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Intel bonanza for war watchers

Western agencies get rare opportunity to judge Russian army's strengths, weaknesses

AFP, Paris

Russia's massive assault on Ukraine is providing Western intelligence agencies and analysts with a rare live opportunity to verify their assessments of the Russian army's strengths and weaknesses in the field. The scale of the deployment means Moscow's military equipment, methods, doctrine and especially its weak points are on full show -- including via vast quantities of open-source data, images and video.

"What people are realising is that what they imagined (about the threat from this country) does not correspond to the reality of this deployment," said Alexandre Papaemmanuel, a professor at Paris' Institute for Political Studies (IEP).

The Ukraine mission was exposing "logistics that aren't up to date and ineffective coordination" on Russia's part, he told AFP.

Information publicly available to spies, analysts and experts on the war in Ukraine ranges from high-quality day and night satellite photos from private firms in almost real time to images of fighting, captured equipment and alleged Russian atrocities posted by the Ukrainian defenders and civilians.

The flow of unclassified data from Ukraine is on a different scale.

"Western and Ukrainian intelligence agencies' targets are much more visible and accessible," said Damien van Puyvelde, a University of Glasgow intelligence researcher.



A Polish soldier carries a child and helps a refugee family after they crossed the border into Poland from Ukraine at the border crossing in Medyka, eastern Poland, on Wednesday. More than 2.3 million refugees have now fled Ukraine since Russia's invasion on February 24, according to United Nations figures issued yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

'I do not believe it'

Lavrov on possibility of nuclear war

 $\pmb{REUTERS, London}$

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said yesterday he did not believe the conflict in Ukraine would spiral into a nuclear war but cautioned the United States and Europe that Moscow never again wanted to be dependent on the West.

Russia's economy is facing the gravest crisis since the 1991 fall of the Soviet Union after the West slapped heavy sanctions on almost the entire Russian financial and corporate system following Moscow's February 24 invasion of Ukraine.

Asked by a Kremlin correspondent for Russia's Kommersant newspaper if he thought a nuclear war could be triggered, Lavrov told reporters in Turkey: "I don't want to believe it, and I do not believe it."

Lavrov, President Vladimir Putin's foreign minister since 2004, said the nuclear theme had been thrown into discussions only by the West, which he said kept on returning to nuclear war like Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis.

"Of course it gives us cause for concern when the West, like Freud, keeps on returning and returning to this topic," Lavrov said after talks in Antalya, Turkey with his Ukrainian counterpart Dmytro Kuleba.

Worried of 'high risk'

US nixes Polish jet offer to Ukraine, warns Russia may use chemical or biological weapons



AGENCIES

The Pentagon on Wednesday conclusively rejected as too "high risk" a plan to transfer fighter jets from Poland to Kyiv to battle Russian forces, pouring cold water for now on Ukraine's bid for more firepower in the skies.

The scheme -- which the United States said it was actively studying before nixing it over concerns the Kremlin could interpret it as a military escalation -- has proven to be a notable hiccup in the otherwise solid alliance between Washington and European allies over Moscow's invasion.

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin spoke with Poland's Defense Minister Mariusz Blaszczak earlier Wednesday and thanked him for Warsaw's willingness to cooperate in the effort to assist Ukraine, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby told

But during the call, Austin "stressed that we do not support the transfer of additional fighter aircraft to the Ukrainian Air Force at this time, and therefore have no desire to see them in our custody," Kirby said.

Warsaw had expressed support for a plan in which Poland would have sent its Soviet-era MiG-29s to Kyiv via a US air base in Ramstein, Germany, with the suggested follow-on step that the United

States would backfill Poland's fleet with American F-16 fighter jets.

"That is something that we are not going to explore right now," Kirby said, adding that adding aircraft to Ukraine's fighter fleet was "not likely to significantly change the effectiveness" of the Ukrainian Air Force against Russian capabilities.

Kirby said intelligence agencies had warned that the MiG transfer to Ukraine "may be mistaken as escalatory and could result in significant Russian reaction that might increase the prospects of a military escalation" with the Nato alliance, reports AFP.

The Biden administration also warned Russia might seek to use chemical or biological weapons in Ukraine as the White House rejected Russian claims of illegal chemical weapons development in the country it has invaded.

This week, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova — without evidence — accused Ukraine of running chemical and biological weapons labs with US support.

In a series of tweets, White House press secretary Jen Psaki called Russia's claim "preposterous" and said it could be part of an attempt by Russia to lay the groundwork for using such weapons of mass destruction against Ukraine itself.

China censors online Ukraine debate Bars calls for peace

REUTERS, Beijing

China's censors, who quietly determine what can be discussed on the country's buzzing social media platforms, are silencing views of citizens protesting against Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

invasion of Ukraine.
In the days after Russia's
February 24 attack,
comments on Chinese
social media platforms
Weibo, WeChat and
Douyin broadly backed
Russia and President
Vladimir Putin. Many
posts challenging that, or
even advocating peace,
quickly disappeared from
view.

Jin Xing, a former popular talk show host and China's first openly transgender celebrity, told Reuters her account on Weibo - China's equivalent to Twitter - was suspended last week, after she published two posts, including one that made reference to Putin as a "crazy Russian man" and urged her followers to pray for peace.

"All I said was I support life and oppose war, that was it. I did not say I support the US or Russia or Ukraine," said Jin, whose account is followed by 13.6 million users.

Jin is not alone. Awardwinning Chinese actor Ke Lan has been banned from posting on Weibo "due to violating relevant rules," according to a notice on her Weibo account.

RUSSIA'S WAR IN UKRAINE Developments

HOSPITAL WAS MILITARY BASE

Russia's top diplomat Sergei Lavrov claims the hospital was a base for Ukrainian Azov Battalion and "other radicals" and slams the West for supplying them with "deadly weapons".

1,207 DEAD IN MARIUPOL SIEGE Some 1,207 civilians have been killed in the

10-day Russian siege of the port, its mayor says. The Red Cross calls the situation there "apocalyptic" after more than a week without water, power

or heat. 35,000 EVACUATED

Some 35,000 civilians are evacuated from the badly hit cities of Sumy, Enerhodar

and areas around Kyiv during a 12-hour ceasefire, with President Volodymyr Zelensky hoping three more corridors will open for Mariupol, Volnovakha and Izium.

RUSSIANS NEAR KYIV

Fears are mounting Kyiv will also soon be encircled, with Russian tanks in places just a few kilometres (miles) from the city limits to the east.

2.3 MILLION FLEE

The UN says at least 2.3 million people have fled Ukraine, with more than half now in Poland. It has called the exodus Europe's fastest-growing refugee crisis since World War II.

US lawmakers pass a \$14-billion aid package for Ukraine with Canada pledging more

military equipment. The International Monetary Fund meanwhile approves \$1.4 billion in emergency financing for Kyiv.

PATRIOT MISSILES
Washington deploys two new
Patriot surface-to-air missile
batteries in Poland to protect
its frontline Nato ally.

NUKE PLANTS 'NOT REPORTING'
The UN's atomic watchdog, the International
Atomic Energy Agency, says it is not receiving
updates from either Chernobyl or Zaporizhzhia
nuclear power plants, both of which are now in
Russian hands.



Activists take part in a lie-in demonstration near the Russian embassy in protest against the country's invasion of Ukraine, in Tokyo, Japan yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

