Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 19, 2023 Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Riley Bailey, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Frederick W. Kagan March 19, 5 pm ET

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

ISW is publishing an abbreviated campaign update today, March 19. This report discusses growing Russian concern about a prospective Ukrainian counteroffensive near Bakhmut or in southern Ukraine, and Russian efforts to prepare mitigations for these claimed efforts. The tempo of Russian offensive operations across the theater has slowed in recent weeks, suggesting that the Russian spring offensive in Donbas may be nearing culmination. Ukrainian officials have indicated that significant Russian losses near Vuhledar are severely inhibiting Russian forces' capacity to conduct further offensive operations in Donetsk Oblast. Russian President Vladimir Putin used his first visit to recently-occupied Ukraine to portray himself as an involved wartime leader amid exaggerated responses in the Russian nationalist information space over fears of a possible future Ukrainian counteroffensive in southern Ukraine.

Ukrainian forces likely conducted a localized counterattack southwest of Bakhmut amid growing Russian discussion about a potential Ukrainian counteroffensive in the Bakhmut area. Geolocated footage published on March 19 indicates that Ukrainian forces conducted a successful counterattack southwest of Ivanivske (6km west of Bakhmut) and pushed Russian forces further away from the To 504 highway in the area. Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty reported that Russian forces conducted 25 attacks in the Bakhmut area on March 19, but Russian forces likely only secured marginal gains.² Russian sources amplified footage on March 18 alleging to show a column of Ukrainian armored vehicles along the To504 southwest of Kostvantynivka (22km southwest of Bakhmut) and speculated that Ukrainian forces are preparing to launch counteroffensive operations southwest of Bakhmut.³ A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces are currently capable of intensifying counterattacks to stabilize the front line around Bakhmut.⁴ The growing Russian discussions about an imminent Ukrainian counteroffensive in the Bakhmut area suggest that Russian sources are increasingly uncertain about the Russian military's ability to maintain the initiative around Bakhmut.

Statements made by Ukrainian military officials on the pace and prospects of current Russian offensive operations may suggest that the overall Russian

spring offensive may be nearing culmination. Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty stated on March 19 that Russia was unable to gather sufficient forces for the anticipated major offensive in Donbas and noted that current Russian offensive actions cannot be called a "major strategic operation." 5 Cherevaty emphasized that Russian forces cannot even complete the tactical capture of Bakhmut, which supports ISW's assessment that the Wagner Group offensive near Bakhmut is likely nearing culmination.⁶ Russian forces are also notably struggling to secure operationally significant gains elsewhere along the frontline, particularly in the Avdiivka-Donetsk City and Vuhledar areas. Ukrainian Tavriisk Defense Forces spokesperson Colonel Oleksiy Dmytrashkivskyi noted on March 19 that Russian forces have been desperately attacking Avdiivka to restart offensive operations on Vuhledar. likely suggesting that continued Russian attacks in the Avdiivka area are meant partially to pull Ukrainian reserves away from western Donetsk Oblast to the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area.⁷ Dmytrashkivskyi stated that this renewed offensive focus on Avdiivka has recently led to major Russian losses around Avdiivka amounting to the equivalent of one company, on which ISW has previously reported.8

Ukrainian military officials additionally continue to indicate that massive Russian losses in the Vuhledar area are severeley degrading Russian offensive capacity in Donetsk Oblast. Dmytrashkivskyi stated that Russian forces have reinforced elements of the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade (currently heavily committed in the Vuhledar area) with reserve forces of the 98th Guards Airborne Division. The 155th Naval Infantry Brigade suffered catastrophic manpower and equipment losses during continued failed attacks on Vuhledar in November 2022 and February 2023, and Russian military leadership is likely heavily relying on reserve elements from the 98th Airborne Division to offset and compensate for the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade's losses. 10 The 98th Airborne Division is at least partially committed in the Kreminna area in Luhansk Oblast, and commitment of some of its constituent elements to the Vuhledar area is likely indicative of a level of desperation on the part of the Russian military command trying to reconstitute battered units and restart offensive operations in western Donetsk Oblast.¹¹ The Ukrainian General Staff similarly noted that the Russian military leadership is in a hurry to send reinforcements to Vuhledar and has been creating a "Shtorm" detachment within the 37th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade (36th Combined Arms Army, Eastern Military District), which will presumably deploy to the Vuhledar area on March 24.12 The ad hoc reconstitution of existing units for deployment to Vuhledar, as well as the apparent creation of sub-brigade echelon special formations, suggests that Russian combat capabilities in western Donetsk Oblast are greatly degraded.

The overall Russian spring offensive is thus likely approaching culmination. Ongoing Russian offensives along the Svatove-Kreminna line, around Bakhmut, and along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City and Vuhledar frontlines have failed to make more than incremental tactical gains in the first few months of 2023. Russia has committed the approximately 300,000 mobilized soldiers, called up by partial mobilization in September 2022 for the purpose of pursing exactly such a spring offensive, to these various offensive efforts. If 300,000 Russian soldiers have been unable to give Russia a decisive offensive edge in Ukraine it is highly unlikely that the commitment of additional forces in future mobilization waves will produce a dramatically different outcome this

year. Ukraine is therefore well positioned to regain the initiative and launch counteroffensives in critical sectors of the current frontline.

Russian President Vladimir Putin visited occupied Mariupol on March 19, likely to project the image of invulnerability and to continue efforts to portray himself as an involved wartime leader. Putin's visit to Mariupol included highly staged meetings with residents, a bizarre drive around the city with Putin supposedly driving the car himself, and a briefing from Russian Deputy Prime Minister Marat Khusnullin about restoration efforts in the city. 13 The Kremlin likely framed Putin's first visit to occupied Ukraine outside of Crimea as a spontaneous jaunt in order to portray Putin as an invincible wartime leader who can visit the zone of hostilities without concern.¹⁴ Putin likely chose to visit Mariupol because it is a city seized since May 2022 that is far away from the frontline, where Russian forces and occupation officials have already instituted stringent security measures. Putin also likely meant his visit to be a response to the International Criminal Court's arrest warrant for his involvement in war crimes connected to the deportation of Ukrainian children, at least 1,000 of whom Russian officials deported from Mariupol alone.¹⁵ Putin likely sought to portray his role in the deportation of children and the destruction of Mariupol as beyond the jurisdiction of the international community and himself as safe from the Ukrainian military 80km to the north. Putin also visited the headquarters of the Southern Military District in Rostovon-Don, Krasnodar Krai, and received briefings from Russian Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov and other Russian military commanders. 16 Russian media publicized Putin's meetings with Gerasimov and previous theater commander Army General Sergey Surovikin to portray Putin as highly involved in the management of the war in Ukraine as well as possibly to signal that Gerasimov currently has Putin's favor and that Survoikin, with his former Wagner Group connections, is now firmly subordinated under Gerasimov.17

Putin's Mariupol visit likely also aimed to assuage a longstanding and pervasive fear in the nationalist space about a prospective Ukrainian counteroffensive in southern Ukraine. Russian milbloggers that ISW tracks claimed en masse on March 19 that Ukrainian forces conducted a limited and localized counterattack near Novodanylivka, Zaporizhia Oblast, a disproportionate response to a frequent occurrence on other areas of the front.¹⁸ Many of these milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces continue to prepare for a future counteroffensive on the Zaporizhia Oblast front line, which milbloggers have been claiming with varying degrees of urgency since October 2022.19 Some milbloggers specifically linked Putin's March 19 visit to Mariupol to a Ukrainian counteroffensive.²⁰ One milblogger claimed that Putin's visit shows he is not a cowardly leader who is too afraid to leave Moscow Oblast out of fear of Ukrainian intelligence and claimed that the Russian "surrender of the south [of Ukraine] will be Putin's personal defeat."21 The milblogger added that Russian forces would have to work harder to defend against a Ukrainian counteroffensive. Former Russian officer and convicted war criminal Igor Girkin instead sarcastically claimed that Russian forces would "do everything to be defeated" in order to "blame everything on Putin," noting that Putin appointed and kept in power all the Russian military commanders responsible for Russia's performance in the war thus far.22 The Russian occupation administration declaring Melitopol rather than Zaporizhzhia City as the capital of occupied Zaporizhia

Oblast also likely reflects a desire to ease the palpable fear in the nationalist and domestic information space by portraying Russian occupation as long term and certain.²³

Former Russian officer, convicted war criminal, and prominent critical nationalist milblogger Igor Girkin indicated that there are likely deepening fractures within the top levels of Russian military leaderships. In a 12-point hyper-critical and sarcastic essay on how Russia can lose the war, Girkin remarked that never changing the leadership of the state, intelligence, and armed forces who "have already demonstrated blatant incompetence" is a sure-fire way to lose the war, and that Russia has already committed this cardinal sin.²⁴ Girkin called for leadership changes in the Russian Ministry of Defense and General Staff, the Foreign Intelligence Service, the 5th Service of the Federal Security Service (FSB), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, political advisors, and representatives of military industry. 25 Girkin's omission of the broader FSB organization (the FSB's 5th Service is a distinct but subordinate FSB entity concerned with intelligence targeting of Russia's foreign neighbors in the post-Soviet space) and FSB Director Alexander Bortnikov is noteworthy because it suggests that Girkin views the FSB as distinct from the failing Russian military, intelligence, and security apparatus.²⁶ The FSB's 5th Service was also responsible for laying the groundwork for the invasion by paying off Ukrainian collaborators.²⁷ Girkin's comments may indicate that there are considerable tensions between the Russian military command and the FSB, as well as within the FSB itself. Girkin's acerbic commentary continues to provide insight into growing inner circle frictions.

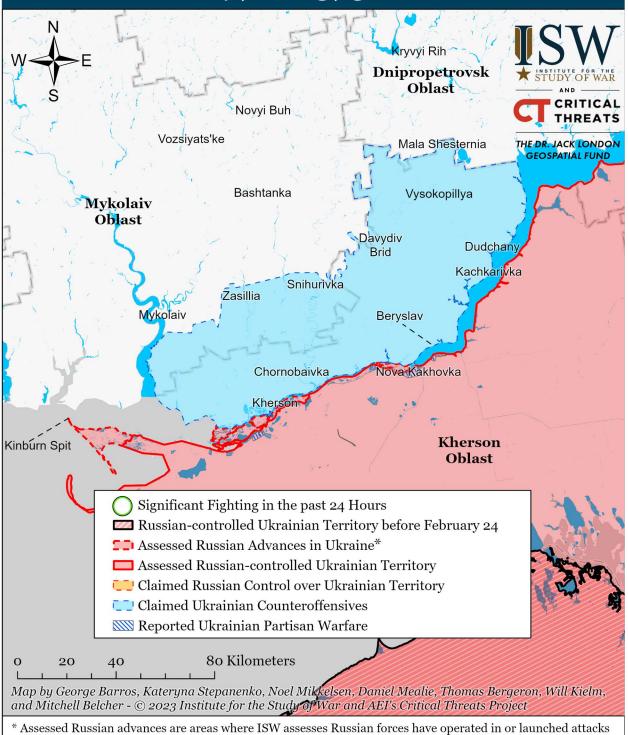
Key inflections in ongoing military operations on March 19:

- Russian forces continued limited offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line.²⁸
- Russian forces likely secured marginal gains near Bohdanivka (6km northwest of Bakhmut) amidst continued Russian offensive operations in and around Bakhmut.²⁹
- Russian forces continued offensive operations along the outskirts of Donetsk City and may have advanced towards Berdychi, about 10km northwest of Avdiivka.³⁰
- Russian forces continued erecting defensive fortifications throughout southern Ukraine. 31
- Unknown actors killed a Russian occupation Ministry of Internal Affairs Patrol Service platoon commander with a car bomb in occupied Kherson Oblast.³² Ukrainian media hypothesized that the attack may have been a partisan attack or a result of Russian infighting.³³
- Russian federal communication supervisor Roskomnadzor blocked a website that helped Russians escape mobilization in continued crackdowns against resistance to mobilization.³⁴

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of March 19, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



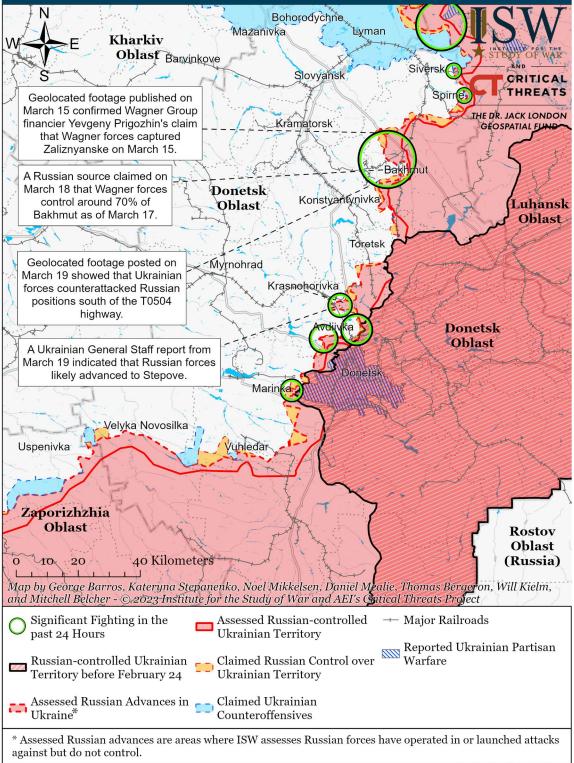
Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of March 19, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



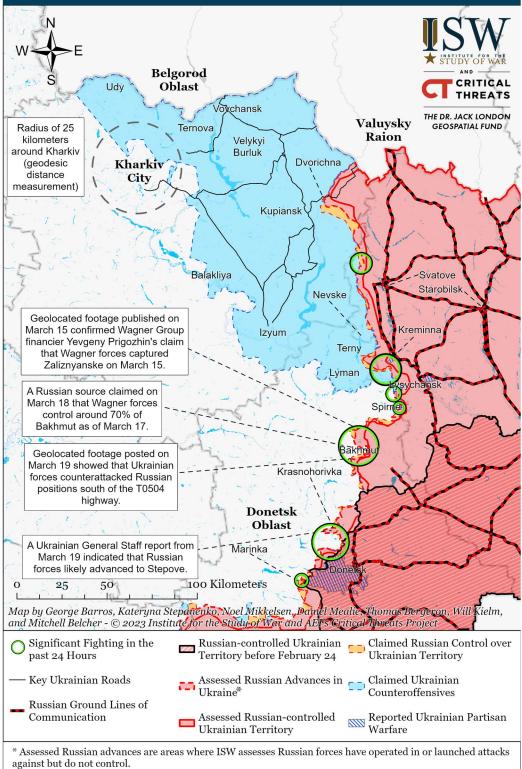
against but do not control.

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Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk as of March 19, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kharkiv as of March 19, 2023, 3:00 PM ET

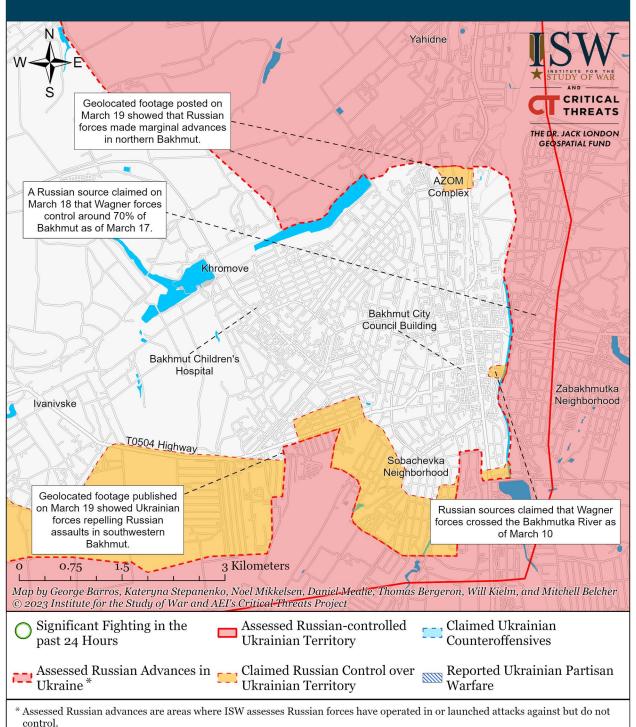


Assessed Control of Terrain Around Zaporizhia as of March 19, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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

Assessed Control of Terrain in Bakhmut as of March 19, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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<sup>1</sup> https://twitter.com/War_cube_/status/1637407855367143424?s=20;
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https://twitter.com/RemyLind21/status/1637413243189702656?s=20

https://twitter.com/SkalaBattalion/status/1637369803047305217

https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid02rSsCgHkAPqRixo3xVknEaeYEh4vRoFE2HwDTP5jrTCZM27hKTSxyrnDYVTVEa83xl

¹³ http://kremlin dot ru/events/president/news/70742; https://tass dot ru/politika/17309183;

https://tass.dot.ru/politika/17308961; https://t.me/boris_rozhin/80833;

 $https://t.me/boris_rozhin/80832\ ;\ https://t.me/boris_rozhin/80831\ ;\ https://t.me/boris_rozhin/80830\ ;$

https://t.me/boris_rozhin/80829; https://t.me/youlistenedmayak/25828;

https://t.me/youlistenedmayak/25829

https://t.me/dva_majors/11256; https://t.me/milchronicles/1682; https://t.me/TRO_DPR/11916;

https://t.me/readovkanews/55026; https://t.me/rybar/44807; https://t.me/RVvoenkor/40888;

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https://t.me/boris_rozhin/80856; https://t.me/vladlentatarsky/20061; https://t.me/vladlentatarsky/20071;

 $https://t.me/south0wind/2956\ ;\ https://t.me/vladlentatarsky/20062;\ ttps://t.me/z_arhiv/19739;$

https://t.me/milinfolive/98237

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ONovember%2028%20PDF.pdf; https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-

² https://suspilne dot media/418320-sankcii-proti-rosijskogo-vpk-obstril-kramatorska-389-den-vijni-onlajn/; https://twitter.com/blinzka/status/1637391127299891203;

³ https://t.me/voenkorKotenok/46194; https://t.me/readovkanews/54999

⁴ https://t.me/boris_rozhin/80787; https://t.me/voenkorKotenok/46195

⁵ https://suspilne dot media/418320-sankcii-proti-rosijskogo-vpk-obstril-kramatorska-389-den-vijni-onlajn/

⁶ https://suspilne dot media/418320-sankcii-proti-rosijskogo-vpk-obstril-kramatorska-389-den-vijni-onlajn/; https://isw.pub/UkrWar031523

⁷ https://armyinform dot com.ua/2023/03/19/pid-avdiyivkoyu-j-maryinkoyu-vorog-vysnazhenyj-ta-zaznaye-serjoznyh-vtrat-oleksij-dmytrashkivskyj/

⁸ https://armyinform dot com.ua/2023/03/19/pid-avdiyivkoyu-j-maryinkoyu-vorog-vysnazhenyj-ta-zaznaye-serjoznyh-vtrat-oleksij-dmytrashkivskyj/; https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-4-2023

⁹ https://armyinform dot com.ua/2023/03/19/pid-avdiyivkoyu-j-maryinkoyu-vorog-vysnazhenyj-ta-zaznaye-serjoznyh-vtrat-oleksij-dmytrashkivskyj/

¹⁰ https://isw.pub/UkrWar021023; https://isw.pub/UkrWar021323; https://isw.pub/UkrWar03012023

 $^{^{11}\} https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-february-19-2023$

¹⁴ https://t.me/youlistenedmayak/25828; https://t.me/youlistenedmayak/25829; https://tass.dot.ru/politika/17309183; https://tass.dot.ru/politika/17308961

¹⁵ https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-august-23

¹⁶ http://kremlin dot ru/events/president/news/70742

¹⁷ https://t.me/boris_rozhin/80840

¹⁸ https://t.me/vrogov/8223; https://t.me/vrogov/8221; https://t.me/rybar/44805;

¹⁹ https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-november-16; https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-february-11-2023; https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-september-28;

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²⁰ https://t.me/donrf22/17515; https://t.me/donrf22/17517; https://t.me/donrf22/17537;

https://t.me/donrf22/17518; https://t.me/NeoficialniyBeZsonoV/23381; https://t.me/strelkovii/4251; https://t.me/strelkovii/4252

²¹ https://t.me/donrf22/17515; https://t.me/donrf22/17517; https://t.me/donrf22/17537;

https://t.me/donrf22/17518; https://t.me/NeoficialniyBeZsonoV/23381

²² https://t.me/strelkovii/4251; https://t.me/strelkovii/4252

²³ https://ria dot ru/20230303/melitopol-1855757173.html

²⁴ https://t.me/strelkovii/4229; https://t.me/strelkovii/4230; https://t.me/strelkovii/4231

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²⁶ https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/ukraine-through-russias-eyes

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9O3NESBCvt6SQ.MEUCIQDe0KNTA67HVys_w4qkGAOJevgTxx5JO6jPY3AH9kbmCQIgZ8AALXCra4jNVCGo555lqLA3N 3Irn_ox_XY3Kjxo7-c&sharetype=gift&token=226dca22-fcea-4689-a900-240d03134f0e

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³³ https://focus dot ua/uk/voennye-novosti/555840-telo-razorvalo-popolam-pod-hersonom-likvidirovali-kollaboranta-moskalenko-smi-video

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