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BRIEF

Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Situational Updates

ZEROFOX INTELLIGENCE

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Scope Note

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Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Situational Updates

Executive Summary

A negotiated end to the war is unlikely in the near term, despite signs of progress from March 29, 2022, talks in Istanbul. Ukraine has proposed a military alliance to guarantee its security against Russian aggression, but its adoption is improbable due to the requirement of Western military intervention. Sweden and Finland are reassessing their neutrality and considering applications for NATO admission. Russia will likely conquer Mariupol soon and redeploy other forces to Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

Analyst Commentary

At a March 29, 2022, press conference following negotiations between Ukrainian and Russian delegations in Istanbul, Russian Deputy Minister of Defense Aleksandr Fomin announced that Russia intends to "dramatically reduce" its military activities around Kyiv and Chernihiv. Fomin said that the moves would show respect for progress made during peace negotiations and that reduced activity near Kyiv would create the conditions for an eventual ceasefire agreement. Fomin's declaration also suggested that the two sides were approaching compromises on certain areas, such as post-war borders, that had recently appeared non-negotiable. Both sides' lead negotiators agreed it was possible that Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky could soon meet in person to discuss terms.

U.S. and UK officials are less optimistic that the negotiations represented legitimate progress. UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson has been vocal in his skepticism of Russian intentions and said that President Putin is "not to be trusted." President Zelensky also said that the talks did not show concrete evidence of progress. Events on March 30, 2022, seemingly supported a skeptical view of the talks, as intense fighting took place in the Irpin suburb of Kyiv, and the Mayor of Chernihiv rejected Russian claims of withdrawal amid what he described as a "colossal attack."



Despite the encouraging remarks that emerged from the Istanbul talks, significant obstacles remain to a peace deal, and it is unlikely that the foremost concerns on either side were resolved. Ukraine has, for example, offered to adopt neutrality status in exchange for security guarantees comparable to NATO's Article 5 that would require guarantors to intervene militarily in Ukraine's defense in the event of future Russian aggression. NATO's unwillingness to admit Ukraine suggests that such a military alliance is improbable. Ukraine's negotiators have also proposed a 15-year period during which the status of Crimea would be negotiated and rejected territorial concessions, including the Donbas "People's Republics" that have been occupied by Russia since 2014. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, on the other hand, said that Ukraine delegates "understand that the issues of Crimea and Donbas have been settled for good," which is fully at odds with the Ukrainian government's public statements.

On the Russian side, negotiations continue to reflect that the war has not gone to plan. President Putin likely has been forced by military failure to retreat, at least temporarily, from the objective of conquering Kyiv and overthrowing the Ukrainian government. But he is not prepared to conclude the war, especially under conditions that can be considered favorable to Ukraine. Recent statements by Russia's foreign policy and military establishment support this conclusion. A March 25, 2022, briefing by the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces asserted that the military accomplished the goals of the war's first phase, and Russia was free to pursue its alleged primary objective of "liberating" the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.¹ On March 30, 2022, Defense Ministry spokesman Igor Konashenkov also claimed that Russia had achieved its objectives near Kyiv and could reorient its forces toward the Donbas. The seeming successes of the Istanbul talks are more likely signs of an operational shift, as Russia reassesses its war aims, rotates troops, and enters a phase of the war focused on the seizure of Mariupol and the rest of the Donbas.

International Response

In the past week, Western governments have taken aggressive measures to counteract alleged Russian espionage. On March 29, 2022, Belgium's Foreign Ministry ordered 21 Russian diplomats to leave after claiming that they used diplomatic cover to engage in espionage. The Netherlands ousted 17 Russian diplomats, Ireland expelled four senior Russian officials, and the Czech Republic ejected one Russian diplomat. Russia ousted diplomats from Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Montenegro, and Slovakia in retaliation for their earlier expulsion of Russian embassy staff.

Sweden may be seriously considering NATO membership, according to comments made by Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson. On March 30, 2022, the prime minister told Swedish broadcaster SVT that she does "not exclude NATO membership in any way." The remark contradicts her prior assertion that Sweden would not apply

¹ <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-ukraine-goals-scaled-back/31770879.html>



for NATO membership. Prime Minister Andersson's comments, and the growing support for NATO membership among Finnish politicians, indicates that the two traditionally neutral countries are reassessing their strategic alliances in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

U.S. President Joseph Biden held a call with Ukrainian President Zelensky on March 30, 2022, and reportedly pledged USD 500 million in economic assistance to Ukraine. In mid-March, Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal estimated that the total damages to Ukraine during the conflict amounted to over USD 565 billion.² President Biden also spoke on March 26, 2022, in Poland, during which he said President Putin "cannot remain in power." The White House said the comments did not reflect a new policy of regime change, but the president defended his remarks, stating that they reflected his moral outrage at the Russian president.

Physical Security Impacts

Ukrainian military forces have reportedly had success retaking territory near Sumy in northeast Ukraine and have made gains in areas around Kherson in the south and Kharkiv in the east. Intense fighting continues outside of Kyiv, despite Russian claims that it would significantly withdraw its forces from the capital region. The Russian military is likely attempting to hold and defend its forward positions near Kyiv and Chernihiv to occupy Ukrainian forces and allow for troop rotation. The U.S. Department of Defense reported that it has observed an estimated one-fifth of Russian forces around Kyiv repositioning, and that some are traveling back to Belarus to be redeployed to the east.³ It is probable that Russian efforts to take Kyiv have failed in the short term, and it is unclear whether there is political or military desire to attempt another large-scale offensive against Kyiv.

Russian forces have made slow but steady progress in Mariupol despite heavy losses, and they can be expected to overtake the city in the coming weeks. Victory in Mariupol is Russia's most immediate military objective, as it would allow forces there to redeploy along the southeastern axis and contribute to fighting elsewhere in the Donbas. Recent comments by top Russian political and military officials about "liberating" the Donbas indicate that the bulk of Russian forces will be focused on the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. The full occupation of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions would allow Russia to declare victory and possibly pursue more consequential ceasefire negotiations.

On March 31, 2022, President Vladimir Putin signed a decree that will conscript an additional 134,000 Russians into the armed forces. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said that the call-up was unrelated to the war, but conscripts were controversially used during the initial invasion, for which the Defense Ministry was

² <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2022/03/16/7331756/>

³ <https://www.cnn.com/europe/live-news/ukraine-russia-putin-news-03-30-22/>



forced to apologize.⁴ If the new round of Russian conscripts is accompanied by an involuntary extension of the service terms of existing conscripts, it could signal that President Putin expects a long war.

4

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-drafts-134500-conscripts-says-they-wont-go-ukraine-2022-03-31/>



Appendix: Traffic-Light Protocol for Information Dissemination

Red

WHEN SHOULD IT BE USED?

Sources may use TLP:

RED when information cannot be effectively acted upon by additional parties and could lead to impacts on a party's privacy, reputation, or operations if misused.

HOW MAY IT BE SHARED?

Recipients may NOT share TLP:

RED with any parties outside of the specific exchange, meeting, or conversation in which it is originally disclosed.

Amber

Sources may use TLP:

AMBER when information requires support to be effectively acted upon but carries risks to privacy, reputation, or operations if shared outside of the organizations involved.

Recipients may ONLY share TLP:

AMBER information with members of their own organization and only as widely as necessary to act on that information.

Green

WHEN SHOULD IT BE USED?

Sources may use TLP:

GREEN when information is useful for the awareness of all participating organizations, as well as with peers within the broader community or sector.

HOW MAY IT BE SHARED?

Recipients may share TLP:

GREEN information with peers & partner organizations within their sector or community but not via publicly accessible channels.

White

Sources may use TLP:

WHITE when information carries minimal or no risk of misuse in accordance with applicable rules and procedures for public release.

TLP:

WHITE information may be distributed without restriction, subject to copyright controls.