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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

NATO leaders met in Brussels on March 24, 2022, to coordinate their response to the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict. The United States and NATO have recently expressed growing concern that Russia could use chemical weapons and have stated that they would respond in such a scenario. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's pleas for a no-fly zone and Russian gas embargoes have gone unheeded, but he has had success pressuring Western businesses to suspend their Russian operations. Mariupol will likely fall to Russian forces in the coming weeks, but an encirclement of Kyiv appears unlikely to succeed.

Analyst Commentary

NATO heads of state and government met in person in Brussels, Belgium, on March 24, 2022, for the first time since Russia invaded Ukraine to coordinate the ongoing allied response to the conflict. U.S. President Joseph Biden also met with European Union (EU) leaders and members of the G7. The Brussels summits are meant to demonstrate allied unity, but they also showcased the difficulty of coordinating sanctions and military aid when the main actors have different priorities. European leaders are limited by their dependence on Russian natural gas, and the United States is wary of any moves that could be interpreted as direct military engagement. Western leaders, however, remain unified in their rejection of a no-fly zone despite President Zelensky's consistent exhortations.

President Biden has been more vocal in recent days about U.S. fears that Russian President Vladimir Putin could use chemical or biological weapons against Ukrainian targets. Speaking at the Brussels G7 summit about the possible use of chemical weapons, President Biden said: "We would respond...The nature of the response would depend on the nature of the use."¹ The White House has reportedly set up a team to map a response to potential weapons of mass destruction (WMD) scenarios, while

¹ <https://twitter.com/mviser/status/1507049070006874118>



NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg warned that evidence of Russia's intent to use chemical WMDs is increasing. Anonymous U.S. officials also suggested that a scenario involving WMDs may force NATO to become directly involved in the conflict and could lead to a significant regional escalation in the war.²

Russia is unlikely to use WMDs—particularly nuclear weapons—under any scenario, given both the massive risks of such action and NATO's close monitoring of the war. Kremlin signaling about nuclear weapons, including the “special combat regime” for Russian nuclear forces that President Putin announced at the beginning of the conflict, was likely defensive in nature and designed as a warning to Western forces to stay out of the war. Additionally, Russian nuclear doctrine does not allow one individual to decide to use nuclear weapons; the process requires at least two of three nuclear suitcases and the assent of the general staff.³ Nevertheless, President Bashar al-Assad's military, with Russian support, has an extensively-documented history of using chemical weapons against civilian targets during the Syrian civil war.

International Response

Chancellor Olaf Scholz spoke to the German parliament on March 23, 2022, to detail Germany's response to the ongoing conflict. Chancellor Scholz emphasized that NATO will not have an active role in the conflict and rejected Ukrainian demands for a no-fly zone, echoing prior U.S. and British assertions. He said that Germany would end its dependence on Russian fossil fuels but reiterated that they would not agree to an embargo on Russian natural gas, as it would—according to Chancellor Scholz—hurt Europeans more than it would hurt Russia's war effort. European leaders do not appear prepared to countenance the risk of wholly-abandoning Russian natural gas, and it is unclear whether an escalation in the conflict would change that calculus. However, the United States is expected to announce a plan on March 25, 2022, to provide the EU with an additional 15 billion cubic meters of liquified natural gas by the end of 2022 in an effort to hasten Europe's break with Russian natural gas.

In recent days, President Zelensky has used his international visibility to push for greater Western action against Russia. While his calls for a no-fly zone have gone unheeded, he has had greater success pressuring Western corporations to suspend or reduce their business operations in Russia. On March 23, 2022, in a speech to France's parliament, President Zelensky demanded that French companies Renault, Auchan, and Leroy Merlin “stop sponsoring the Russian war machine,” and he used an address to Switzerland to criticize food and beverage company Nestlé. Renault announced on the same day that it would suspend operations at its Moscow factory.

Polish Interior Minister Mariusz Kaminski stated on March 23, 2022, that Poland identified 45 Russian diplomats working as spies in the Warsaw embassy and that they

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/23/us/politics/biden-russia-nuclear-weapons.html>

³ <https://warontherocks.com/2022/03/understanding-putins-nuclear-decision-making/>



had been given five days to leave the country. The Russian embassy denied the allegations of espionage and said that they have the right to retaliate.

Russian Response

President Putin announced on March 23, 2022, that Russia would soon implement measures to invoice gas payments due from “unfriendly” European countries in Russian rubles. President’s Putin’s announcement increased the price of natural gas futures on European markets and strengthened the ruble but could pose a risk to the fulfillment of gas contracts. The payment for Russian natural gas in most current contracts among EU members is denominated in euros, though some may include an existing option to pay in rubles. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said that Germany would not pay rubles for Russian gas because the contracts clearly stated that they would be fulfilled in euros.⁴

Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov confirmed on March 23, 2022, that Anatoly Chubais, climate envoy for the Russian government, resigned from his post.⁵ Chubais was one of Russia’s foremost political figures in the 1990s and one of the leaders of the country’s rapid privatization of formerly state-owned enterprises. He is presumed to be the most prominent and senior figure within Russian leadership to break with President Putin.

Reports that several senior defense and intelligence officials were detained suggest that Russian security services may be coming under scrutiny for the intelligence that supported the invasion. Two journalists writing for the news outlet *Meduza* reported that Sergey Beseda, head of the Federal Security Service’s (FSB) Fifth Service, and his deputy Anatoly Bolukh were placed under house arrest after the Russian military’s failure to quickly overrun Ukrainian forces.⁶ Netherlands-based investigative journalism group *Bellingcat* later reported that the deputy head of Rosgvardia, the Russian national guard that has featured extensively in the fighting and reportedly suffered heavy losses, was detained and later fired.⁷ However, there is no evidence of mass detentions or purges of senior officials, and even the reporting about Beseda’s detention has been questioned.⁸

Opposition activist and political figure Alexey Navalny was sentenced to nine additional years in prison on March 22, 2022, adding to the growing crackdown on dissent and opposition within Russia. The sentence will be added to the 2.5 years he is currently serving for violating the terms of his parole from a prior embezzlement charge. He was arrested upon returning to Russia in January 2021 after recovering in Germany from an attempted assassination. Navalny’s main organization, the

⁴ <https://twitter.com/CNBCMiddleEast/status/1507052444659818496>

⁵ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60849918>

⁶ <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2022/03/11/from-bad-intel-to-worse>

⁷ <https://twitter.com/christogrozev/status/1504440205352349700>

⁸ <https://fsb.dossier.center/beseda/>



Anti-Corruption Foundation, is officially designated an extremist organization in Russia, and many of Navalny's allies have been arrested or have fled the country.

A U.S. embassy official was given access to speak with detained American basketball player Britney Griner on March 22, 2022, and the U.S. State Department reported that Griner was in good condition. Griner was arrested in Moscow on February 17, 2022, and is accused of attempting to smuggle narcotics. Her detention was recently extended to May 19, 2022, by a Moscow court.



Source: <https://www.ft.com/content/737584c8-3dfb-43f2-b6be-e5fcd2bd1cc5>

Physical Security Impacts

Russian forces have encircled Mariupol and appear to be slowly advancing through the city via intense bombardment and street-by-street fighting. The current urban warfare in Mariupol is perhaps the most intense fighting yet seen in the war. The Ukrainian government has expressed its desire to relieve the city, but an effective counterattack against Russian forces in the area is unlikely; the Russian military will likely occupy the whole city in the coming weeks. Russia has demonstrated a serious commitment to taking Mariupol, with significant firepower focused on the city, but what they will do with a captured Mariupol is unclear. Mariupol links the Russian military occupation of Donetsk with the forces coming from Crimea and could form the basis of a so-called land bridge to occupied Crimea. President Putin's recognition of the "independence" of the entire Donetsk region suggests that Mariupol will not be used as a trading piece in negotiations and that Russia intends to incorporate the vital port city into a larger "Donetsk People's Republic."



The Russian Ministry of Defense reported that Russian forces have taken control of Izyum, a strategically important town between Kharkiv and Donetsk in eastern Ukraine. While the claim has not been independently verified, Izyum's capture has been a clear Russian objective and part of the effort to link forces moving south from Kharkiv with those driving north from Mariupol to cut off Ukrainian fighters in the eastern salient.

Russian operations around Kyiv have slowed, and it appears that a full encirclement of the capital city is no longer possible in this phase of the fighting—though this objective may be reassessed after a future ceasefire. This likely suggests that Russian forces throughout Ukraine are preparing for a more protracted conflict based on smaller territorial gains and long-range bombardment of major urban areas. The result will be greater civilian casualties and possibly-altered Russian war aims that focus on the conquest of the full Donetsk and Luhansk regions.