam_ru/status/1496808466371031042.
¹³ https://www.zsu.gov.ua/new_page/62179d0a4909af001304b32b
¹⁴ <https://twitter.com/Danspiun/status/1496799918685519872?s=20&t=WCoPkWWUFgGI56RglmAmyg>;
<https://www.facebook.com/CinCAFU/posts/254601806835312>.
¹⁵ https://www.zsu.gov.ua/new_page/6217ae6b4909af0013065b7e; https://www.zsu.gov.ua/new_page/6217855f4909af00130263cb.
¹⁶ <https://tvzvezda.ru/news/20222242010-sqIXk.html>.
¹⁷ <https://twitter.com/DefenceHQ/status/1496916804777787395?s=20&t=eewCamzBVVJ2fhTWMhhqVQ>.
¹⁸ https://www.zsu.gov.ua/new_page/6217ae6b4909af0013065b7e.
¹⁹ https://twitter.com/NotWoofers/status/1496887039014359047?s=20&t=IIXtoiyFgu5kUQz2eL_Vog
²⁰ <https://tvzvezda.ru/news/20222242010-sqIXk.html>;
https://twitter.com/konrad_muzyka/status/1496798777251926017.
²¹ https://twitter.com/maxseddon/status/1496884512244080640?s=20&t=IIXtoiyFgu5kUQz2eL_Vog
²² <https://twitter.com/KofmanMichael/status/1496733967323701254>;
<https://twitter.com/KofmanMichael/status/1496672802786746369>.