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MOSCOW DIGS IN IN CENTRAL ASIA

Despite its current difficulties on the Ukraine front, Russia has announced its intention to beef up its military presence in other parts of its "near abroad" – namely, Central Asia. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu has stated that Russia is increasing its combat readiness in Central Asia as part of efforts to counter the U.S. in that region. Moscow already has military bases in both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, but the Kremlin is reacting to supposed U.S. attempts to build up military infrastructure in the area. The state-controlled RIA news agency quoted Shoigu as saying, "The United States and its allies, under the pretext of helping in the fight against terrorism, are trying to restore their military presence in Central Asia." Shoigu, speaking at a meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in India, also claimed that the United States is seeking to defeat Russia in Ukraine and to threaten China. (Reuters, April 28, 2023)

A RUSSIAN HAND IN PIPELINE BLAST, AFTER ALL

The explosions that struck the Nord Stream II pipeline last Fall have been a source of mystery and uncertainty for months, but new evidence implicating Russia has now been released. The Danish military has confirmed that it has 26 photos that were taken from a Danish patrol boat on September 22nd, and which show a Russian navy vessel specializing in submarine operations operating near the pipeline just days before the explosions. According to former Danish intelligence officer Jacob Kaarsbo, the presence of the SS-750 submarine "sheds light on what was going on in the region in the preceding days." Moreover, Kaarsbo confirmed that the SS-750 would have been capable of conducting such an operation. Criminal investigations into the attack on Nord Stream have been underway for months in several countries, but attribution for the incident has proven extremely difficult. (*The Guardian*, April 28, 2023)

A REPORTER AS POLITICAL PAWN

Russia's decision to arrest Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich on espionage charges back in March was widely seen as an example of hostage-taking, and Moscow's actions since have only perpetuated this perception. For instance, Russia's Foreign Ministry denied an upcoming consular visit to Gershkovich in retaliation for the U.S. decision to not grant several Russian journalists the requisite visas they required to travel to the States. The Foreign Ministry also warned that, beyond refusing access to Gershkovich, Moscow was developing other "retaliatory measures." Immediately after Washington declined to issue the visas, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov warned that Russia "will not forgive this," and began threatening retaliation. The Russian journalists in question had planned to accompany Lavrov during his visit to the United Nations in New York. (*The Moscow Times*, April 27, 2023)

MOUNTING INTERNATIONAL CONDEMNATION OF RUSSIA'S WAR OF CHOICE

Since the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, many countries with ties to the Kremlin have chosen to abstain from United Nations resolutions condemning Moscow's actions. That, however, may be changing. China unexpectedly supported a UN resolution which expressly acknowledges that Russia engaged in military aggression against Georgia in the past and is currently engaging in military aggression against Ukraine. Moreover, other countries that have abstained from condemning Russia in the past voted for the resolution as well. India, Brazil, and Kazakhstan all chose to support the measure, and it was backed by 122 countries in total, with only 5 voting against and 18 abstaining. The resolution, while not expressly focused on the war in Ukraine, called for cooperation between the Council of Europe and the United Nations to address issues in Europe such as "unprecedented challenges facing Europe, after Russia's aggression against Ukraine and Georgia." (*Kyiv Post*, May 1, 2023)

THE COMPLICATED CASE OF MIKHAIL FRIDMAN

Mikhail Fridman, one of Russia's richest men, is currently seeking sanctions relief from the European Union, claiming that he's been wrongly swept up in Western sanctions against the Kremlin stemming from the Ukraine war. But, behind the scenes, companies linked to the magnate have been found to in fact be supporting Russian forces in Ukraine in various ways, from insuring vehicles used by Russia's National Guard units to supplying the military with equipment and uniforms. An investigation by Current Time and Radio Svoboda Ukraine found that the X5 Retail Group, of which Fridman is a shareholder, has been cooperating with the Russian Ministry of Defense's supply chain, known as VOENTORG. Another Fridman-linked company, AlfaStrakhovanie, also received \$3.2 million dollars over the last five years for insuring Russian National Guard vehicles which have been used in Ukraine.

Fridman has attempted to contextualize these facts by claiming that, while he remains a shareholder in these companies, he has withdrawn "from all management bodies" since the start of Russia's Ukraine war in February 2022. Interestingly, Fridman is considered by many to be a part of the Russian political opposition to President Vladimir Putin – leading a number of noted activists to call for leniency with regard to his treatment. (*The Moscow Times*, May 2, 2023)