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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

Russian forces are continuing to mass northwest of Kyiv and will likely begin a concerted effort to encircle the city in the next 72 hours. In addition, the humanitarian situation in Ukraine is deteriorating—Russia has fired on evacuation corridors, and Mariupol has been without water and power for nearly a week. The U.S. Congress is pressuring the White House to support an import ban on Russian oil, but a similar move by the European Union (EU) is less likely due to lack of German support. Further, NATO has rejected requests from the Ukrainian government to introduce a no-fly zone due to the likelihood it would lead to military escalation.

Analyst Commentary

Russian military forces massed to the northwest of Kyiv conducted limited operations over the weekend, likely in an effort to regroup and resupply in advance of a stronger push to encircle the Ukrainian capital in the coming days. Forces are also reportedly amassing northeast of Kyiv and will soon push toward the city to cut it off on the east side of the Dnipro river. Russia's primary political objective remains the seizure of Kyiv and capitulation of Ukrainian leadership. In the first days of the war, Russia attempted to achieve this objective via a rapid advance on Kyiv and the seizure of key Ukrainian military and strategic positions. The advance was stalled due to unexpectedly fierce Ukrainian resistance, and the fighting is now focused on the defense of key locations near major urban centers and Russian long-range bombing of Ukrainian cities.

In recent days, Russia has intensified its effort to destroy Ukrainian cities with long-range missile strikes and bombing runs. U.S. defense officials have stated that the number of Russian missile attacks on Ukraine grew by at least 100 from March 5-6, 2022, and Ukraine has accused Russia of using thermobaric bombs and cluster



munitions.¹ Russia is likely targeting urban centers with greater destruction in an attempt to destroy both civilian and military morale and to force the surrender of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.

The conflict has already created a humanitarian crisis that will only worsen in the coming weeks. Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, said on March 6, 2022, that more than 1.5 million Ukrainian refugees have crossed into neighboring countries since the start of the war, and the UN estimates that more than 1 million Ukrainians have been internally displaced.² Ukrainian and British officials have also alleged that Russia is intentionally bombing civilian targets, and the World Health Organization said that Russia is targeting healthcare facilities. Additionally, the Ukrainian government claimed that Russia violated the terms of a March 6, 2022, ceasefire by firing on evacuation routes out of the besieged southeastern city of Mariupol, while *The New York Times* reported on the mortar shelling of civilians attempting to flee the Kyiv suburb town of Irpin.³

On March 4, 2022, the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant in Enerhodar came under assault by Russian forces, which resulted in a fire at a training facility. Zaporizhzhia is the largest nuclear power plant in Europe and has since been seized by Russian forces. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) issued a statement indicating that all actions of plant management, “including measures related to the technical operation of the six reactor units,” now require approval by the Russian commander of the military unit that captured the plant.⁴ The IAEA also reported on March 7, 2022, that Russian forces have switched off some mobile networks and internet access at the plant, which has prevented the IAEA from accessing real-time information about radiation levels.⁵

International Response

Western leaders continue to debate the introduction of new sanctions but have not reached consensus on the most significant and controversial target: the Russian oil and gas industry. The U.S. Congress is pressuring the Biden administration to take aggressive action on Russian fossil fuels, despite the likelihood that it would cause energy prices to spike and create supply issues. The Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi said that Congress is exploring legislation that would

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<https://www.wsj.com/articles/ukraine-has-accused-russia-of-using-thermobaric-weapons-heres-what-makes-them-so-devastating-11646423184>

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-60555472>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/06/world/europe/ukraine-irpin-civilian-death.html>

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<https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/pressreleases/update-13-iaea-director-general-statement-on-situation-in-ukraine>

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https://www.cnn.com/europe/live-news/ukraine-russia-putin-news-03-06-22/h_da096fdaae7cc63f9b81c880d2a234ec



ban imports of Russian oil, suspend trade relations with Russia and Belarus, and attempt to deny Russia access to the World Trade Organization.⁶ Recent comments from the Biden White House suggest it is growing more amenable to possible sanctions on Russian oil and gas, but the White House has only officially said that it is consulting with EU partners on the possibility of a ban. The EU, on the other hand, appears less open to such a strategy. On March 7, 2022, Germany and Hungary officials said that they are opposed to sanctions on Russian energy, with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz stating that such action would impair the lives of ordinary Germans. Major multinational firms continue to suspend their operations or withdraw from Russia entirely. Over the weekend, Visa, Mastercard, American Express, Netflix, PricewaterhouseCoopers, and TikTok shut down their business activities in Russia.

The war is also forcing Europe to reconsider its security outlook. Denmark announced that it will hold a June referendum on whether to join the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy pact that it opted out of nearly 30 years ago. According to Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, Denmark will increase its defense spending to be in line with NATO's target of 2 percent of GDP and phase out its reliance on Russian energy. Finland and Sweden said that they will increase defense cooperation; both countries have reportedly seen growth in popular support for joining NATO, though the governments are non-committal on the possibility of holding referendums on NATO admission.⁷ The United States is discussing a plan to send F-16 fighter jets to Poland in exchange for Polish MiG-29 jets being given to Ukraine. It is unlikely that Ukraine would be able to effectively incorporate new aircraft into its defensive capabilities even if the plan is approved. However, NATO contributions will not extend to actions that would be considered direct involvement in the conflict. NATO has repeatedly rejected Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's requests that it create a no-fly zone over the country, assessing that it would require the shooting down of Russian aircraft and other offensive military actions.

Physical Security Impacts

The Russian military is massing west and northwest of Kyiv and will likely push south to cut off Ukrainian supply lines and evacuation corridors to and from the city. Russian forces are also approaching from the city's northeast and are expected to pursue a similar operation in an eastern arc around Kyiv. The attempted encirclement of Kyiv will likely begin in earnest within the next 72 hours. Elsewhere, Russian forces appear to be coordinating an advance west of Kharkiv, with the possible intent of joining forces north of the Donbas to advance on

⁶ <https://thehill.com/homenews/house/597098-house-working-on-bill-to-ban-russian-oil-imports>

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<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/sweden-finland-further-strengthen-security-cooperation-2022-03-05/>



Dnipro and cut off Ukrainian military forces operating in the eastern part of the country.

In the south, the military outlook is similarly deteriorating for Ukrainian forces. The Russian military may soon renew operations against Mykolaiv, and Russian forces have also moved northwest of the city. While they could bypass Mykolaiv and move toward Odesa, they will likely attempt another serious assault on Mykolaiv, as it is an important Black Sea port. Russian forces will eventually move against Odesa, though that operation may not begin for several days. U.S. defense officials said that there are no signs that an amphibious assault on Odesa is imminent.

Conditions in major Ukrainian cities, and in the country at large, are worsening. On March 6, 2022, the government announced that it suspended exports of meat, rye, oats, buckwheat, sugar, millet, and salt and that exports of wheat, corn, poultry, eggs, and oil will only be allowed with government approval.⁸ An estimated 200,000 civilians are trapped in Mariupol on the Black Sea coast. On March 6, 2022, the local government arranged a bus convoy to evacuate residents from the city, but it failed after Russian forces began shelling residential areas. Mariupol has reportedly been without running water and power for five days and is low on food. The Ukrainian military may attempt a counterattack to relieve forces in the city, as it is not clear how much longer Mariupol can hold out. In Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city, Russia has largely withheld from urban combat operations, but it continues to inflict massive damage on civilian targets using missile attacks and bombing raids.

Despite the dire conditions in many besieged Ukrainian cities, residents in occupied Kherson, Melitopol, and elsewhere rallied in the streets to confront Russian occupation forces.⁹ If Russia intends to continue its occupation of captured Ukrainian cities, such public protest will become much more dangerous in the coming weeks. In order to solidify control of civilian populations, Russia would likely bring in security services to replace the military as the occupation force. The presence of police and security services in captured cities would be a sign that extended control is intended and may be accompanied by arrests and less lenient—relatively speaking—treatment of Ukrainian civilians.

In Russia, police reportedly arrested at least 4,300 anti-war protestors in 56 cities on March 6, 2022. The scale of these protests is slightly surprising, as networks for coordinated demonstrations, like Alexey Navalny's organization, have largely been

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<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraine-introduces-export-licences-key-agricultural-commodities-2022-03-06/>

⁹ <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2022/03/7/7329088/>



destroyed in recent years by the Russian government, and new laws will allow for much harsher punishment of protestors. However, the scale of arrests and the unchallenged control of the security services suggest that they will not evolve into a large-scale, anti-war movement.