

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 21, 2023

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December 21, 2023, 7:15pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Click [here](#) to see ISW's 3D control of terrain topographic map of Ukraine. Use of a computer (not a mobile device) is strongly recommended for using this data-heavy tool.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 1:15pm ET on December 21. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the December 22 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The failure of Russian operations in Ukraine to achieve Russian President Vladimir Putin's maximalist objectives thus far is not a permanent condition, and only continued Western support for Ukraine can ensure that Putin's maximalist objectives remain unattainable. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated on December 20 that Putin has already failed to achieve his principal objective of "erasing [Ukraine] from the map and subsuming it into Russia."^[1] The Russian military has failed to force Ukraine to capitulate to Putin's maximalist objectives to replace the Ukrainian government with one acceptable to the Kremlin under veiled calls for "denazification," to destroy Ukraine's ability to resist any future Kremlin demands under calls for "demilitarization," and to prohibit Ukraine's right to choose its own diplomatic and military partnerships under calls for Ukrainian "neutrality."^[2] The Kremlin has also pursued additional undefined objectives for territorial conquest in Ukraine that have resulted in the illegal annexation of parts of Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhia, and Kherson oblasts and the occupation of small parts of Kharkiv and Mykolaiv oblasts, none of which represents either a departure from or the full accomplishment of Putin's initial "principal" objectives.^[3]

Putin has recently re-emphasized that his maximalist objectives in Ukraine remain unchanged, and Putin and senior Kremlin officials have increasingly expressed expansionist rhetoric indicating that these objectives do not preclude further Russian territorial conquests in Ukraine.^[4] Russian victory on Putin's terms does not necessarily portend the full-scale annexation of Ukraine into Russia and the erasure of a Ukrainian state altogether, to be sure, but they certainly entail at least the destruction of the current Ukrainian state and its recreation into an entirely Russian-dominated entity, for which the full-scale Russian military occupation of Ukraine will very likely be required.

ISW has assessed that the collapse of Western aid would likely lead to the eventual collapse of Ukraine's ability to hold off the Russian military and that the current positional war in Ukraine is not a stable stalemate because the current instable balance could readily be tipped in either direction by decisions made in the West.^[5] Continued Western security assistance that empowers Ukrainian forces to repel ongoing and future Russian offensive efforts and to liberate more Ukrainian territory is the only course of action at this time that can make the Russian failure to achieve Putin's maximalist objectives in Ukraine permanent.

US National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby stated that the White House assesses that Russian forces will be able to conduct offensive operations more easily when winter weather conditions become more conducive for mechanized maneuver warfare (likely in January–February 2024) — an assessment that is consistent with ISW's observations and assessments about the tempo of fighting in Ukraine during the winter. Kirby stated on December 20 that Russian forces intend to continue offensive operations, particularly around Avdiivka, and that the White House believes that it will be easier for Russian forces to conduct offensive operations when cold temperatures freeze the ground in the end of January and into February 2024.^[6] The fall mud season has hampered ground maneuver for both Ukrainian and Russian forces since 2014, but periods of prolonged freezing temperatures that typically start in late December freeze the ground and allow armored vehicles to move more easily than in muddy autumn and spring months.^[7] Weather is variable, however, and the upcoming period of hard freeze may come later in the year — or not at all if it is a mild winter — and presents a shorter window of favorable terrain for mechanized maneuver warfare. Russian forces have launched localized offensive operations throughout eastern Ukraine during a period of the most challenging weather of the fall–winter season in an effort to seize and retain the initiative rather than waiting for the hard freeze.^[8] Russian forces will likely try to sustain or intensify these offensive operations regardless of weather conditions this winter, as Russian forces did in winter 2022–2023.

Russian forces conducted a series of drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of December 20 to 21. The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Russian forces launched 35 Shahed-131/-136 drones from Primorsko-Akhtarsk in

Krasnodar Krai, occupied Cape Chuada in Crimea, and Kursk Oblast targeting Kyiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Vinnytsia, Cherkasy, Kherson, Zaporizhia, Mykolaiv, Khmelnytskyi, Sumy, Poltava, Chernihiv, and Kirovohrad oblasts.[9] The Ukrainian Air Force stated that Ukrainian forces shot down 34 Shaheds.[10]

Japan is reportedly preparing to revise its defense equipment export policy to backfill US stockpiles of Patriot missiles and UK artillery ammunition stores.[11] The Japanese government will reportedly meet on December 22 to finalize plans to allow for Japan's first export of lethal military equipment since 1967, when Japan established its Three Principles on Arms Exports, which prohibits the export of defense equipment to countries party to a conflict.[12] The revision will reportedly allow Japanese manufacturers to export completed defense equipment to the country in which the manufacturing license for that weapon originated.[13] Japanese Patriot missiles exported to the US will help fill US stockpiles, allowing the US to send more Patriot missiles to Ukraine. The *Financial Times* (FT) reported on December 21 that Japan is also considering exporting 155mm artillery shells to the United Kingdom (UK) to indirectly aid Ukraine in a similar way.[14]

The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) objected to military exercises in Japan involving the Japanese military, possibly in an effort to deter or respond to the Japanese government's decision to change its defense equipment export regulations. The Russian MFA claimed on December 21 that it sent an official objection to the Japanese Embassy in Russia on December 18 about regular military exercises among Japan, the US, and Australia on Hokkaido Island, claiming that the exercises posed a potential security threat to Russia.[15] Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov claimed on December 18 that Russia has "closed" all territorial disputes with Japan.[16] Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshimasa Hayashi disputed Lavrov's claim on December 19, stating that Russia did not want to continue negotiations on its territorial disputes with Japan after Tokyo imposed sanctions on Russia.[17] The Yama Sakura 85 trilateral exercises with the US, Japan, and Australia occurred from December 4 to 12, and US Indo-Pacific Command stated that the exercises symbolize the participants' commitment to the shared vision of a free, open, and prosperous Indo-Pacific, suggesting that the exercises are highly likely aimed at China, not Russia.[18] Russia's insistence that exercises on Japanese territory involving the Japanese military threaten Russia, despite Russia's alleged and self-proclaimed lack of territorial disputes with Japan, suggests that Russia wants to be seen as a Pacific power as part of the Kremlin's pursuit of an equal defense partnership with China.[19] The MFA may also have announced its complaints about the exercises' alleged threat to Russian security in an effort to deter Japan from making the reported possible changes to Japanese defense equipment export regulation policies.

The Uzbek Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) summoned Russian Ambassador to Uzbekistan Oleg Malginov after Russian ultranationalist and former Russian State Duma Deputy Zakhar Prilepin suggested that Russia should annex part of Uzbekistan, likely demonstrating post-Soviet countries' concerns about intensifying Russian imperial designs against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine. Prilepin stated that Russia should annex territory from which labor migrants in Russia originate, "for example, [territory] in Uzbekistan," at a press conference on December 20.[20] Prilepin is a prominent Russian ultranationalist voice who has affiliations with Rosgvardia and led a Russian battalion to fight in Donbas prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[21] Prilepin also survived an alleged Ukrainian assassination attempt in May 2023.[22] The Uzbek MFA reported that it had summoned Malginov to a meeting regarding Prilepin's statements and noted that "such rash statements" do not correspond with Uzbekistan and Russia's strategic partnership.[23] Russian MFA Spokesperson Maria Zakharova stated that Prilepin's statements do not "even remotely" reflect the official Russian government position on its relations with Uzbekistan and claimed that Russia's use of foreign labor migrants benefits both Russia and migrants' countries of origin.[24] Prilepin's statements likely reflect increasing public discontent in the Russian ultranationalist community about the role of migrants in Russian society.[25] The Uzbek MFA's response likely indicates that the Uzbek government views Prilepin's statements as sufficiently threatening to warrant a demand for an official Russian response. Central Asian governments have notably previously responded to statements from Russian officials questioning Central Asian states' territorial integrity and sovereignty by summoning their respective Russian ambassador.[26]

An investigation by Africa-based French-language outlet *Jeune Afrique* highlights the Kremlin's ongoing efforts to maintain and expand Russia's influence in the Central African Republic (CAR) and the Sahel while subsuming Wagner Group operations on the continent.[27] *Jeune Afrique* noted that since the Wagner Group's aborted June 24 armed rebellion and Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's subsequent death in August, operatives of the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces (GRU) have increasingly accompanied Wagner fighters in Mali as part of the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD)'s efforts to take control of former Wagner elements in Mali and other African states. *Jeune Afrique* cited an anonymous source reportedly close to French intelligence who claimed that Russian President Vladimir Putin is trying to consolidate control over former Wagner operatives in Mali so as to not "create another Frankenstein's monster" by overly empowering Wagner's independent operations in Africa. The *Jeune Afrique* investigation also highlighted efforts by the Russian MoD and GRU to assure the leadership of the CAR, where Wagner has historically been particularly active, that the CAR–Russian partnership will continue to operate fruitfully even following Prigozhin's death. *Jeune Afrique* additionally emphasized that the Burkinabe junta is trying to expand relations

with Russia for "military and security purposes" and that Russia is generally interested in working with the newly formed Alliance of Sahel States, comprised of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. CTP previously assessed that Russia is exploiting shifting power dynamics in Africa by strengthening partnerships with Sahelian juntas.[28] These partnerships allow Russia to evade Western sanctions levied against Russia due to the war in Ukraine and to spoil Western strategic influence on the continent.[29]

Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to formalize avenues for the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia under the guise of humanitarian services. Putin signed a decree on December 21 "on measures of social support for families with children affected by the aggression of Ukraine," which expands Russian control over occupied areas of Ukraine through financial coercion and includes a key provision that further formalizes an existing set of deportation schemes under medical pretenses.[30] The decree holds that the guardians of children who were under the age of 18 after February 2022 and suffered an injury while living in occupied Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhia, and Kherson oblasts are eligible to receive a one-time 100,000-ruble (\$1,076) compensation payment. The financial support provision codifies social control of occupied areas of Ukraine in a threefold way—first, by generating financial dependence on Russian authorities for social support payments; second, by collecting personal information on Ukrainian children and their guardians; and finally, by framing the Ukrainian military as dangerous to Ukrainian civilians in a way that propagates a negative view of the Ukrainian state. The decree also stipulates that occupation authorities must refer children to "sanatorium-resorts" or otherwise provide children with the "opportunity to travel to a place of rest or treatment" in the case of certain "medical indicators." This provision of the decree essentially will allow Russian occupation officials to tabulate personal information on children who have been registered as injured and send those children to Russia for treatment and rehabilitation purposes. ISW has frequently reported that Russian occupation officials use the promise of various medical and psychiatric programs in Russia to justify the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia.[31] The deportation of children on humanitarian and medical grounds is likely still a violation of international law because Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine created the conditions that endangered Ukrainian children in the first place.[32]

Kremlin-appointed Commissioner on Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova continues to implicate herself in the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia against the backdrop of the death of a 12-year-old Ukrainian girl in Russian custody. Russian opposition outlet *Meduza* reported on December 21 that a 12-year-old girl from Sorokyne (Krasnodon), occupied Luhansk Oblast, died from an excessively high fever on a train that was traveling from the "Olympic" Children's camp in Tyumen Oblast back to occupied Luhansk Oblast.[33] Russian media reported that following the girl's death, Russian Railways stopped the train in Penza, Saratov Oblast, and the Russian Health Ministry reported that it hospitalized 86 children from the train with symptoms of Acute Respiratory Viral Infection (AFVI).[34] Lvova-Belova responded to the situation and emphasized that she is monitoring what is happening with the remaining children who are hospitalized in Saratov Oblast, acknowledging that the children from Sorokyne were on the train for "vacation" in Tyumen Oblast.[35]

Russian occupation officials have long used children's vacation and rest/rehabilitation camps to facilitate the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia, while also using the camps to instill pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian sentiment in Ukrainian children, as ISW has frequently assessed.[36] It is notable that Lvova-Belova acknowledged that the Tyumen Oblast "Olympic" children's camp is part of the network of children's camps that figure into Russia's wider scheme of deporting Ukrainian children, which implicates her further in the overall deportation process. The Ukrainian girl's death also further demonstrates an apparent violation of Russia's obligations under international law. Under international law, Russia, as the occupying power, must ensure the health and safety of "protected persons" that are part of a removed or deported population, including children.[37] The apparent rapid spread of AFVI and dangerous flu-like symptoms to up to 86 Ukrainian children, toward whom Russia has international legal obligations, represents a further case of Russia's contempt for international standards.

The US Treasury Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) announced a series of sanctions against oil traders with opaque ownership and a Russian-owned ship manager that have been helping Russia skirt the G7 price cap on Russian oil and petroleum products. OFAC announced on December 20 that it sanctioned a Russian-owned ship manager who managed a vessel that OFAC previously identified as having transported Russian crude oil above the \$60 price cap under the cover of a US-based service provider.[38] OFAC also sanctioned two ship managers based in Hong Kong and one based in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which have reportedly made over 150 port calls to transport Russian oil above the price cap since summer 2023.[39] OFAC stated that it will strengthen review processes for service providers to better enforce the price cap in accordance with recent G7 commitments.[40] *Bloomberg* reported on December 20 that roughly five million barrels of Russian crude oil that were scheduled to reach Indian refiners have not done so in the past four weeks for unspecified reasons.[41] *Bloomberg* reported that five ships that intended to deliver the Russian crude oil are idling several kilometers from their destination and belong to Russian state tanker company Sovcomflot PJSC, which owns six of the eight tankers that OFAC has previously sanctioned.[42] Another Sovcomflot-owned tanker reportedly loaded oil cargo on December 19 and still set course for delivery to Indian refiners scheduled for January 5, however.[43]

Key Takeaways:

- The failure of Russian operations in Ukraine to achieve Russian President Vladimir Putin's maximalist objectives thus far is not a permanent condition, and only continued Western support for Ukraine can ensure that Putin's maximalist objectives remain unattainable.
- ISW has assessed that the collapse of Western aid would likely lead to the eventual collapse of Ukraine's ability to hold off the Russian military and that the current positional war in Ukraine is not a stable stalemate because the current instable balance could readily be tipped in either direction by decisions made in the West.
- US National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby stated that the White House assesses that Russian forces will be able to conduct offensive operations more easily when winter weather conditions become more conducive for mechanized maneuver warfare (likely in January–February 2024) – an assessment that is consistent with ISW's observations and assessments about the tempo of fighting in Ukraine during the winter.
- Russian forces conducted a series of drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of December 20 to 21.
- Japan is reportedly preparing to revise its defense equipment export policy to backfill US stockpiles of Patriot missiles and UK artillery ammunition stores.
- The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) objected to military exercises in Japan involving the Japanese military, possibly in an effort to deter or respond to the Japanese government's decision to change its defense equipment export regulations.
- The Uzbek Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) summoned Russian Ambassador to Uzbekistan Oleg Malginov after Russian ultranationalist and former Russian State Duma Deputy Zakhar Prilepin suggested that Russia should annex part of Uzbekistan, likely demonstrating post-Soviet countries' concerns about intensifying Russian imperial designs against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine.
- An investigation by Africa-based French-language outlet *Jeune Afrique* highlights the Kremlin's ongoing efforts to maintain and expand Russia's influence in the Central African Republic (CAR) and the Sahel while subsuming Wagner Group operations on the continent.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to formalize avenues for the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia under the guise of humanitarian services.
- Kremlin-appointed Commissioner on Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova continues to implicate herself in the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia against the backdrop of the death of a 12-year-old Ukrainian girl in Russian custody.
- The US Treasury Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) announced a series of sanctions against oil traders with opaque ownership and a Russian-owned ship manager that have been helping Russia skirt the G7 price cap on Russian oil and petroleum products.
- Russian forces made confirmed advances near Kreminna, Bakhmut, and Avdiivka and continued positional meeting engagements along the entire frontline.
- The Russian government continues efforts to digitalize and organize conscription through a unified digital register as part of ongoing attempts to improve the effectiveness of issuing military summonses and prevent draft dodging.
- Russian authorities are using Rosgvardia to perform law enforcement functions and strengthen occupational control in occupied Ukraine.

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of December 21, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



* Assessed Russian advances are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks against but do not control.

We do not report in detail on Russian war crimes because these activities are well-covered in Western media and do not directly affect the military operations we are assessing and forecasting. We will continue to evaluate and report on the effects of these criminal activities on the Ukrainian military and the Ukrainian population and specifically on combat in Ukrainian urban areas. We utterly condemn Russian violations of the laws of armed conflict and the Geneva Conventions and crimes against humanity even though we do not describe them in these reports.

- Russian Main Effort – Eastern Ukraine (comprised of two subordinate main efforts)
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1 – Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and encircle northern Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2 – Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Supporting Effort – Southern Axis
- Russian Mobilization and Force Generation Efforts
- Russian Technological Adaptations
- Activities in Russian-occupied areas
- Russian Information Operations and Narratives

NOTE: ISW has restructured the operational kinetic axis sections of the daily Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment to more accurately reflect the positional nature of fighting on the battlefield. Operational kinetic axis paragraphs will be shorter and more synthetic to convey the same assessment in fewer words and not to overwhelm the reader with long lists of settlement names. The level of detail included in the report has not decreased. The report’s endnotes still contain the same level of sourcing, and ISW encourages readers interested in tactical granular details to read them. ISW will explicitly flag major operational inflections in axis text as usual, so the lack of named settlements should not be taken as an indication of gains or losses of territory or changes in the frontline. ISW will lead operational axes with confirmed map changes to accord with the daily map products produced by the Geospatial Intelligence Team, supplemented by Ukrainian and Russian claims, and will also list order of battle (ORBAT) details in each axis section when available.

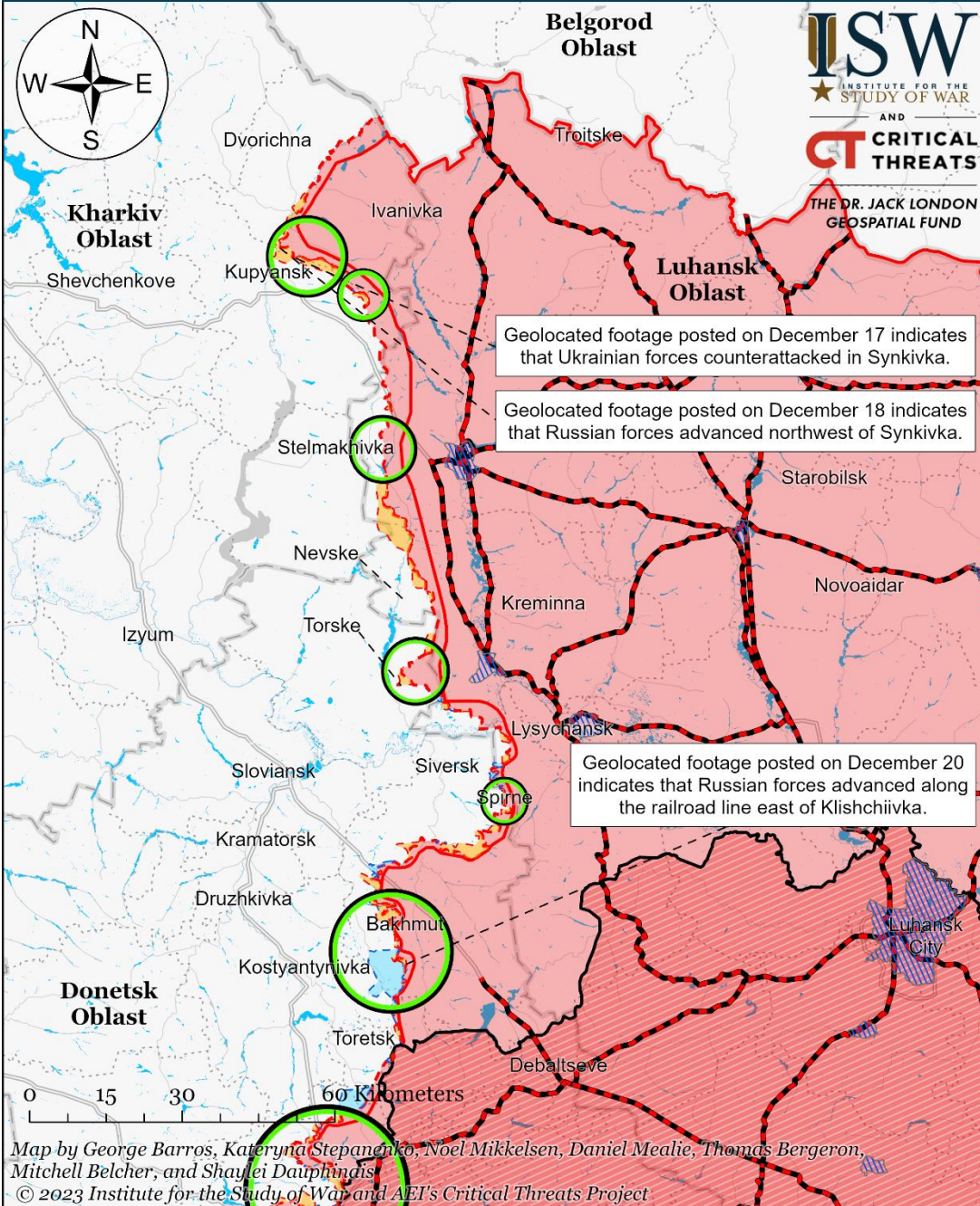
Russian Main Effort – Eastern Ukraine

Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1 – Luhansk Oblast (Russian objective: Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and northern Donetsk Oblast)

Russian and Ukrainian forces continued positional engagements northeast of Kupyansk on December 21. Russian and Ukrainian sources stated that fighting continued in the Kupyansk direction near Synkivka, Petropavlivka, Ivanivka, and Stelmakhivka.[44] Ukrainian Ground Forces Command Spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel Volodymyr Fityo reported that Ukrainian forces destroyed nine Russian tanks and 19 armored vehicles in the Kupyansk and Lyman directions on December 20.[45]

Russian forces recently made a marginal confirmed advance northwest of Kreminna. Geolocated footage published on December 21 indicates that Russia forces recently made a marginal gain east of Yampolivka.[46] Ukrainian and Russian sources stated that positional engagements occurred west of Kreminna near Terny and south of Kreminna near Dibrova and Bilohorivka.[47]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Luhansk Oblast as of December 21, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



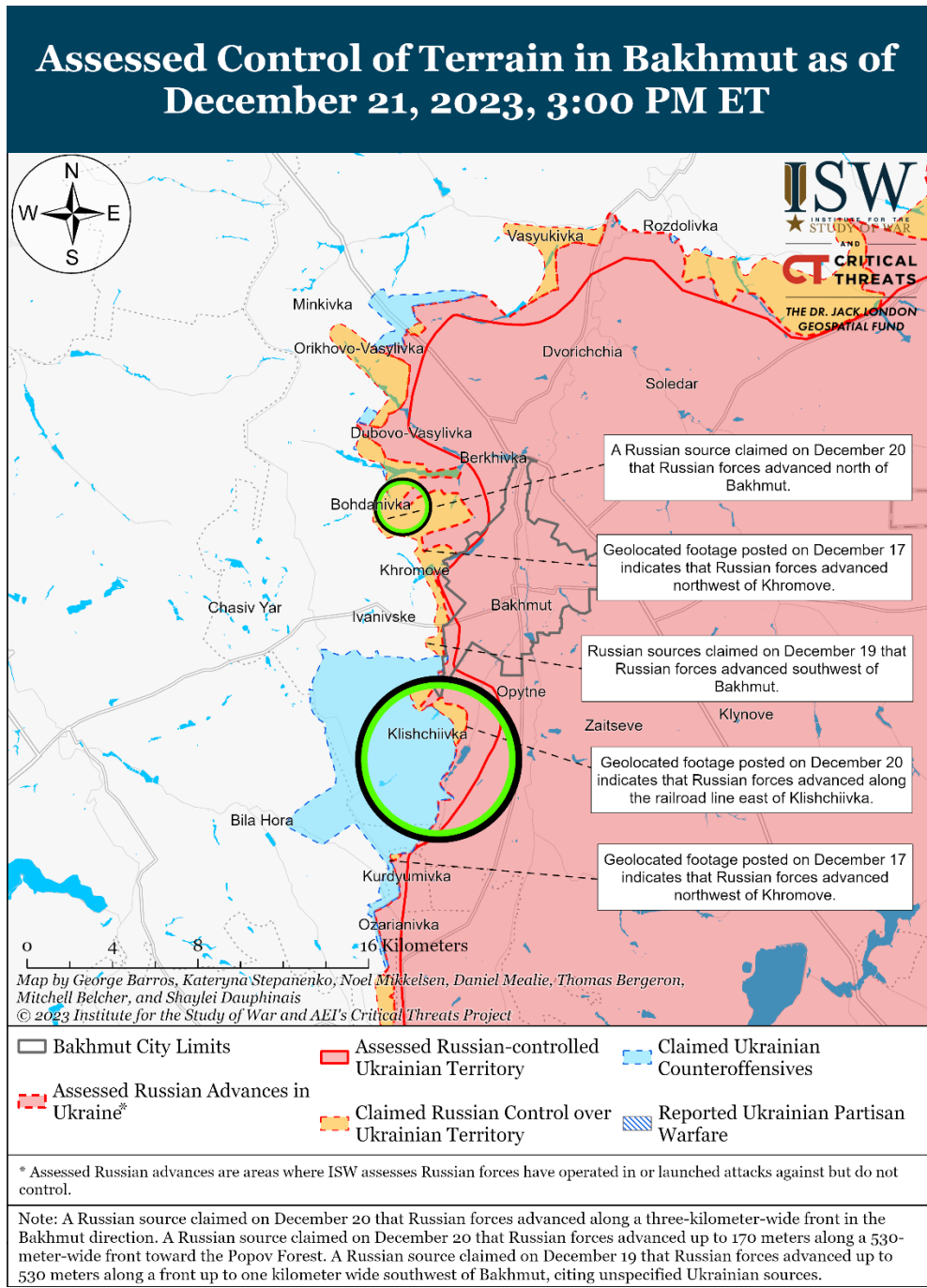
- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- - - Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*
- ▢ Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives
- Russian Ground Lines of Communication
- ▢ Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- ▨ Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare
- ▢ Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24
- ▢ Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory

* Assessed Russian advances are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks against but do not control.

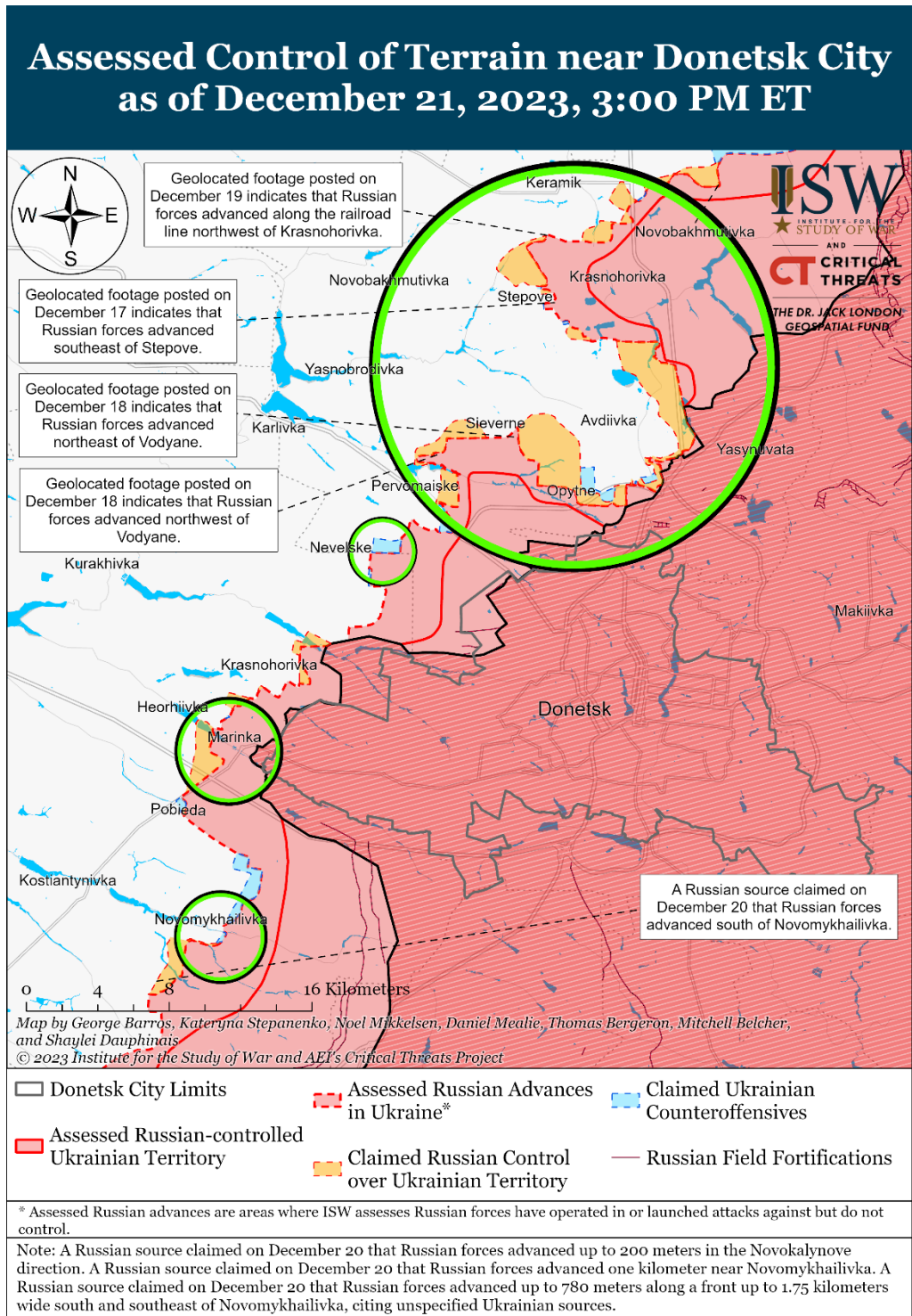
Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2 – Donetsk Oblast (Russian objective: Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, the claimed territory of Russia’s proxies in Donbas)

Russian forces reportedly advanced northwest of Bakhmut near Spirne, but there are no confirmed changes to the frontline in this area.[48]

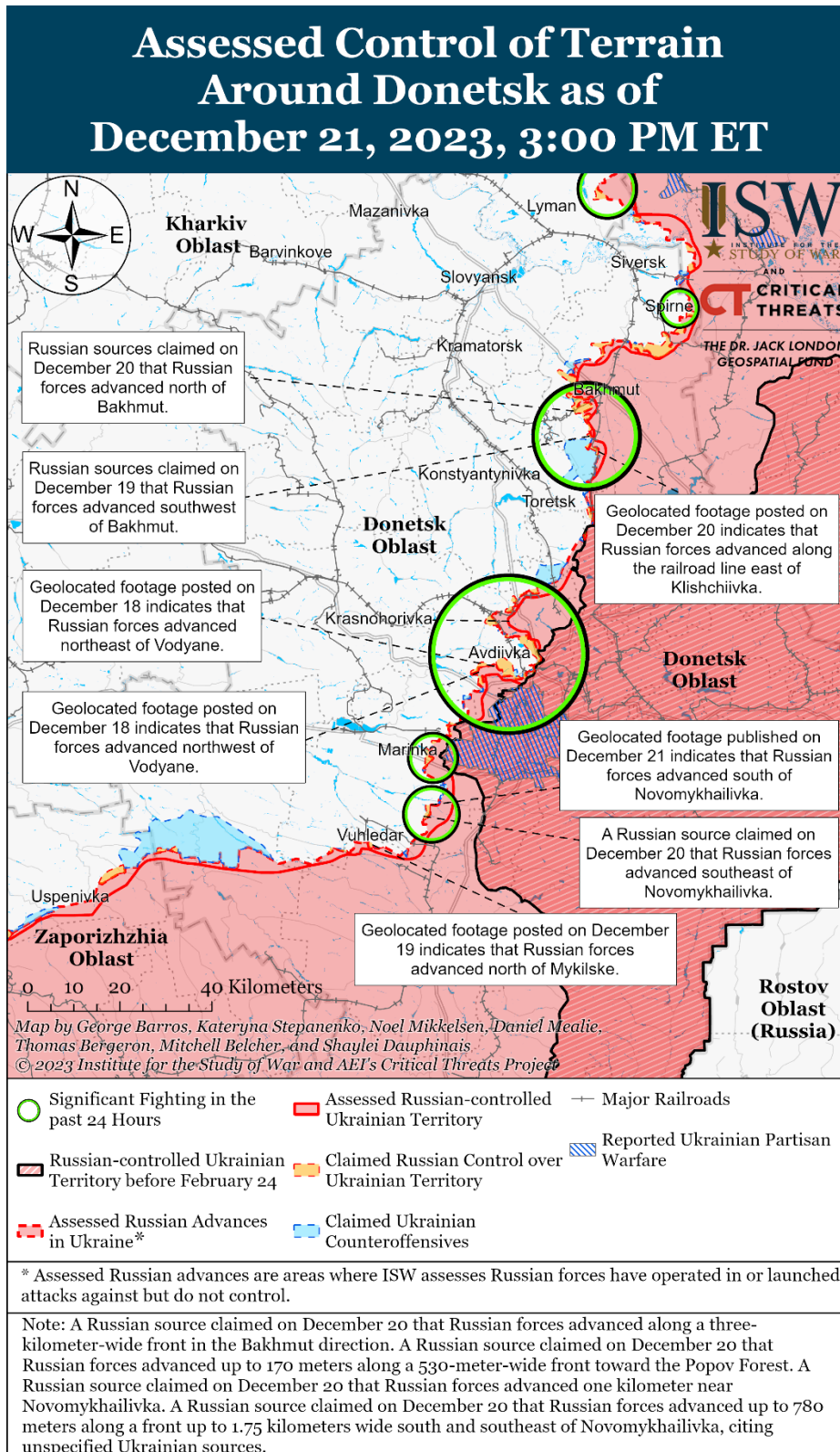
Russian forces recently made a confirmed advance near Bakhmut. Geolocated footage published on December 20 indicates that Russian forces advanced along a section of the railway line east of Klishchiivka (southwest of Bakhmut).[49] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces pushed Ukrainian forces out of positions near Bohdanivka (northwest of Bakhmut) and west of Klishchiivka.[50] Ukrainian and Russian forces stated that fighting occurred on Bakhmut’s northwestern and southwestern flanks near Andriivka, Klishchiivka, Khromove, Ivanivske, and Bohdanivka, and northwest of Horlivka (south of Bakhmut).[51] Elements of the Russian 98th Airborne (VDV) Division reportedly continue to operate northwest of Bakhmut, and elements of the Russian 58th Spetsnaz Battalion (1st Donetsk People’s Republic [DNR] Army Corps) reportedly continue to operate near Bakhmut.[52]



Russian forces recently made a confirmed advance near Avdiivka. Geolocated footage published on December 19 indicates that Russian forces advanced northwest of Krasnohorivka on Avdiivka's northwestern flank.[53] A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces withdrew from positions in the Avdiivka Coke Plant in northwestern Avdiivka.[54] Russian sources also claimed that Russian forces advanced near Stepove and advanced up to 200 meters towards Novokalynove (northwest of Avdiivka).[55] ISW has not observed visual confirmation of these Russian claims, however. Ukrainian and Russian sources stated that Russian forces attacked northwest, east, southeast, and southwest of Avdiivka near Sieverne, Pervomaiske, Vodyane, and Nevelske and near the Avdiivka Coke Plant.[56] Elements of the Russian 9th Motorized Rifle Brigade (1st DNR Army Corps) are reportedly operating in the Avdiivka direction.[57] The spokesperson for a Ukrainian brigade operating in the Avdiivka direction stated that there is room for maneuver near Avdiivka, unlike in the Zaporizhia direction where there are only narrow cleared corridors through minefields, and that Russian forces are continuing waves of both infantry and mechanized assaults.[58]

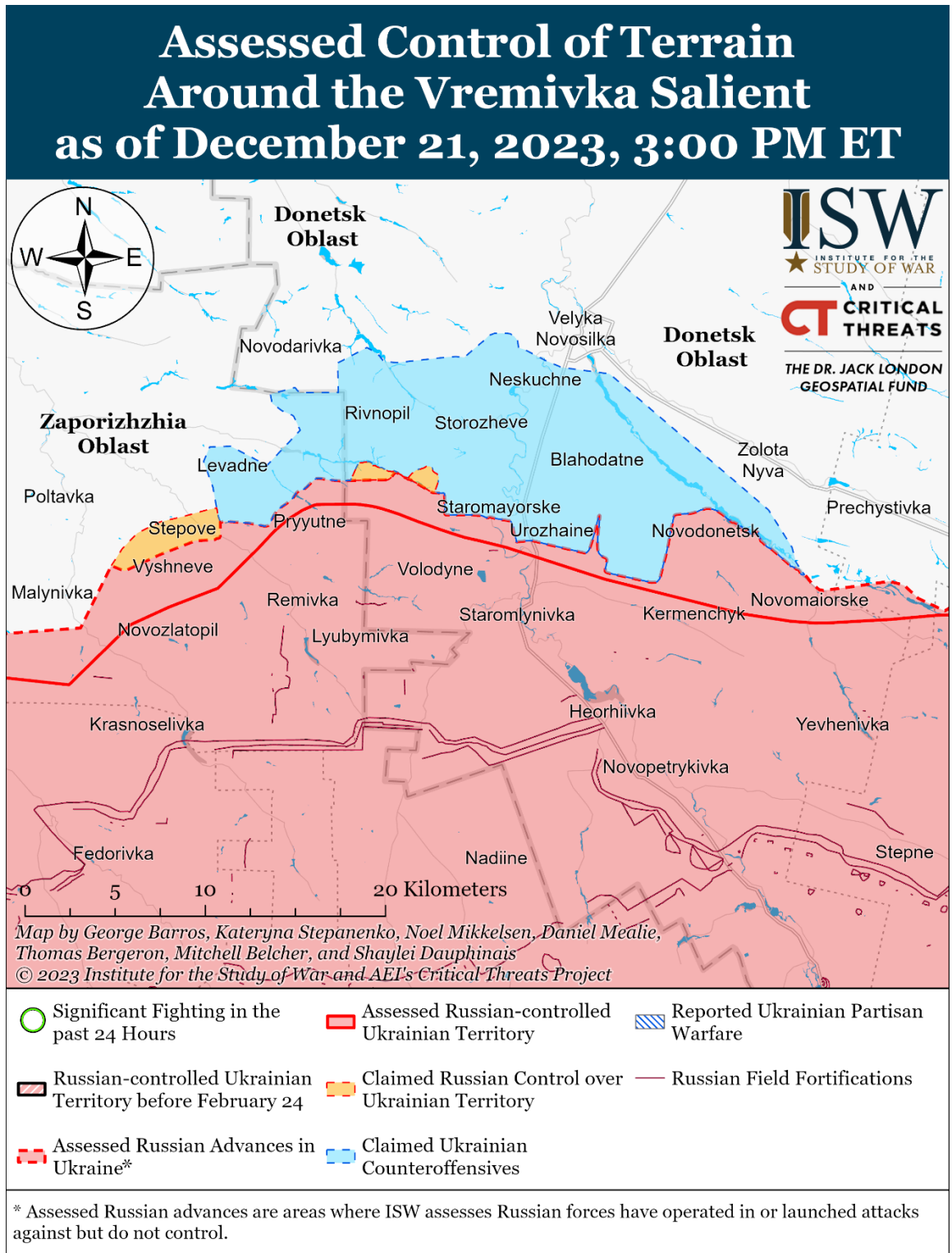


Russian forces made a confirmed advance southwest of Donetsk City, and positional engagements continued west and southwest of Donetsk City. Geolocated footage published on December 21 indicates that Russian forces advanced south of Novomykhailivka (southwest of Donetsk City).[59] A Russian milblogger claimed that elements of the Russian “Kaskad” Operational Tactical Combat Formation of the DNR Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) advanced near Novomykhailivka.[60] Ukrainian and Russian sources stated that fighting occurred near Marinka, Novomykhailivka, and Pobieda [61]

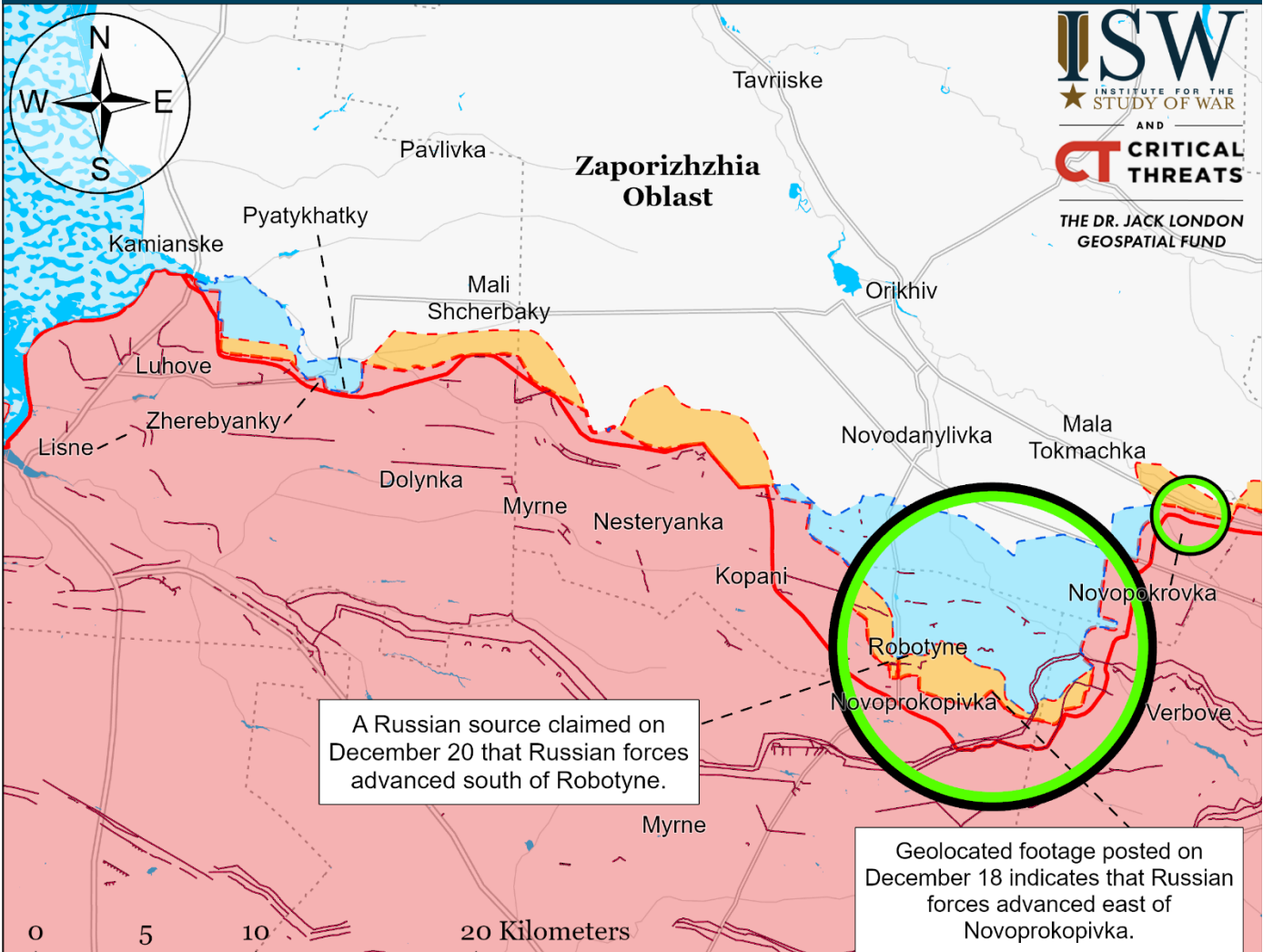


Russian Supporting Effort – Southern Axis (Russian objective: Maintain frontline positions and secure rear areas against Ukrainian strikes)

Russian forces reportedly advanced in western Zaporizhzhia Oblast on December 20 and participated in positional combat engagements with Ukrainian forces on December 21. A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces advanced west and south of Robotyne on December 20, although ISW has not seen visual confirmation of this claim.[62] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces made unspecified gains along the Novoprokopivka-Verbove line on December 20 and 21.[63] Russian and Ukrainian sources reported on December 21 that positional fighting occurred south of Robotyne, west of Verbove, and near Novofedorivka and Novoprokopivka.[64]



Assessed Control of Terrain Around Pyatykhatky and Robotyne as of December 21, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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A Russian source claimed on December 20 that Russian forces advanced south of Robotyne.

Geolocated footage posted on December 18 indicates that Russian forces advanced east of Novopropkopiivka.

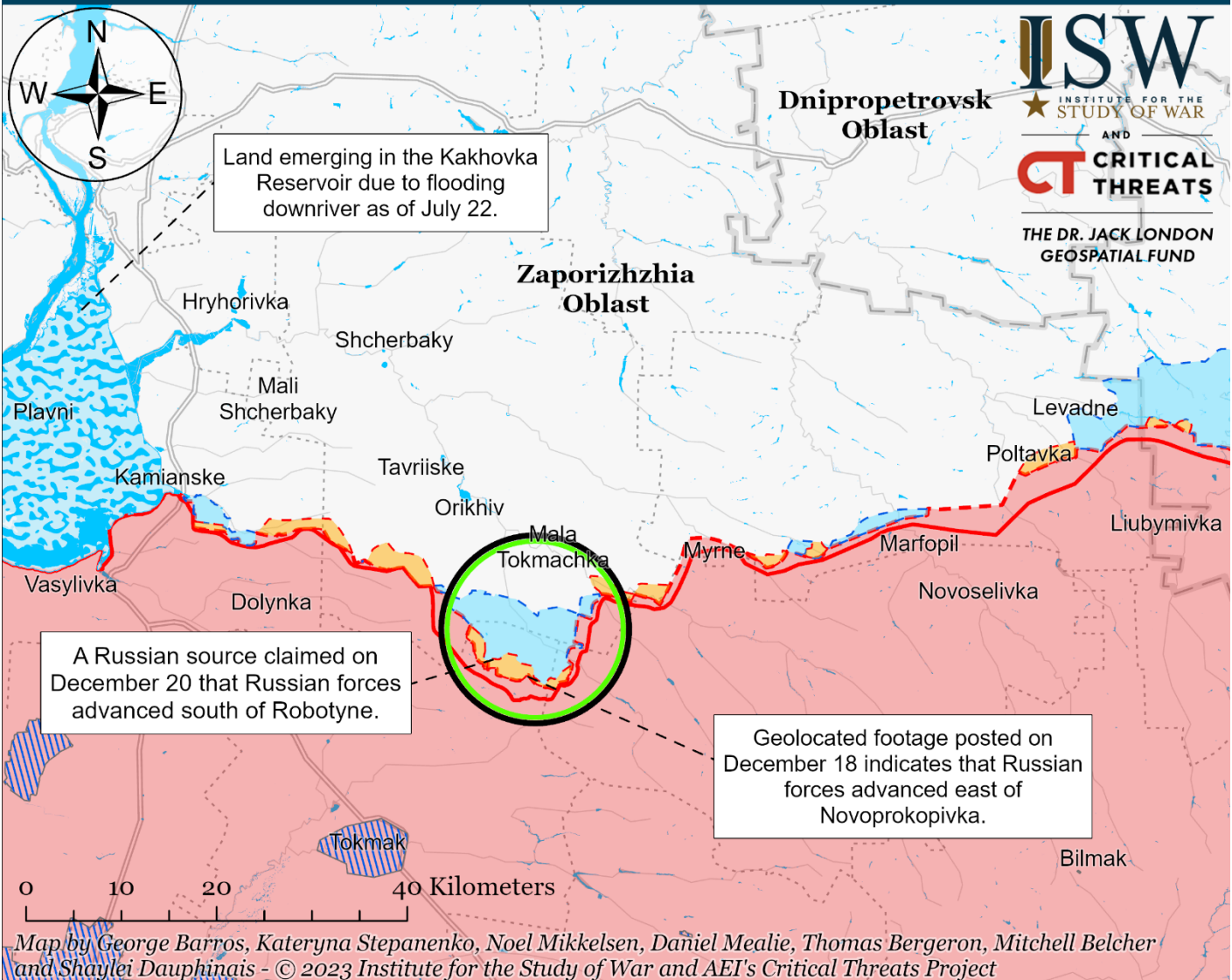
Map by George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Noel Mikkelsen, Daniel Mealie, Thomas Bergeron, Mitchell Belcher, and Shaylei Dauphinais - © 2023 Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project

- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare
- Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
- Emerging land in the Kakhovka Reservoir
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*
- Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives
- Russian Field Fortifications

* Assessed Russian advances are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks against but do not control.

Note: A Russian source claimed on December 19 that Russian forces advanced up to 1.5 kilometers near Robotyne and Novopropkopiivka. A Russian source claimed on December 19 that Russian forces advanced 700 meters between Robotyne and Verbove.

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Zaporizhia as of December 21, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare
- Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
- Emerging land in the Kakhovka Reservoir
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*
- Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives

* Assessed Russian advances are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks against but do not control.

Note: A Russian source claimed on December 19 that Russian forces advanced up to 1.5 kilometers near Robotyne and Novoprokopivka. A Russian source claimed on December 19 that Russian forces advanced 700 meters between Robotyne and Verbove.

Ukrainian forces maintain a presence on the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast as of December 21, but there have been no confirmed changes to the frontline in this area. Ukrainian military observers and Russian milbloggers claimed that positional fighting continued near and in Krynyky, with one milblogger claiming that Russian forces advanced towards the center of the settlement.[65] Ukrainian officials reported that Ukrainian forces repelled 30 Russian attempts to dislodge Ukrainian forces from positions on the east bank in the past day.[66] A Ukrainian military observer reported that elements of the Russian 47th Motorized Rifle Division (18th Combined Arms Army) and the Russian 328th and 337th Airborne (VDV) Regiments (both of the 104th VDV Division) participated in unsuccessful Russian assaults near Krynyky.[67] A Russian milblogger claimed that elements of the Convoy private military company (PMC) are also operating near Krynyky.[68]



Russian Mobilization and Force Generation Efforts (Russian objective: Expand combat power without conducting general mobilization)

The Russian government continues efforts to digitalize and organize conscription through a unified digital register as part of ongoing attempts to improve the effectiveness of issuing military summonses and prevent draft dodging. Russian President Vladimir Putin issued a set of orders on December 18 that instructed the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) to conduct the fall 2024 conscription cycle in October to December 2024 using the unified digital register.[69] Putin also ordered Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu to determine the Deputy Minister of Defense that will be responsible for implementing and developing the unified digital register.[70] Shoigu has yet to publicly identify who will be responsible for the effort. Putin instructed the Russian MoD and Ministry of Digital Development to ensure that citizens are registered for military service without needing to physically appear at military registration and enlistment offices.[71]

US Ambassador to NATO Julianne Smith stated on December 20 that North Korea continues to provide military equipment and ammunition to Russia. Smith reported that North Korea has transferred over 1,000 containers of military equipment and munitions to Russia via cargo ship.[72] Smith stated that North Korea is likely seeking advanced military technology from Russia such as fighter aircraft, surface-to-air missiles, armored vehicles, and ballistic missile production equipment.[73] Smith reported that deepening Russian-North Korean relations could extend the war in Ukraine and demonstrates the relevance of geopolitical dynamics in the Indo-Pacific to NATO.[74]

Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have reportedly increased their exports of raw materials used for manufacturing gunpowder to Russia. Russian opposition outlet *Vazhnye Istorii (iStories)*, Kazakh opposition outlet *Vlast*, and the Organized Crime and Corrupting Reporting Project published a joint investigation on December 21 that found that Kazakh and Uzbek exports of cotton cellulose, a key component in manufacturing gunpowder, to Russia have increased since 2022.[75] The investigation found that Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan together supplied almost \$4 million worth of cotton cellulose to Russia in 2021 and supplied almost \$10 million worth of cotton cellulose in 2022.[76] The report found that Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan together supplied Russia with a little over \$10 million worth of cotton cellulose to Russia from January to September 2023.[77]

Russian Technological Adaptations (Russian objective: Introduce technological innovations to optimize systems for use in Ukraine)

A Russian milblogger claimed on December 21 that Russian forces operating in an unspecified location, likely in Ukraine, received new 9K57-1 Uragan-1 multiple launch rocket system (MLRS) complexes on BAZ-69092 chassis.[78] The milblogger claimed that the 9K57-1 Uragan-1 MLRS complex is more maneuverable and can more accurately and quickly fire rockets than previous models.[79]

Activities in Russian-occupied areas (Russian objective: Consolidate administrative control of annexed areas; forcibly integrate Ukrainian citizens into Russian sociocultural, economic, military, and governance systems)

Russian authorities are using Rosgvardia to perform law enforcement functions and strengthen occupational control in occupied Ukraine. A video posted to Rosgvardia's official Telegram channel on December 21 shows Rosgvardia "mobile units" searching civilian cars and checking documents in an unspecified part of occupied Ukraine and reported that these Rosgvardia units are working "around the clock" to ensure law and order and enforce martial law in occupied Ukraine.[80] Rosgvardia claimed that these groups are meant to detect and detain "accomplices of the Armed Forces of Ukraine," and that Rosgvardia agents have detained several dozens of such "accomplices" in occupied Kherson and Zaporizhia oblasts over the last month.

Russian Information Operations and Narratives

Russian Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov briefed foreign military attaches on December 21 and reiterated a number of Kremlin narratives, including about the world's increasing multipolarity and the West's alleged role in increasing the potential for conflict in the Asia Pacific region and Europe and creating instability in Africa.[81] Gerasimov reiterated Kremlin narratives about the creation of the Leningrad Military District (LMD) and Moscow Military District (MMD) as justifiable responses to NATO expansion with Finland's accession and Sweden's planned accession, despite the fact that Finland and Sweden only applied to NATO shortly after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Gerasimov also claimed that Russia deployed forces to the Arctic not as a demonstration of military force but only to ensure Russian economic development in the region. Russia has been expanding its military presence in the Arctic since before its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in part to expand its defense posture and gain strategic advantage over the US and China.[82]

The Ukrainian Center for Countering Disinformation reported on December 21 that unspecified Russian actors plan to promote several information operations aimed at degrading Ukrainian morale through a network of fake Telegram channels disguised as official accounts of Ukrainian regional officials and military brigades.[83] The fake Telegram channels will reportedly promote narratives that Ukraine will lose the war and that the West no longer wants to aid Ukraine.[84] The fake Telegram channels will also reportedly promote desertion from the Ukrainian military, alleged division between Ukrainian political and military leadership, and allegations government corruption.[85]

Significant activity in Belarus (Russian efforts to increase its military presence in Belarus and further integrate Belarus into Russian-favorable frameworks and Wagner Group activity in Belarus)

Nothing significant to report.

Note: ISW does not receive any classified material from any source, uses only publicly available information, and draws extensively on Russian, Ukrainian, and Western reporting and social media as well as commercially available satellite imagery and other geospatial data as the basis for these reports. References to all sources used are provided in the endnotes of each update.

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