

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment

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Russian forces made small territorial gains in Luhansk Oblast on March 14 but did not conduct any major attacks toward Kyiv or in northeastern Ukraine. Russian forces continue to assemble reinforcements and attempt to improve logistical support in both the Kyiv and southern operational directions. Ongoing Russian efforts to replace combat losses with both Russian replacements and non-Russian sources, including Syrian fighters and the Wagner Group, are unlikely to enable Russia to resume major offensive operations within the coming week.

Key Takeaways

- **Russian forces conducted several limited attacks northwest of Kyiv on March 14, unsuccessfully attempting to bridge the Irpin River.**
- **Russian forces did not conduct offensive operations east of Kyiv and continued to prioritize improving logistics and reinforcing combat units.**
- **The continued ability of Ukrainian forces to carry out successful local counterattacks around Kharkiv indicates that Russian forces are unlikely to successfully bypass Kharkiv from the southeast to advance toward Dnipro and Zaporizhia in the near term.**
- **Russian and proxy forces continue to achieve slow but steady territorial gains in Donetsk Oblast after initial failures in the first week of the Russian invasion.**
- **Ukrainian forces halted resumed Russian attacks from Kherson toward Mykolayiv and Kryvyi Rih on March 14.**
- **Russia will likely deploy small units of Syrian fighters to Ukraine within the week and is confirmed to have deployed private military company (PMC) forces.**
- **Russian and Belarusian forces increased their activity near the Ukrainian border in the last 24 hours in a likely effort to pin down Ukrainian forces but likely do not have the capability to open a new axis of advance into western Ukraine.**
- **Russia and China deny that Russia seeks military aid from China and claimed that Russia does not need additional military support to complete its objectives in Ukraine.**

Russia continues to face difficulties replacing combat losses and increasingly seeks to leverage irregular forces including Russian PMCs and Syrian fighters. The Ukrainian General Staff claimed that Russian servicemen are increasingly refusing to travel to Ukraine despite promises of veteran status and higher salaries.¹ The Ukrainian General Staff reported on March 14 that Russia has recruited over a thousand Syrian fighters in “recent days” and that approximately 400 Syrian fighters have arrived in Russia.² Russia reportedly established training camps near Rostov (in Russia, directly east of Donbas) and Gomel (in Belarus, north of Kyiv). Senior Lieutenant Sergey Zavadsky of the Russian PMC Wagner Group was confirmed killed in Ukraine on March 13, the first verified Russian PMC casualty since the start of the invasion on February 24.³

Russian and Belarusian forces increased their activity near the Ukrainian border in the last 24 hours in a likely effort to pin down Ukrainian forces but likely do not have the capability to open a new axis of advance into western Ukraine. The Ukrainian General Staff reported Russian unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) are increasingly conducting reconnaissance of

settlements near the Ukrainian-Belarusian border in western Ukraine.⁴ The General Staff additionally stated that Belarusian forces “strengthened the protection” of the Belarusian-Ukrainian border.⁵ It is unclear if the Ukrainian General Staff has observed additional Belarusian forces deploying to the Ukrainian border or if troops already in place are increasing their readiness. ISW cannot independently confirm any additional Belarusian redeployments in the last 48 hours. Social media users observed Russian forces, including Rosgvardia units, deploying to southern Belarus on March 13-14.⁶ These forces will likely reinforce existing Russian operations toward Kyiv. Russian and Belarusian forces likely seek to pin Ukrainian forces on the Belarusian border with the threat of new offensive operations, preventing those forces from reinforcing the defense of Kyiv. However, Russian and Belarusian forces remain unlikely to have the capability or intent to open a new axis of advance into western Ukraine at this time.

Russian and Chinese officials both denied US intelligence reports that Russia sought military aid from China. Both claimed that Russia does not need additional military support. Russian and Chinese officials and state media denied US media reports on March 13 that Russia requested military aid from China, calling these reports disinformation.⁷ Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov pushed back on the reports and denied that Russia would *need* any external aid, claiming that “Russia has an independent potential to continue the operation” and that Russian operations “will be completed on time and in full.”⁸ Chinese state media similarly stated that Russia does not need Chinese help in its “limited-scale” war in Ukraine but emphasized that the United States cannot obligate China to promise not to export arms to Russia.⁹ Russia and China likely have discussed possible Chinese military aid to Russia, but both seek to frame Russia’s invasion of Ukraine as a limited operation and to avoid acknowledging growing Russian supply issues.

Ukrainian military intelligence reported on March 14 that Russian forces are seizing Ukrainian farming machinery for engineering work, constructing fortifications, and as ad hoc armored vehicles and are forcing Ukrainian civilians to help them.¹⁰ Independent Ukrainian human rights organizations additionally report Russian forces are abducting activists, volunteers, and journalists in several occupied cities, including Kherson, Berdyansk, and Melitopol.¹¹

Russian forces are engaged in four primary efforts at this time:

- Main effort—Kyiv (comprised of three subordinate supporting efforts);
- Supporting effort 1—Kharkiv;
 - Supporting effort 1a—Luhansk Oblast;
- Supporting effort 2—Mariupol and Donetsk Oblast; and
- Supporting effort 3—Kherson and advances westward.

Main effort—Kyiv axis: Russian operations on the Kyiv axis are aimed at encircling the city from the northwest, west, and east.

Russian forces conducted several limited attacks northwest of Kyiv on March 14, unsuccessfully attempting to bridge the Irpin River. Russian forces did not conduct offensive operations east of Kyiv and continued to prioritize improving logistics and reinforcing combat units. Russian forces may not be able to concentrate the combat power necessary to resume major offensive operations toward Kyiv within the week, despite several operational pauses to reconstitute forces.

Subordinate main effort along the west bank of the Dnipro

Russian forces launched several unsuccessful assaults against Irpin and Bucha on March 13-14, attempting to cross the Irpin River.¹² Russian VDV (Airborne) forces supported by engineers unsuccessfully attempted to establish a pontoon bridge over the Irpin river.¹³ The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces primarily continued to restore combat capability, regroup their troops, and improve logistics and have not resumed large-scale offensive operations, despite the limited attacks in Irpin and Bucha.¹⁴ Russian forces have not conducted any major attacks on northwestern Kyiv since March 9.

Putin-appointed strongman leader of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov claimed on Telegram to have traveled to the northwestern Kyiv suburb of Hostomel to meet with Chechen forces on March 13.¹⁵ ISW cannot verify Kadyrov's video and claimed travel to Ukraine, though Chechen forces are confirmed to be participating in Russian efforts to encircle Kyiv from the west. Kadyrov likely seeks to increase the morale of Chechen troops that have reportedly suffered heavy losses in Ukraine, regardless of the veracity of his video.

Subordinate supporting effort—Chernihiv and Sumy axis

Russian forces did not conduct any offensive operations toward the eastern Kyiv suburb of Brovary or against Chernihiv in the last 24 hours.¹⁶ The Ukrainian General Staff reported Russian forces northeast of Kyiv “moved to the defense” in the last 24 hours and focused on replenishing supplies and conducting reconnaissance.¹⁷ Russian forces likely intend to reinforce their exposed line of communication in northeastern Ukraine against counterattacks prior to resuming offensive operations toward northeastern Kyiv.

Supporting Effort #1—Kharkiv:

Ukrainian forces repelled Russian forces around Izyum (southeast of Kharkiv) late on March 13, repelling Russian attacks near several villages, including Topolske, Shpakivka, and Donetsk.¹⁸ The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted several attacks to reclaim the territory throughout March 14, with fighting ongoing as of 6:00 pm local time on March 14.¹⁹ Russian forces did not conduct any offensive operations in or around Kharkiv in the past 24 hours and continued to shell the city.²⁰ The continued ability of Ukrainian forces to carry out successful local counterattacks indicates that Russian forces are unlikely to successfully bypass Kharkiv from the southeast to advance toward Dnipro and Zaporizhia in the near term.

Supporting Effort #1a—Luhansk Oblast:

Russian forces conducted several unsuccessful attacks on Severodonetsk late on March 13.²¹ Ukrainian authorities reported Russian forces shelled the town of Popasnaya with prohibited incendiary rockets on March 12-13.²²

Supporting Effort #2—Mariupol and Donetsk Oblast:

Russian forces conducted several assaults on eastern Mariupol on March 13-14.²³ Russian artillery continued to shell the city and its northern outskirts, and Russian aircraft are increasingly conducting close-air-support missions near the city.²⁴ Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov claimed 5,000 Chechen soldiers are fighting near Mariupol on March 14. Social media users on the ground confirmed the presence of Chechen fighters.²⁵

Russian and proxy forces continue to achieve slow but steady territorial gains in Donetsk Oblast after initial failures in the first week of the Russian invasion. The Russian Ministry of Defense claimed Russian forces have advanced 15-17km from the pre-invasion line of contact in Donetsk Oblast as of

March 14.²⁶ The Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) additionally announced a list of 90 settlements it claims to have captured as of March 14.²⁷ Russian and proxy forces likely seek to advance toward Zaporizhya and mitigate the possibility of any Ukrainian attempts to relieve Mariupol or attempts by its defenders to break out.

Supporting Effort #3—Kherson and west:

The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces halted resumed Russian attacks from Kherson toward Mykolayiv and Kryvyi Rih on March 14.²⁸ Russian forces have not abandoned their effort to encircle Mykolayiv.²⁹ The Ukrainian Border Guard found three dead Russian soldiers in Mykolayiv while patrolling the area of a possible Russian airborne landing on March 14 and stated they believe these three servicemen were left behind by their own detachment.³⁰ Russian forces may intend to advance toward Kryvyi Rih to encircle Zaporizhya but are unlikely to have the forces necessary to do so while Russian forces in the south remain committed to the encirclement of Mariupol.

Immediate items to watch

- The Kremlin likely seeks to pressure Belarus to join the war in Ukraine and will deploy Syrian fighters to Ukraine in the near future.
- Ukrainian counterattacks and operations by Territorial Defense Forces in northeastern Ukraine threaten Russia's exposed line of communicating, requiring Russia to redeploy forces away from the offensive towards eastern Kyiv.
- Russian forces are undertaking another operational pause to prepare for renewed efforts to encircle Kyiv from east and west and/or to seize the city center itself following their failures of March 8-9.
- Russian troops may drive on Zaporizhya City itself within the next 48-72 hours, likely attempting to block it on both banks of the Dnipro River and set conditions for subsequent operations after Russian forces take Mariupol, which they are currently besieging.

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/271814665131619>.

² <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/272216235091462>.

³ https://twitter.com/666_mancer/status/1503060311825436677.

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/272216235091462>.

⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/272374668408952>;

<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/272216235091462>.

⁶ <https://twitter.com/pmakela1/status/1503097088741154829>; <https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1503315199419367429>;

⁷ https://www.dotfmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/202203/t20220314_10651590.html;

<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202203/1254841.shtml>; <https://tass.ru/politika/14061833>; <https://www.interfax-russia.ru/rossiya-i-mir/peskov-rf-ne-prosila-u-knr-voennoy-pomoshchi-dlya-prodolzheniya-specialnoy-voennoy-operacii-na-ukraine>.

⁸ <https://tass.ru/politika/14061833>; <https://www.interfax-russia.ru/rossiya-i-mir/peskov-rf-ne-prosila-u-knr-voennoy-pomoshchi-dlya-prodolzheniya-specialnoy-voennoy-operacii-na-ukraine>.

⁹ <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202203/1254841.shtml>.

¹⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/DefenceIntelligenceofUkraine/posts/270576275253800>.

¹¹ <https://twitter.com/avalaina/status/1503379318562504708>.

¹² <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/272216235091462>.

¹³ <https://twitter.com/EuromaidanPR/status/1503033140331352069>; <https://twitter.com/IntelCrab/status/1503032699635785741>.

¹⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/271814665131619>.

¹⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/03/14/world/ukraine-russia-war/chechen-strongman-claims-he-has-joined-russian-troops-outside-kyiv>; <https://www.npr.org/live-updates/ukraine-russia-civilian-deaths-talks-pregnant-woman-03-14-2022#chechen-president-ramzan-kadyrov-says-he-is-in-ukraine>.

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