

# Putin's Bombers Could Devastate Ukraine But He's Holding Back. Here's Why

By [William M Arkin](#)

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The following text by **William Arkin** published in **Newsweek** based on analysis and interviews within the US intelligence establishment provides an incisive understanding on the nature of Russia's military operation.

See [William Arkin's author's archive](#)

William M. Arkin is a former US intelligence official and award-winning best-selling author. Global Research has posted several of earlier writings. Our thanks to Newsweek. Below are selections from the article with a link to the complete Newsweek text.

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*As destructive as the Ukraine war is, Russia is causing less damage and killing fewer civilians than it could, U.S. intelligence experts say.*

*Russia's conduct in the brutal war tells a different story than the widely accepted view that **Vladimir Putin** is intent on demolishing Ukraine and inflicting maximum civilian damage—and it reveals the Russian leader's strategic balancing act. If Russia were more intentionally destructive, the clamoring for U.S. and [NATO](#) intervention would be louder. And if Russia were all-in, Putin might find himself with no way out. Instead, his goal is to take enough territory on the ground to have something to negotiate with, while putting the government of Ukraine in a position where they have to negotiate.*

Understanding the thinking behind Russia's limited attacks could help map a path towards peace, experts say.

In nearly a month since Russia invaded, dozens of Ukrainian cities and towns have fallen, and the fight over the country's largest cities continues. [United Nations](#) human rights specialists say that some 900 civilians have died in the fighting (U.S. intelligence [puts that](#)

[number](#) at least five times UN estimates). About 6.5 million Ukrainians have also become internally displaced (15 percent of the entire population), half of them leaving the country to find safety.

“The destruction is massive,” a senior analyst working at the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) tells *Newsweek*, “especially when compared with what Europeans and Americans are used to seeing.”

But, the analyst says, the damage associated with a contested ground war involving peer opponents shouldn’t blind people to what is really happening. (The analyst requested anonymity in order to speak about classified matters.) “The heart of Kyiv has barely been touched. And almost all of the long-range strikes have been aimed at military targets.”

In the capital, most observable to the west, Kyiv city authorities say that some 55 buildings have been damaged and that 222 people have died since February 24. It is a city of 2.8 million people.

“We need to understand Russia’s actual conduct,” says a retired Air Force officer, a lawyer by training who has been involved in approving targets for U.S. fights in Iraq and Afghanistan. The officer currently works as an analyst with a large military contractor advising the [Pentagon](#) and was granted anonymity in order to speak candidly.

“If we merely convince ourselves that Russia is bombing indiscriminately, or [that] it is failing to inflict more harm because its personnel are not up to the task or because it is technically inept, then we are not seeing the real conflict.”

In the analyst’s view, though the war has led to unprecedented destruction in the south and east, the Russian military has actually been showing restraint in its long-range attacks.

As of the past weekend, in 24 days of conflict, Russia has flown some 1,400 strike sorties and delivered almost 1,000 missiles (by contrast, the United States flew [more sorties and delivered more weapons](#) in the first day of the 2003 Iraq war). The vast majority of the airstrikes are over the battlefield, with Russian aircraft providing “close air support” to ground forces. The remainder—less than 20 percent, according to U.S. experts—has been aimed at military airfields, barracks and supporting depots.

A proportion of those strikes have damaged and destroyed civilian structures and killed and injured innocent civilians, but the level of death and destruction is low compared to Russia’s capacity.

“I know it’s hard ... to swallow that the carnage and destruction could be much worse than it is,” says the DIA analyst. “But that’s what the facts show. This suggests to me, at least, that Putin is not intentionally attacking civilians, that perhaps he is mindful that he needs to limit damage in order to leave an out for negotiations.”

Russia began its invasion of Ukraine on February 24 with an air and missile attack targeted against some 65 airfields and military installations. On the first night, at least 11 airfields were attacked. Some 50 additional military installations and air defense sites were hit, including 18 early-warning radar facilities.

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In fact, there has been no methodical bombing campaign to achieve any systemic outcome of a strategic nature. Air and missile strikes, which initially seemed to tell one story, have almost exclusively been in direct support of ground forces.

“Think of the Russian Air force as flying artillery,” says the retired senior U.S. Air Force officer, who communicated with *Newsweek* via email. “It’s not an independent arm. It has undertaken no strategic air campaign as American observers might be used to from the last 30 years of American conflict.”

Ukrainian air defenses, both fixed and mobile missiles, have proven resilient and deadly.

“The Air Defense’s survivability and efficacy have surprised many, not only in Kyiv, but also across the country,” Kyiv-based military expert Oleg Zhdanov told the *Kyiv Independent*.

Ukrainian military reporter Illia Ponomarenko [says](#) that the air defense system defending Kyiv from aircraft and missiles “has been particularly effective.

“Most missiles targeting the city are successfully intercepted,” Ponomarenko says.

Russia did not bomb stationary air defense emplacements protecting cities. U.S. analysts say Putin’s generals were particularly reluctant to attack urban targets in Kyiv.

As a result, regardless of the Kremlin’s plans—whether Russia was actually seeking air superiority or intended to limit damage in Kyiv—there is no question that Putin has had to revise the long-range attack plan.

Over the course of almost four weeks, missiles fired at Kyiv have been scarce. Ukrainian media have reported just more than a dozen incidents involving Russian cruise and ballistic missiles intercepted over the city and its closest suburbs since February 24. And all of them, U.S. experts say, have been clearly headed for legitimate military targets.

“The fact that the mobile S-300 SAM systems are still operating is a powerful indictment of Russia’s ability to conduct dynamic or time-sensitive targeting,” the Atlantic Council asserted this week in a military brief.

The DIA analyst disagrees: “For whatever reason, clearly the Russians have been reluctant to strike inside the urban megalopolis of Kyiv.

“Yes they might not be up to the U.S. task [in dynamic targeting] or in establishing air superiority ... But this is the Russian air force, subordinate to the ground forces. And this war is different: it’s being fought on the ground, where everything strategic that Russia might destroy in front of its forces—bridges, communications, airfields, etc.—also becomes unusable to them as they move forward.”

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