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Contact: Dr. Ian Davis
Email: idavis@natowatch.org
www.natowatch.org

Russia's war with Ukraine

As the war enters its 55th week both Kyiv and Moscow appear to be struggling with ammunition shortages and mounting casualties. Both sides claim hundreds of each other's troops were killed over recent days in the fight for Bakhmut. The prospects for peace talks remain low.

The war's bloodiest battle and ongoing airstrikes

The city of Bakhmut in the Donbas region has remained the focus of fierce fighting. According to the UK Ministry of Defence Bakhmut has become a "[killing zone](#)" and that over the past four days, Wagner group forces had taken control of most of the eastern part of the city, while Ukrainian forces held its west and had demolished key bridges over the Bakhmutka river, "which now marks the frontline".

A senior Ukrainian official Mykhailo Podolyak [said](#) the battle is pinning down Russia's best units and degrading them ahead of a planned Ukrainian spring counter-offensive. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg [warned](#) on 8 March that the city may fall to Russian forces in the coming days. "What we see is that Russia is throwing more troops, more forces and what Russia lacks in quality they try to make up in quantity. They have suffered big losses, but at the same time, we cannot rule out that Bakhmut may eventually fall in the coming days", he said. However, the US director of national intelligence, Avril Haines [told](#) a Senate hearing on 8 March that Russia is unlikely to capture significantly more territory this year, even with the possible capture of Bakhmut.

Meanwhile, President Zelensky [said](#) in an interview with CNN on 7 March that it will be an "open road" for Russian troops to capture cities in Ukraine should they seize control of Bakhmut. "This is tactical for us, we understand that after Bakhmut they could go further", he said. Ukrainian forces appeared to be "conducting a limited fighting withdrawal" in eastern Bakhmut, the Institute for the Study of War [said](#) on 6 March, but continued to inflict high casualties on the advancing Russian forces. Ukraine's national security chief, Oleksiy Danilov, [said](#) that one Ukrainian is being killed for every seven Russians, and claimed that Ukrainian soldiers are killing as many as 1,100 Russians a day (implying an estimated 100-200 Ukrainian casualties a day). Western officials have [estimated](#) Russian casualties in Bakhmut at 20,000-30,000. While no firm figure was offered for Ukrainian losses, it was claimed they were "significantly less". The Ukrainian deputy prime minister told regional media that fewer than 4,000 civilians, including 38 children, remained in Bakhmut, which had an estimated prewar population of about 70,000.

On 9 March Russia unleashed its largest missile [attack](#) against Ukraine in three weeks, including six hypersonic missiles able to evade air defences. At least nine civilians were reported killed and critical infrastructure and residential buildings in 10 regions were hit. The attacks struck a wide arc of targets, including cities stretching from Zhytomyr, Vynnytsia and Rivne in the west to Dnipro and Poltava in central Ukraine. Ukraine's air force [said](#) Russia launched 81 missiles in total, alongside eight Shahed drones. It claimed to have shot down

34 cruise missiles and four of the drones. The attacks also briefly disconnected the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant from the grid (see below). Russia's defence ministry [said](#) it had carried out a "massive retaliatory strike" as payback for a cross-border raid last week (see NATO Watch [update 44](#)). It claimed to have hit all its intended targets, destroying drone bases, disrupting railways and damaging facilities that make and repair arms.

Russia has launched 821 cruise and ballistic missiles against Ukraine since 10 October 2022, Ukraine's Defence Minister Oleksii Reznikov [said](#) during his meeting with Norway's Minister of Defense Bjørn Arild Gram on 11 March.

Stalled diplomacy

The war in Ukraine is driven by the interests of several "empires" and not just the "Russian empire", Pope Francis [said](#) in an interview on Swiss tv on 10 March, and he also described how he had offered to go to Moscow to negotiate peace but had been rebuffed. The same day, the UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak [said](#) the war will end at the negotiating table, but that he would support Volodymyr Zelensky to be in the "best possible place to have those talks" and recommitted to providing additional support to Ukraine to ensure it has a battlefield advantage. German chancellor Olaf Scholz [told](#) CNN on 5 March that it was "necessary" for Russian President Putin to understand he will not win the Ukraine war, so negotiations to end the conflict can begin. "If you look at the proposal of the Ukrainians, it is easy to understand that they are ready for peace," he added.

Despite repeated calls from the UN Secretary General for the war to end, few other voices seem to share this view. Both President Zelensky and President Putin have previously expressed a willingness to negotiate an end to the war, but their positions remain so far apart that there are no real hopes of peace talks soon. There have been some negotiations on key issues, such as the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant, getting grain out of Ukraine and in organising prisoner swaps—in the [latest](#)

[prisoner exchange](#), 130 Ukrainian and 90 Russian troops were released—but no Ukrainian-Russian negotiations since March 2022 on the big issues. President Zelensky said in a pre-recorded CNN [interview](#) on 8 March, for example, that he will not meet with Putin until Russia leaves Ukraine. When asked what it would take to get him to meet with Putin, Zelensky said, "We don't have any circumstances to talk to the Russian Federation president because he doesn't hold his word" and "Russia should leave our territory. And after that, we're happy to join the diplomatic tools. In order to do that, we can find any format with our partners just after that". For its part, Russia shows no signs of being ready to respect Ukraine's sovereignty and pre-war borders. For example, the Kremlin's spokesperson, Dmitry Peskov, [said](#) on 28 February that Russia is open to negotiations to end the conflict in Ukraine, but he insisted Moscow would "never compromise" on what he described as new "territorial realities", meaning Moscow would not renounce its claims to four Ukrainian regions that Putin annexed in September 2022.

For options of what a possible settlement for Ukraine might look like, see Cambridge University's [Ukraine Peace Settlement Project](#).

Military and financial assistance to Ukraine and Russia

Ukraine continues to rely heavily on international military and financial support from Western states. Most of the military assistance has come in the form of bilateral arms transfers, training and other support, which is being coordinated by the US-led Ukraine Defence Contact Group, which meets on an ad hoc basis and involves Ministers of Defence and senior military officials from Western-aligned states from around the world. The most recent meeting [took place](#) on 14 February during the NATO Defence Ministers meeting in Brussels. In addition, NATO agreed at its June [Madrid Summit](#) to strengthen a 2016 [Comprehensive Assistance Package](#) for Ukraine. The additional elements to the package include both short-term assistance

(ranging from fuel, protective equipment to portable anti-drone systems and secure communications) and longer-term support (to help modernize the Ukrainian armed forces to NATO interoperability standards and strengthen its defence and security institutions).

The United States is the [largest](#) provider of military assistance to Ukraine, having committed roughly \$31.7 billion since February 2022. In comparison, the top recipient in other years, Israel, received between \$3 and \$4 billion. European and other partners have [pledged](#) about \$12-15 billion in military support to Ukraine, with more to come. [The EU](#) is also providing non-lethal and lethal arms through its European Peace Facility (EPF). This is the first time the EU has approved the supply of lethal weapons to a third country. To date, the EU has committed €3.1 billion in assistance, and in October 2022, the EU also approved a new training mission for the Ukrainian armed forces.

Recent European announcements

The EU is prepared to disburse a further €2 billion to boost ammunition production and deliveries to Ukraine, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell [said](#) on 8 March. Speaking from Stockholm where EU defence ministers had gathered for an informal summit to discuss plans for joint weapons procurement to boost ammunition deliveries to Ukraine and replenish depleted domestic stockpiles, Borrell stressed that "time is of the essence". Major questions regarding funding and scale remain to be resolved in what would be a landmark move.

A British-led £520m international fund to provide fresh weapons for Ukraine and intended to be "low bureaucracy" has been plagued by delays, with only £200m allocated amid [warnings](#) that the rest of the funding will not provide arms at the front "until the summer". Meanwhile, Switzerland's government [said](#) on 10 March it will not change its longstanding policy banning the transfer of Swiss-made arms to a third country despite growing pressure to export them to Ukraine.

Combat aircraft

During visits to London, Paris and Brussels in early February (see NATO Watch [update 43](#)) (President Zelensky urged EU leaders and Britain to supply Ukraine with combat aircraft. Since then, the lobbying has continued. Latvia's Prime Minister [said](#) on 4 March western states delivering fighter jets to support Ukraine defending itself against Russia is "only a question of time". In an interview on 11 March Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba [urged](#) Germany to speed up supplies of ammunition and to start training Ukrainian pilots on western fighter jets. Kuleba told the Bild am Sonntag newspaper that ammunition shortages were the "number one" problem in Ukraine's attempt to repel Russia's invasion.

Military assistance to Russia

External military support to Russia so far has been limited to a handful of states, principally Belarus, [Iran](#) and [North Korea](#). Russia has been capturing some of the US and NATO-provided weapons and equipment left on the battlefield in Ukraine and sending them to Iran, where the US believes Tehran will try to reverse-engineer the systems, according to a CNN [report](#). In addition, Iran has reached a [deal](#) to buy advanced Su-35 combat aircraft from Russia, Iranian state media said on 11 March, expanding a relationship that has seen Iranian-built drones used in Russia's war on Ukraine.

For further details on arms transfers to Ukraine, see, the [Forum on the Arms Trade](#). For a timeline of every US arms shipment to Ukraine that has been announced since the war began, see [here](#). And for a list of the total military support from Germany, see [here](#).

Humanitarian consequences of the war

Exact figures for the number of war fatalities, both military and civilian, are difficult to verify and confirm. [Undercounting and manipulation](#) of the data is common in war. According to the Supreme Commander of the Joint NATO Forces in Europe and Commander of the US Armed

Forces in Europe, General Christopher Cavoli, over [200,000 Russian soldiers](#) and more than 1,800 officers have been "killed or wounded" in the war. Ukraine [claims](#) to have killed more than 153,000 Russian soldiers in the war to date. Speaking on Ukrainian tv on 2 December, Kyiv's presidential adviser Mykhailo Podolyak [said](#) up to 13,000 Ukrainian soldiers have been killed since Russia invaded in February, apparently based on official figures from Ukraine's general staff. However, at certain points in the war, Ukraine [said](#) that between 100 and 200 of its forces were dying each day on the battlefield, making Podolyak's estimate seem conservative.

According to [data](#) collected by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), as at 5 March, 8,173 civilians have died since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. The actual civilian casualty figures are likely to be considerably higher, as the receipt of information from some locations where intense hostilities have been going on has been delayed and many reports are still pending corroboration. According to [Action on Armed Violence](#) (AOAV) the number of civilian casualties from explosive violence in the Ukrainian conflict reached 11,740 people by 10 March. From this number, 4,057 were killed and 7,683 were injured. Ninety-four per cent (11,067) of civilian casualties have occurred in populated areas.

According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project ([ACLED](#)), a disaggregated data collection, analysis and crisis mapping project, there were a total of 37,803 conflict-related fatalities in Ukraine between 24 February 2022 and 3 March 2023: 19,048 in explosions/remote violence; 17,481 in battles; 1,270 in violence against civilians; and 4 in protests.

The number of refugees from the conflict have now surpassed 8 million. As of 28 February, there were 8,108,448 [refugees](#) from Ukraine recorded across Europe, 4,890,639 of whom were registered for Temporary Protection or similar national protection schemes in Europe. This gives them the right to live and work in any

EU country and benefit from housing and schooling assistance.

Continuing concerns about nuclear facilities

Russian airstrikes on 9 March cut off the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant from the power grid, the company Enerhoatom [said](#). The plant was forced on to emergency diesel power to prevent a meltdown, but it was later reconnected to Ukraine's energy grid, operator Ukrenergo said. In August last year fires caused by [shelling](#) cut the last remaining power line to the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, temporarily disconnecting it from the grid for the first time in nearly 40 years of operation. Then, it took two weeks for power to be restored to the plant.

There have been ongoing fears Russia's relentless targeting of Ukraine's electricity grid will threaten the safety of the country's nuclear power plants. Most international concern has focused on the Zaporizhzhia plant, which is in Russian hands but operated by Ukrainian workers. It is Europe's largest, provided about a fifth of Ukraine's electricity before Russia's invasion, and a 14-member [expert mission](#) from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) carried out an inspection of the plant in early September. For further details see NATO Watch updates [23](#) through to [27](#). The IAEA now has a permanent presence at all five of Ukraine's nuclear facilities.

Further reading:

On outcomes and consequences of the war

[Russia can keep up this level of fighting intensity in Ukraine for 2 more years, NATO country intel says](#), Business Insider, 10 March 2023

Connor Echols, [Diplomacy Watch: Tensions grow in West as brutal war drags on](#), Responsible Statecraft, 10 March 2023

[Russia has been sending some US-provided weapons captured in Ukraine to Iran, sources say](#), CNN, 10 March 2023

Michael Hikari Cecire, [Ukraine as Russian Imperial Action: Challenges and Policy Options](#), RUSI Commentary, 9 March 2023

Artin DerSimonian, [Ukraine war unleashed similar West-Russia divide in Georgia](#), Responsible Statecraft, 9 March 2023

John Feffer, [Ukraine's Future: Like Korea Or Yugoslavia?](#) Foreign Policy in Focus, 8 March 2023

[NATO Secretary General at EU Defence Ministerial: we must boost ammunition stockpiles, ramp up production](#), NATO News Release, 8 March 2023

[NATO chief: Russian forces may take Bakhmut 'in the coming days'](#), The Hill, 8 March 2023

Joshua Keating, [Why joining NATO and the EU are life or death issues for so many Ukrainians](#), Grid, 7 March 2023

Anatol Lieven, [A looming crisis in Moldova's breakaway state](#), Responsible Statecraft, 7 March 2023

Sidharth Kaushal and Kevin Rowlands, [Tackling the Underwater Threat: How Ukraine Can Combat Russian Submarines](#), RUSI Commentary, 7 March 2023

Filip Bryjka, [Wagner Group Transforms in the Wake of the War in Ukraine](#), Polish Institute of International Affairs, Bulletin No. 23 (2142), 7 March 2023

Naman Karl-Thomas Habtom, [The Potential Consequences for Africa of an FTO Designation of the Wagner Group](#), Lawfare, 7 March 2023

[NATO Secretary General to parliamentarians: support Ukraine for as long as it takes](#), NATO News Release, 6 March 2023

Suzanne Loftus, [Biden must resist calls to give Zelensky all that he wants](#), Responsible Statecraft, 6 March 2023

Ian Li, [Constructing the Orc: Embracing Fiction in Ukraine's Tactical Narrative](#), RUSI Commentary, 6 March 2023

Ted Galen Carpenter, [Is weakening support for Ukraine war following a historical pattern?](#) Responsible Statecraft, 6 March 2023

Alexander J. Motyl, [It's not NATO — Putin always has had expansionist designs](#), The Hill, 6 March 2023

Ieva Cesnulaityte, [How to shore up democracy in Eastern Europe after the Ukraine war](#), Responsible Statecraft, 5 March 2023

Jeremy Scahill, [The Disturbing Groupthink Over the War in Ukraine](#), The Intercept, 3 March 2023

ACLED, [War in Ukraine: One Year On, Nowhere Safe](#), 1 March 2023

On the risk of nuclear war

There have been [concerns](#) for many months that the war in Ukraine might escalate to the use of nuclear, chemical or biological weapons. Russia's former president Dmitry Medvedev said in [remarks](#) published on 27 February, for example, that the continued arms supply to Kyiv risks a global nuclear catastrophe, reiterating his threat of nuclear war over Ukraine. Medvedev's apocalyptic rhetoric has been seen as an attempt to deter Kyiv's western allies from getting even more involved in the war. Meanwhile, President Putin announced on 21 February that Moscow would suspend its participation in the New START treaty, threatening the end of the last remaining nuclear arms control agreement between the United States and Russia.

On investigations of war crimes in Ukraine

On 6 March Ukraine urged the International Criminal Court (ICC) to [investigate](#) footage circulating on social media that appeared to show Russian fighters killing a Ukrainian prisoner of war. Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba [wrote](#) on Twitter that the "horrific" video was more "proof this war is genocidal", adding that it was "imperative" that the ICC prosecutor Karim Khan "launches an immediate ICC investigation into this heinous war crime".

Meanwhile, the Pentagon has been accused of blocking the sharing of US intelligence with the ICC about Russian war crimes in Ukraine, [according](#) to a report in the New York Times on 8 March. The US Defence Department is said to be firmly opposed to using the ICC, as a means of holding Russian forces accountable for widespread war crimes on the grounds that the precedent could eventually be turned

against US soldiers. The move puts the Pentagon at odds with the rest of the Biden administration and many members of Congress, who gave special permission to share US intelligence with the court despite the fact that Washington rejects its jurisdiction (as does Moscow and Beijing). Ukraine's November 2022 10-point [peace plan](#) called for a special tribunal to try Russian leaders for numerous alleged war crimes. "We are doing everything to ensure that the International Criminal Court is successful in punishing Russian war criminals," President Zelensky [said](#) on 3 March.

International fact-finding missions and investigations have identified clear patterns of violation of international humanitarian law and international human rights law in Ukraine since the Russian invasion in February 2022. The violations are wide-ranging, including the conduct of fighting as well as treatment of prisoners of war, forced abductions, torture, restriction of civil and human rights, and denial of essential services. The United Nations, the International Court of Justice, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the European Court of Human Rights, the ICC and Ukrainian national courts have all been active in attempting to hold criminals accountable.

The ICC, for example, opened an [investigation](#) into possible war crimes in Ukraine just days after Moscow's forces invaded and it dispatched dozens of investigators to the country to gather evidence. A substantial ICC investigative team [appears](#) to be working in Ukraine on a near permanent basis. Similarly, within the OSCE the Moscow Mechanism was activated to establish two expert missions to investigate violations and abuses committed in the war (see the subsequent [April](#) and [June](#) reports). On 14 July, 45 countries [agreed](#) at a conference in the Hague to coordinate investigations into suspected war crimes in Ukraine. In October, a [report](#) published by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine found reasonable grounds to conclude that an array of war crimes, violations of human rights and international humanitarian law have been committed in

Ukraine. Russian armed forces are responsible for the vast majority of the violations identified. Finally, a [report](#) published on 7 December by OHCHR said Russian forces killed at least 441 civilians in the early days of Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. The report documents attacks in dozens of towns and summary executions that it said might be war crimes. The actual number of victims in the Kyiv, Chernihiv and Sumy regions was likely to be much higher, the UN human rights office added. The report covers the period from the invasion's start on 24 February until early April, when Russian forces withdrew from those three areas.

On sanctions against Russia

Russia's invasion of Ukraine galvanized the US, UK and EU, and a handful of other Western-aligned countries, to unleash a series of [sanctions](#) meant to punish Vladimir Putin's government and pressure him to pull his forces back. While the sanctions lists are sometimes difficult to interpret, the EU has [sanctioned](#) 1,236 individuals and 115 entities—an approximate doubling of its entire sanctions portfolio across the dozens of sanctions regimes it implements; the UK Government has [frozen](#) more than £18bn of assets belonging to oligarchs and other Russians and UK [sanctions](#) have been imposed on 1,271 people according to [the annual review](#) of the Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation (OFSI), published on 10 November; and the US has [sanctioned](#) more than 1,000 individuals or organizations since the invasion. The numbers, and the pace of the rollout, dwarf the sanctions lists for the likes of Iran, North Korea, Libya, the thematic counterterrorism lists, and all others.

Canada [announced](#) on 10 March a ban on imports of Russian aluminium and steel products, with the aim of denying Moscow revenues to fund its war in Ukraine. The imports were worth almost C\$250m (US\$180m) in 2021, according to the latest government data. The US [obtained](#) a warrant to seize a Boeing aircraft owned by Russian oil company Rosneft that is valued at over \$25 million, the Justice Department said on 8 March.

The potential participation of Russian and Belarusian athletes at the Paris 2024 Summer Olympics remains controversial (see NATO Watch [update 44](#)). In January, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) set out a pathway for competitors from both countries to earn Olympic slots through Asian qualifying and to compete as neutral athletes. The UK government [has written to Olympic sponsors](#) urging them to pressure the IOC over its decision to allow Russians and Belarusians to compete. Meanwhile, the International Fencing Federation [decided](#) on 10 March to allow Russian and Belarusian athletes to compete in Olympic qualifying events. Fencing became the first Olympic sport to reopen events to the two countries, one year after their exclusion due to the war in Ukraine.

On global food security

During a visit to the Ukrainian capital Kyiv on 8 March, UN Secretary General António Guterres [told](#) journalists it was “critical” that a deal that allows safe passage for ships carrying grain out of Ukraine across the Black Sea be renewed. A senior UN trade official was due to meet Russian representatives to discuss the extension of the deal. Ukraine has already started talks with partners on extending the UN-backed Black Sea grain initiative aimed at ensuring Kyiv can keep shipping grain to global markets, a senior Ukrainian government source [said](#) on 7 March. The source said Ukraine had not held discussions with Russia, which blockaded Ukrainian Black Sea ports after its invasion last year, but that it was Kyiv’s understanding that its partners were talking to Moscow. Similarly, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu [said](#) on 5 March that Ankara was working hard to extend the initiative. A Russian foreign ministry spokesperson indicated Moscow was unhappy with aspects of the deal.

The war in Ukraine has not only led to a [significant spike](#) in food insecurity in Ukraine, it has also had a major impact on global supply chains and international trade in food and fertilizers. This has partly led to 50 million more people—the majority of them outside

Ukraine—having potentially become severely food insecure since the invasion.

Before the war, for example, Ukraine was the world’s fourth-largest corn exporter and fifth-biggest wheat seller. War damage could [cut](#) Ukraine’s potential grain harvest by 10 to 20 million tonnes a year, or up to a third based on its pre-war output. Most of Ukraine’s winter grain crops – winter wheat and barley – are in good condition and could produce a good harvest, Ukraine’s academy of agricultural science [said](#). Ukraine’s wheat harvest declined to 20.2 million tonnes in 2022 from 32.2 million tonnes in 2021.

On energy security in Europe

Ukraine will take part in an EU scheme to jointly buy gas in global markets, to procure 2bn cubic metres of the fuel ahead of next winter, the EU energy policy chief [said](#) on 9 March. Europe is striving to diversify its energy supply sources to curb its dependence on Russia. Gas shortages have been occurring across Europe and governments have been pushing to develop alternative supplies. Angola, for example, has [presented](#) itself as an alternative supplier of natural gas. The West accuses Russia of restricting energy supplies to boost prices in retaliation for sanctions imposed after Moscow’s invasion of Ukraine. Russia denies it is to blame, and instead attributes responsibility to Western sanctions and various technical problems.

Nord Stream update: the plot thickens

According to a [report](#) in Der Spiegel on 10 March the underwater bombing of the Nord Stream gas pipelines in September 2022 was carried out by a team of divers operating from a 15-metre chartered yacht called the Andromeda. The yacht was traced around the Baltic from its home marina in Rostock to the German island of Rügen and then to the Danish island of Christiansø, close to the site of the 26 September blasts. Earlier, a 7 March [report](#) in the New York Times suggested a pro-Ukrainian militia could have carried out the attack. There was no evidence that the perpetrators were acting at the direction of the Ukrainian government the report said, citing US officials.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg [said](#) that it was still uncertain who carried out the attack, and that national investigations needed to be allowed time to finish. Russia said media reports about Nord Stream underscored the need to answer Moscow's questions about what happened. Foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova [said](#) those responsible for leaks to the media wanted to divert the public's attention and avoid a proper investigation.

Investigations by Denmark, Germany and Sweden into explosions on the Nord Stream gas pipelines have not yet concluded, the three countries [said](#) on 21 February when the UN Security Council met to discuss the September 2022 incident. Russia, which called for the meeting, wanted the Council to ask for an independent inquiry into the blasts on the pipelines connecting Russia and Germany. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg [announced](#) on 15 February 2023 the creation of a Critical Undersea Infrastructure Coordination Cell at NATO Headquarters. "The centre will facilitate engagement with industry and bring key military and civilian stakeholders together", Stoltenberg said, adding that the centre will also share best practices, leverage innovate technologies and boost the security of allied undersea infrastructure". The sabotage of the Nord Stream pipelines highlighted the vulnerability of undersea energy pipelines and communication cables. In response, NATO member states increased their military presence around key infrastructure, including with ships and patrol aircraft. In January 2023, NATO and the EU also set up a joint task force to protect critical infrastructure.

[NATO cautious amid ongoing Nord Stream blasts investigation](#), Al Jazeera, 8 March 2023

Kelley Beacar Vlahos, [On NYT Nord Stream theory, German official raises specter of 'false flag'](#), Responsible Statecraft, 8 March 2023

[NATO Mum on Explosive New Nord Stream Accusations](#), US News, 7 March 2023

[Intelligence Suggests Pro-Ukrainian Group Sabotaged Pipelines, U.S. Officials Say](#), New York Times, 7 March 2023

Rene Tebel, [Seymour Hersh's Nord Stream Theory: Fact or Fiction?](#), Geopolitical Monitor, 2 March 2023

On China's position on the war

Despite widespread Western criticism of China's position on the war in Ukraine, and the claim in NATO's new [Strategic Concept](#) of a "deepening strategic partnership" between China and Russia, there is no evidence that China has been giving lethal support for Russia's war in Ukraine. Moreover, China is now being touted both as a potential mediator in the conflict and as a future supplier of lethal aid to Russia (see NATO Watch [update 44](#)). China's new Foreign Minister In a press conference on 7 March, Qin Gang, in his first appearance as Foreign Minister, [said](#) China must strengthen its relationship with Russia in the face of continued hostility from the US. Qin outlined China's foreign policy agenda for the coming years, presenting its relationship with Russia as a beacon of strength and stability, and the US and its allies as a source of tension and conflict. Xi Jinping, China's president, is expected to visit Putin in Russia in the coming months.

[NATO Outlines How It Will Respond if China Supplies Weapons to Russia](#), Newsweek, 8 March 2023

Sheena Chestnut Greitens, [China's Response to War in Ukraine](#), Asian Survey, Vol. 62, Number 5-6, 2022, pp. 751–781.

On developments within Ukraine

Ukrainian officials on 10 March [ordered](#) a historically Russian-aligned wing of the Ukrainian Orthodox church to leave a monastery complex in Kyiv where it is based, the latest move against a denomination regarded with deep suspicion by the government.

On developments within Russia

Russia's premier tank force is expected to be re-equipped with Soviet-made T-62 tanks first fielded in 1954 to make up for combat losses, the UK Ministry of Defence [said](#). The MoD said

there was a “realistic” possibility” that the 60-year-old tanks would be supplied to units that had been expected to receive the next-generation T-14 Armata main battle tank.

Russia has continued its crackdown on opponents of the Putin administration. On 7 March a court in Moscow [jailed](#) a student activist, Dmitry Ivanov, for eight and a half years for social media posts criticising Russia’s war in Ukraine and of spreading false information about the Russian army. In addition, Russia’s prosecutor general [said](#) on 6 March it is labelling German-based anti-corruption group Transparency International an “undesirable organisation”. “It was found that the activities of this organisation clearly go beyond the declared goals and objectives,” it said. And on 10 March Russia [listed](#) the World Wildlife Fund as a foreign agent. According to the Russian justice ministry, the Washington DC-based conservation group, “under the guise of protecting nature and the environment ... tried to influence the decisions of the executive and legislative authorities” and “hindered the implementation of industrial and infrastructure projects”.

Meanwhile, on 9 March Russia [introduced](#) personal sanctions against 144 government officials, journalists, lawmakers and other public figures from the three Baltic states – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – deemed “most hostile” to Moscow.

On developments within Belarus

Belarus detained on 7 March what it [said](#) was a Ukrainian “terrorist group” working with Kyiv’s intelligence services to carry out sabotage at a Belarusian airfield. Belarusian anti-government activists said last month they had blown up a sophisticated Russian military surveillance aircraft in a drone attack at an airfield near the Belarusian capital, Minsk, a claim disputed by Moscow and Minsk. Ukraine’s foreign ministry has denied Kyiv was involved.

Meanwhile, the Belarus government has continued its crackdown on opponents. [Belarusian human rights activist Ales Bialiatski](#),

who won the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize while in prison, was sentenced to ten years in a penal colony, while the exiled Belarusian opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya was handed a 15-year jail term after being [convicted](#) in absentia for treason and “conspiracy to seize power”. She said the verdict was punishment for her efforts to promote democracy. In addition, President Alexander Lukashenko has [signed a bill](#) introducing capital punishment for state officials and military personnel convicted of high treason. The amendments to the country’s criminal code envisage death sentences for officials and service personnel who cause “irreparable damage” to Belarus’s national security through acts of treason. Belarus is the only country in Europe that has not banned capital punishment, which has previously been applied to those convicted of murder or terrorism.

Katia Glod, [The war in Ukraine one year on: will Belarus join the battlefield?](#) ELN Commentary, 28 February 2023

On developments within NATO

Permanent NATO deployments in the Baltics?

The long-term deployment of a German brigade to Lithuania is to be determined by NATO, German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius [said](#) on 7 March, amid calls for increased NATO presence in the country. Lithuania currently [hosts some 1,500 German troops](#), with [Berlin leading an international battalion since 2017](#), as part of a NATO effort to deter Russia. The Baltic region is among the alliance’s [weakest spots on the eastern flank](#). In addition, a German brigade of some 3,000 to 5,000 troops is on standby at home, ready for deployment within 10 days if necessary. Since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have been [calling for bigger and permanent NATO deployments](#). NATO members, however, have raised concerns regarding the cost of a permanent deployment, as well as it restricting free troop movement along the eastern flank.

Denmark scraps public holiday to boost military spending

Denmark's parliament has [voted](#) to abolish a springtime public holiday, observed since the 17th century, to boost spending on the military. The cancellation will provide an additional \$427 million for the defence budget.

[According to surveys, people in Germany are also skeptical about NATO's alliance obligations](#), Breaking Latest, 12 March 2023

[Over 2,000 rally in northern Spain against NATO, in support of Russia](#), Al Mayadeen, 12 March 2023

[Serbia gives definite 'no' to Kosovo recognition](#), NATO accession, Euractiv, 10 March 2023

[Secretary General's Annual Report](#), NATO News Release, 10 March 2023

[NATO marks International Women's Day with conference on gender equality in technology](#), NATO News Release, 9 March 2023

[Doorstep statement](#) by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg ahead of the meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council of the European Union with Defence Ministers, 8 March 2023

[NATO team in North Macedonia to help against hybrid attacks](#), NATO News Release, 8 March 2023

[Germany says troop deployment in Lithuania up to NATO](#), Deutsche Welle, 7 March 2023

[NATO Secretary General: Albania plays a key role promoting stability in the Western Balkans](#), NATO News Release, 7 March 2023

[Lithuania wants permanent German brigade, Germany says it's 'up to NATO'](#), Reuters, 7 March 2023

[NATO Deputy Secretary General: resilience requires close cooperation with partners like Ireland](#), NATO News Release, 7 March 2023

[NATO Taking Part in 'Air Policing' Missions on Russia's Doorstep](#), Newsweek, 6 March 2023

[Preparing for Russia: Inside NATO fighter pilot training in Texas](#), Air Force Times, 6 March 2023

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Pieter Balcaena, Cind Du Boisa and Caroline Buts, [Sharing the Burden of Hybrid Threats: Lessons from the Economics of Alliances](#), Defence and Peace Economics, Vol. 34, No. 2, 2023, pp. 142–159

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On Finland and Sweden joining NATO

Finland and Sweden were invited to join NATO, after a [trilateral memorandum](#) with Turkey agreed on the eve of the NATO Madrid Summit assuaged Ankara's previous objections. The two Nordic countries will become NATO members after the Accession Protocol is ratified by all 30 member states. The invitation to Finland and Sweden represents a major geopolitical shift in Europe as the two countries move away from neutrality. To date, 28 NATO member states have ratified the decision. Hungary and Turkey are the two member states where parliaments have not yet been asked to vote on the issue.

The assumption is that Turkey is likely to wait until after a general election in June 2023, but ratification by Turkey is still by no means certain. Turkey has made its approval conditional on Stockholm cracking down on exiled Kurdish militants and other groups that Ankara considers a threat to its national security. Finland's parliament on 1 March ratified NATO's founding treaties (see NATO Watch [update 44](#)), increases the chances of it becoming a member before its neighbour Sweden. Both had previously said they want to join "[hand in hand](#)".

Talks between Turkey, Sweden and Finland resumed on 9 March, after a delay in January in the wake of a Quran-burning [protest](#) (see NATO Watch [update 40](#)), which it later transpired was [funded](#) by a far-right journalist with links to Kremlin-backed media. Jens Stoltenberg convened representatives from



the three governments in the third meeting of the Permanent Joint Mechanism since its creation last year. However, Ankara showed no signs of lifting its objection on Stockholm and Helsinki's NATO accession.

Meanwhile, a parliamentary [delegation](#) from Hungary on 7 March said that it supports Sweden's NATO membership bid after meeting the speaker of the Swedish parliament to iron out what Hungary's governing party has called "political disputes". Some Hungarian MPs have raised doubts about supporting the NATO membership applications, citing what they call "blatant lies" from Stockholm and Helsinki on the state of Hungary's democracy. But the Hungarian delegation indicated that the parliament in Budapest would ultimately ratify Sweden's NATO bid.

[Sweden's anti-Nato coalition hopes to put brakes on membership bid: 'Rushed, risky and wrong'](#), inews, 12 March 2023

[I should thank Putin for prompting Sweden and Finland to rapidly join NATO, says U.S. Ambassador](#), Barents Observer, 11 March 2023

Alexandra von Nahmen, [Turkey's blockade 'makes NATO weaker'](#), Deutsche Welle, 10 March 2023

[NATO Secretary General hosts meeting of senior officials from Türkiye, Finland and Sweden](#), NATO News Release, 9 March 2023

[No NATO yet, Turkey tells Sweden and Finland](#), Politico, 9 March 2023

[Sweden proposes security law seeking Turkey's backing for NATO bid](#), Reuters, 9 March 2023

[NATO chief pushes for Finland and Sweden to become new members by July](#), PBS News Hour, 9 March 2023

[Sweden, Finland and Turkey hold NATO talks, agree to more meetings](#), Reuters, 9 March 2023

Paul Levine, [The Turkish Veto: Why Erdogan Is Blocking Finland and Sweden's Path to NATO](#), Foreign Policy Research Institute, 8 March 2023

[Secretary General in Stockholm: time to welcome Finland and Sweden as NATO Allies](#), NATO News Release, 7 March 2023

[Hungarian delegation backs Sweden's NATO application](#), Associated Press, 7 March 2023

[Swedish parliament to vote on new anti-terror bill as NATO accession talks set to resume](#), Anadolu Agency, 6 June 2023

For further details see:

[Murky trilateral agreement results in Turkey lifting objections to Finland and Sweden's NATO application](#), NATO Watch News Brief, 29 June 2022

[Should Finland and Sweden hold a referendum on NATO membership?](#) NATO Watch Briefing no. 93, 6 May 2022

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