

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 3

Mason Clark, George Barros, and Kateryna Stepanenko
March 3, 4:00 pm EST

The Russian military has continued its unsuccessful attempts to encircle Kyiv and capture Kharkiv. The Russians continued to attack piecemeal, committing a few battalion tactical groups at a time rather than concentrating overwhelming force to achieve decisive effects. Russian commanders appear to prefer opening up new lines of advance for regiment-sized operations but have been unable to achieve meaningful synergies between efforts along different axes toward the same objectives. They have also continued conducting operations in southern Ukraine along three diverging axes rather than concentrating on one or attempting mutually supporting efforts. These failures of basic operational art—long a strong suit of the Soviet military and heavily studied at Russian military academies—remain inexplicable as does the Russian military’s failure to gain air superiority or at least to ground the Ukrainian Air Force. The Russian conventional military continues to underperform badly, although it may still wear down and defeat the conventional Ukrainian military by sheer force of numbers and brutality. Initial indications that Russia is mobilizing reinforcements from as far away as the Pacific Ocean are concerning in this respect. Those indications also suggest, however, that the Russian General Staff has concluded that the forces it initially concentrated for the invasion of Ukraine will be insufficient to achieve Moscow’s military objectives.

Operations to envelop Kyiv remain Russia’s main effort. Russian troops are also continuing three supporting efforts, one to seize Kharkiv, one to take Mariupol and secure the “land bridge” connecting Rostov-on-Don to Crimea, and one to secure Kherson and set conditions for a drive west toward Mykolayiv and Odesa.

The Russian attack on Kyiv likely consists of a main effort aimed at enveloping and ultimately encircling the city from the west and a supporting effort along the axes from Chernihiv and Sumy to encircle it from the east.

Russian forces in the south resumed offensive operations toward Mykolayiv on March 3 after securing Kherson on March 2, but do not appear to pose an imminent danger to Odesa. Russian forces likely seek to force Mariupol to capitulate by destroying critical civilian infrastructure and killing civilians to create a humanitarian catastrophe—an approach Russian forces have repeatedly taken in Syria.¹

Key Takeaways

- **Russian forces opened a new line of advance from Belarus south toward Zhytomyr Oblast, west of Kyiv, as Russian forces attempting to encircle Kyiv from the northwest were driven further west by determined Ukrainian resistance and counterattacks. Russian forces will struggle to complete an encirclement of Kyiv at all if they have to advance along ring roads as far from the city center as those they are now using.**
- **Russian forces on the east bank of the Dnipro River remain unable to secure the important town of Chernihiv or to break through Ukrainian defenses in the northeastern outskirts of Kyiv.**
- **Russian ground forces have remained relatively static near Kharkiv as Russian artillery, air, and missile bombardments wreak devastation in the city. The Ukrainian military indicates that a regiment-sized Russian formation will try to envelop or bypass Kharkiv in the coming days. Similar Russian attempts at such**

operations elsewhere in Ukraine render the success of such an undertaking at that scale unlikely.

- **Russian forces are attempting once again to open a line of advance through northern Luhansk Oblast, possibly to assist efforts at Kharkiv or, as the Ukrainian General Staff assesses, to drive on Dnipro and Zaporzhya. The Russian forces currently reported as engaging in that drive are far too small to attack either city successfully and are probably insufficient to sustain a long drive on their own.**
- **Russian troops have surrounded Mariupol and are attacking it brutally to compel its capitulation or destroy it.**
- **The mayor of Kherson conditionally surrendered to the Russians, allowing Russian forces to renew their advance on Mykolayiv, which they have done. The Ukrainian military nevertheless reportedly defeated an attempted Russian air assault to take an airfield near Mykolayiv.**

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of March 3, 2022, 3:00 PM EST



Map by George Barros, Kathryn Tyson, and Thomas Bergeron
 © 2022 Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project

Confirmed Russian units in the past 24 hours:

Elements of the 2nd Combined Arms Army (CAA) attacked Peremoha in the direction of Brovary, Kyiv Oblast.

Elements of the 200th Motorized Rifle Brigade of the 14th Army Corps (Northern Military District) attacked in the direction of Brovary, Kyiv Oblast.

Elements of the 2nd Motorized Rifle Division of the 1st Tank Army attacked Chernihiv Oblast.

Elements of the Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) attacked Kamenka-Dneprovskaya, Zaporizhzhia Oblast.

Elements of the 1st Tank Army, 6th CAA, and 20th CAA attacked Okhtyrka, Bogodukhiv, Chuguiv, and Shevchenkove, Kharkiv Oblast.

Ukrainian forces killed Russian Major General Andrey Sukhovetskiy, a Spetsnaz commander and the deputy commander of the 41st Combined Arms Army.

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

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 2—Mariupol; and
- Supporting effort 3—Kherson and advances westward.

Main effort—Kyiv axis: Russian operations on the Kyiv axis consist of a main effort aimed at enveloping and ultimately encircling the city from the west and supporting efforts along the Chernihiv and Sumy axes to encircle it from the northeast and east.

The Ukrainian General Staff published an assessment of Russia’s likely plan to encircle Kyiv on March 3. The Ukrainian General Staff reported at 6:00 am local time on March 3 that Russian forces are attempting to conduct offensive operations in the area of Kozarovychi (40km north of Kyiv) on the west bank of the Dnipro River toward Vyshhorod (15km north of Kyiv); Fastiv (70km southwest of Kyiv and approximately 50km south of Russia’s current furthest point of advance west of Kyiv); and Obukhiv (40km directly south of Kyiv).² The Ukrainian General Staff likely assesses that Russian forces seek to encircle Kyiv from the west along a line running through these towns. **Russian forces remain far from all four towns except Kozarovychi and likely will require further combat power to complete the encirclement of Kyiv.** The Ukrainian General Staff reported at noon local time on March 3 that Russian forces committed an additional battalion tactical group (BTG) to operations against Kyiv along an unspecified axis.³

Ukrainian Airspace Remains Contested

Russia has not achieved air superiority over Ukraine as of March 3. The Ukrainian Air Force continues operating a week after the invasion began, with the Ukrainian General Staff reporting that Ukrainian Su-24s and Su-25s conducted airstrikes in Kyiv, Sumy, Chernihiv, and Kharkiv oblasts in the last 24 hours.⁴ Ukrainian air defenses reportedly intercepted a Russian missile targeting Kyiv’s main railway station, which remains packed with refugees, the night of March 2.⁵ Russian failures to secure air superiority likely reduce the effectiveness and extent of Russian air and missile attacks, increase the risk to Russian airborne and air assault operations, and force Russian ground combat units to face periodic air attack, likely degrading their operations to some extent. Russia’s failures in the air superiority fight are very surprising; ISW cannot offer any explanations for them at this time.

Russia Continues Clandestine Operations and Prepares More Disinformation

Russian efforts within and in the immediate vicinity of Kyiv have reportedly relied on saboteurs and reconnaissance elements, often out of uniform or wearing Ukrainian uniforms, rather than on attacks by regular combat forces. ISW cannot confirm any new developments in central Kyiv on March 3. Ukraine’s Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) warned Ukrainians that Russian forces may employ a deepfake video depicting Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky’s surrender to Russia on March 3.⁶ The GUR warned that Russia could use such a deepfake video to demoralize the Ukrainian population and convince Ukrainians to surrender.

Russia Likely Mobilizing Reinforcements from the Far East and Donbas

Russian social media users observed new trains loaded with combat vehicles likely of the Eastern Military District (EMD) in Khabarovsk, far eastern Russia.⁷ These elements will likely deploy to Belarus to reinforce the EMD’s existing axis against Kyiv from the northwest. Ukraine’s commander in chief claimed on March 3 that Russia mobilized residents of the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics (DNR and LNR) and is transporting them to Belgorod via mainland Russia to support assaults on Kyiv.⁸ Ukraine’s commander in chief also claimed that Russia is transporting DNR and LNR citizens via Krasnodar to Crimea to support a Russian assault on Odesa.⁹

Subordinate main effort along the west bank of the Dnipro

- Ukrainian forces halted Russian efforts to extend their western envelopment of Kyiv into Zhytomyr Oblast directly west of Kyiv. The Ukrainian General Staff reported halting Russian forces in Pirozhky, Rizniya, and Ukrainka as of noon local time on March 3.¹⁰ These towns are just west of Makariv, where Ukrainian forces halted Russian advances on March 2. Ukrainian forces additionally likely shot down a Russian Su-30 over Irpin on March 3.¹¹ Russian forces are likely unsuccessfully attempting to extend their envelopment of Kyiv westward to bypass Ukrainian forces around Makariv.
- Russian forces additionally opened a new line of advance into northern Zhytomyr Oblast from Belarus, advancing roughly 20km into Ukraine toward Bihun and Ovruch as of noon local time on March 3.¹² ISW cannot currently assess the concentration of Russian forces on this new axis of advance. The Ukrainian General Staff reported two Russian BTGs are operating in Zhytomyr Oblast as a whole but did not differentiate between operations west of Makariv and new Russian advances across the Belarusian border.¹³
- Russian forces continued to assemble supplies in Borodyanka, Katyuzhanka, and Gavronshchyn, north of Kyiv.¹⁴ The Ukrainian General Staff reported Russian forces began assembling logistics camps in these towns on March 2. Russian forces are likely further deploying supplies and munitions forward from Belarus, but heavy cloud cover impeded satellite imagery north of Kyiv on March 2-3.

Subordinate supporting effort — Chernihiv axis

- Russian forces did not attempt assaults on Chernihiv on March 3, instead bypassing the city to advance on the outskirts of Kyiv.¹⁵ Elements of Russia's 41st Combined Arms Army and 90th Tank Division remain concentrated in Lyubech and Mena west and east of Chernihiv, respectively.¹⁶ Russian forces continued to shell Chernihiv on March 3, destroying a school and killing nine civilians.¹⁷
- Ukrainian forces reported that two BTGs of Russia's 2nd Combined Arms Army are advancing toward eastern Kyiv along the "Peremoha-Brovary" axis.¹⁸ Elements of the Russian 200th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade are additionally participating in this line of advance.¹⁹ Ukrainian forces likely halted Russian forces in Peremoha on March 2.²⁰ Ukrainian forces additionally halted Russian advances in Korosten, 30km south of Chernihiv.²¹
- ISW cannot confirm the presence of any Belarusian forces in operations on the Chernihiv axis. Ukrainian Territorial Defense authorities claimed on March 1 that Belarusian combat troops have entered Chernihiv District in support of the Russian offensive.²²

Subordinate supporting effort — Sumy axis

- Ukrainian forces halted Russian offensive operations towards Nizhyn and Pryluky (approximately 130km northeast of Kyiv) by seven BTGs of Russia's 2nd and 6th Combined Arms Armies, supported by missile and artillery assets, as of noon local time on March 3.²³
- Russian forces did not attempt assaults on Sumy March 3, instead concentrating on further advances toward Kyiv's northeastern outskirts.²⁴ Two BTGs from the Pacific Fleet's 200th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade continued to keep Sumy, Lebedyn and Oknytyrka "under siege" as of March 2.²⁵ Ukraine's 93rd Separate Motorized Brigade reported destroying several Russian tanks near Sumy on March 2 and 3.²⁶

Supporting Effort #1—Kharkiv: Russian forces will likely attempt to encircle Kharkiv in the next 24-48 hours. The Ukrainian General Staff reported six Russian BTGs around Kharkiv "moved to the defense" on March 3, but additionally assessed that three BTGs will "probably make an attempt to surround Kharkiv from the south."²⁷ Russian forces likely seek to encircle and bypass

Kharkiv before bombarding it to force a capitulation—as Russian forces are currently similarly attempting against Mariupol. Russian forces continued to deliberately target civilian infrastructure in Kharkiv with multiple-launch-rocket systems (MLRS), tube artillery, cluster munitions, and Kalibr cruise missiles on March 3.²⁸ The Russian air, artillery, and missile barrage may be intended to generate panic and reduce the morale of Ukrainian defenders in Kharkiv and elsewhere. It is not likely to achieve that effect. It is too early to evaluate the likelihood that a renewed Russian ground offensive will succeed in taking the city.

The Ukrainian General Staff reported on March 3 that two Russian BTGs will “probably try to advance in the direction of Izum [south of Kharkiv]” from northern Luhansk Oblast with the eventual objective of taking Dnipro and Zaporizhya from the north.²⁹ If confirmed, this would be a wide Russian enveloping maneuver, likely seeking to cut off all Ukrainian forces in Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts. Two BTGs would be unable to complete this encirclement, let alone attack two large cities.

Supporting Effort #2—Mariupol: Russian forces fully encircled Mariupol as of March 2 and are conducting a deliberate campaign to destroy critical civilian infrastructure and residential areas in a likely attempt to force the city to surrender. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Mariupol is “stable” as of noon local time on March 3, though LNR forces (likely supported by Russia’s 8th Combined Arms Army) continued attacks on the city.³⁰ ISW cannot confirm the status of Ukrainian defenders or the extent of Russian attacks on the city on March 3.

The LNR announced that it captured the seven towns of Novoaidar, Krasnorichens'ke, Epifanovka, Stepnoy Yar, Havrylivka, Starobilsk, and Andriivka in Luhansk Oblast on March 3.³¹ ISW assesses that Russian proxy forces control Havrylivka, Starobilsk, and Krasnorichens'ke, but cannot confirm Russian proxy control over Novoaidar, Krasnorichens'ke, Epifanovka, and Andriivka at this time.³² Ukraine’s General Staff acknowledged that that LNR forces continued offensive operations near Novoaidar at 6:00 am local time on March 3.³³

The Ukrainian General Staff additionally published photos on March 2 of a Russian plan Ukrainian forces captured from a battalion of the Black Sea Fleet’s 810th Naval Infantry Brigade.³⁴ The plans stated that Putin authorized a Russian invasion of Ukraine on January 18, planned at that time to run from February 20 to March 6. The BTG reportedly planned to conduct an amphibious landing at Stepanovka, on the Sea of Azov, before operating with elements of the 58th CAA and 117th Naval Infantry Regiment to surround and seize Melitopol. No such landing occurred.

Supporting Effort #3—Kherson and west: Russian forces secured a negotiated surrender of Kherson on March 2 and continued advances toward Mykolayiv on March 3, including a failed airborne landing. The mayor of Kherson confirmed that no Ukrainian forces remain in the city and that “for the Ukrainian flag to continue flying over us” he negotiated several conditions with Russian forces, including a strict curfew from 8 p.m. to 6 a.m. and forbidding civilians from walking in groups larger than two or confronting Russian forces.³⁵ Russian forces deployed additional reserves and resumed offensive operations toward Mykolayiv on March 3.³⁶ Ukrainian forces additionally defeated a heliborne assault by Russian VDV (airborne) or special forces on Balovne, an airport near Mykolayiv.³⁷

The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces committed reserve elements of the 205th Motor Rifle Brigade of the 49th Combined Arms Army towards both Mariupol and Zaporizhya on March 3.³⁸ Russian forces will likely struggle to fully resource three simultaneous lines of effort from

Crimea – Mikoayiv, Zaporizhya, and Mariupol. Russian forces have not made territorial advances towards Zaporizhya since March 1.

Immediate items to watch

- Russian forces maneuvering to the west and southwest of Kyiv to envelop and then encircle it
- Russian forces securing the crossings over the Desna near Chernihiv and/or linking up with forces advancing from the Sumy axis to open a new front against Kyiv from the east
- Belarusian ground forces might begin actively participating in the Russian offensive campaign
- Russian efforts to encircle Kharkiv following air/missile/artillery attacks
- Russian forces around Kherson resuming their advance toward Mykolayiv and Odesa
- Russian and proxy force offensive to take Mariupol or continued air/missile/artillery campaign to force the city to surrender

¹ <https://www.understandingwar.org/report/russian-military%e2%80%99s-lessons-learned-syria>;
<https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISW%20Report%20-%20Russia%E2%80%99s%20Dead-End%20Diplomacy%20in%20Syria%20-%20November%202019.pdf>; <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/un-syria-russia-assad-deliberately-targeted-civilians-aid-convoy-war-crimes/>; <https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/american-security-is-at-risk-in-aleppo-why-syrias-second-largest-city-matters-to-the-us>.

² <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/263593572620395>.

³ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/263757872603965>.

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/263443892635363>.

⁵ <https://twitter.com/dkaleniuk/status/1499126564977532931?s=20&t=Gp-8n6e61TDPrWAUC6ZVTw>.

⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/DefenceIntelligenceofUkraine/posts/262743036037124>

⁷ <https://twitter.com/GirkinGirkin/status/1499383504265785353>

⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/CinCAFU/posts/260042476291245>

⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/CinCAFU/posts/260042476291245>

¹⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/263757872603965>.

¹¹ <https://twitter.com/GirkinGirkin/status/1499297177990045696>.

¹² <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/263757872603965>.

¹³ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/263757872603965>.

¹⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/263593572620395>.

¹⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/263593572620395>.

¹⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/263757872603965>.

¹⁷ <https://twitter.com/GirkinGirkin/status/1499371816946647049>; <https://twitter.com/GirkinGirkin/status/1499370226839863297>.

¹⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/263757872603965>.

¹⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/263593572620395>.

²⁰ <https://www.understandingwar.org/background/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-2>.

²¹ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/263757872603965>.

²² <https://t.me/suspilnechernihiv/6484>, <https://gur.gov.ua/content/spysky-kerivnoho-skladu-viiskovykh-chastyn-viiskovo-povitrianykh-syl-respubliky-belarus.html>;

<https://www.facebook.com/DefenceIntelligenceofUkraine/posts/261783329466428>

²³ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/263757872603965>.

²⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/263593572620395>.

²⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/263757872603965>.

²⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/263675939278825>.

²⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/263757872603965>.

²⁸ <https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1499378734817845250>; <https://twitter.com/GirkinGirkin/status/1499254338283315206>.

²⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/263757872603965>.

³⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/263757872603965>;

<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/263593572620395>.

³¹ <https://lug-info.com/news/narodnaya-miliciya-osvobodila-ot-kievskih-silovikov-eshe-sem-naselennykh-punktov-lnr>

³² https://twitter.com/666_mancer/status/1498965187579285504; <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=343626874352873>

-
- ³³ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/263593572620395>
- ³⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/263165642663188>.
- ³⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/kolykhaev.igor/posts/4999567616803299>.
- ³⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/263593572620395>;
- ³⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/263195662660186>
<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/263593572620395>;
- <https://twitter.com/TheDeadDistrict/status/1498999540967432198>.
- ³⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/263593572620395>.