



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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Russian Government Actions and U.S. Policy

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GUARDED OPTIMISM ABOUT UKRAINE'S COUNTEROFFENSIVE

The slow pace of Ukraine's counteroffensive against Russia, now several months old, has raised questions about its overall effectiveness in the West. U.S. defense officials, however, see the progress made by Ukraine's troops as generally positive. Kyiv's counteroffensive has made "significant progress" in recent weeks against Russia's entrenched forces in southern Ukraine, Trent Maul, the director of analysis for the Defense Intelligence Agency, has told *The Economist*. As a result, there is now a "realistic possibility" that Ukraine can overwhelm Russian defenses in the south of the country by year's end. Nevertheless, Maul noted, Ukraine's progress toward this objective could be influenced – perhaps significantly – by factors such as worsening weather and shortages of ammunition, particularly as the country heads into its notoriously treacherous muddy season. (*Newsweek*, September 7, 2023)

A TACIT ALLY IN HANOI

In its efforts to isolate and sanction Russia over its aggression against Ukraine, the Biden administration is finding that another geopolitical issue – its intensifying strategic cooperation with China – is intruding in unexpected (and complicated) ways. Vietnam serves as a case in point. Despite warming relations between Hanoi and Washington, the Vietnamese government is quietly angling to improve its regional position vis-à-vis Beijing, and is turning to Moscow for help in doing so. The *New York Times*, relying on leaked internal Vietnamese documents, reports that "Hanoi is making clandestine plans to buy an arsenal of weapons from Russia in contravention of American sanctions." Specifically, "[t]he Ministry of Finance document, which is dated March 2023 and whose contents have been verified by former and current Vietnamese officials, lays out how Vietnam proposes to modernize its military by secretly paying for defense purchases through transfers at a joint Vietnamese and Russian oil venture in Siberia."

Vietnam's objective, the paper reports, is "to revamp its military and create a tougher deterrent to Chinese encroachment on its maritime borders in the South China Sea." Those goals, however, have been complicated by U.S. pressure on trading partners of the Russian Federation, including traditional arms clients like Vietnam, necessitating the clandestine arrangement. (*New York Times*, September 9, 2023)

MOSCOW AND PYONGYANG: AN "ANTI-IMPERIAL" ALLIANCE

On September 13th, capping off weeks of speculation, Russian President Vladimir Putin met with North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un in Vladivostok in Russia's Far East. The summit, Kim's first with a foreign leader since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, was intended to showcase unity in the face of Western pressure, as well as to hammer out concrete understandings surrounding Russia's war in Ukraine, experts say. "Russia has risen to a sacred fight to protect its sovereignty and security against the hegemonic forces," Kim reportedly told Putin at the meeting. "North Korea supports all Putin's decisions... I'm sure we will remain together in [the] fight against imperialism." (*Euronews*, September 13, 2023; Reuters, September 14, 2023)

UK PUTS WAGNER ON TERROR LIST

The British government has officially designated Russia's notorious Wagner mercenary group as a terrorist organization under UK law. The action, previously presented to Parliament, officially proscribes the private militia of recently-deceased oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin, making its members and supporters subject to prosecution by British authorities. "This order comes into force with immediate effect and will make belonging to the Wagner Group or actively supporting the group in the UK a criminal offence, with a potential jail sentence of 14 years which can be handed down alongside or in place of a fine," the British Home Office said in a statement. (*ABC News*, September 15, 2023)

[EDITOR'S NOTE: The ban is notable on a number of levels. By proscribing Wagner, the UK is following the lead of the Lithuanian parliament, which unanimously proclaimed the mercenary group to be a terrorist organization this past Spring, bringing British policy closer to that of Eastern Europe. It is significant, too, because it highlights emerging differences with the U.S. Despite significant pressure from Congress – including the introduction of legislation like the *Holding Accountable Russian Mercenaries (HARM) Act* – the Biden administration has so far stopped short of formally designating the group.]

MOSCOW WANTS A NORTH AFRICAN FOOTHOLD

As part of its growing geopolitical focus on the African continent, the Kremlin is now seeking to secure maritime access to Libyan ports – a development that would dramatically expand Russia's presence and capabilities in the Mediterranean. Senior Russian officials are reported to have met recently with Gen. Khalifa Haftar, Libya's powerful rebel warlord, in an attempt to secure port access for the country's Mediterranean flotilla. Both Benghazi and Tobruk, situated on Libya's northern coastline, opposite Italy and Greece, are now said to be under consideration. (*Wall Street Journal*, September 15, 2023)