



News Brief Update 46

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Russia's war with Ukraine

As the war enters its 56th week both Kyiv and Moscow continued to be struggling with ammunition shortages and mounting casualties in the fight for Bakhmut. The prospects for peace talks remains low, although the Black Sea grain deal was renewed on 18 March. The conflict was in danger of further escalation after a US drone was downed by a Russian aircraft in the Black Sea area and the first pledges of combat aircraft to Ukraine were made by Poland and Slovakia. Meanwhile, an arrest warrant was issued for President Putin by the International Criminal Court in the Hague.

The UK Ministry of Defence said in its intelligence [update](#) on 14 March that Russian artillery ammunition shortages have probably worsened "to the extent that extremely punitive shell-rationing is in force on many parts of the front", adding that it was almost certainly "a key reason why no Russian formation has recently been able to generate operationally significant offensive action". A senior NATO official, cited by the Guardian, but speaking on condition of anonymity, [claimed](#) that Russia is sustaining up to 1,500 casualties a day in its current offensive, mostly in the eastern city of Bakhmut.

On 14 March AFP journalists in Eastern Ukraine [reported](#) seeing white phosphorus fired from Russian positions on an uninhabited road leading to nearby Bakhmut. Weapons containing phosphorus are incendiary arms whose use against civilians is banned, but they can be deployed against military targets under a 1980 convention signed in Geneva.

Russian aircraft down US drone over the Black Sea

A Russian Su-27 combat aircraft collided with a US MQ-9 Reaper drone on 14 March over the Black Sea. The incident marked another point of increasing tensions between the United States and Russia. A US European Command [statement](#) said the collision happened just after 7am on 14 March, when two Russian Su-27 fighter jets flew up to the MQ-9 Reaper drone over international waters about 75 miles southwest of Crimea. The statement said the Russian pilots sought to disrupt the US aircraft before the collision. The Pentagon said the drone was on a routine intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance (ISR) mission.

The Biden administration said one of the Russian jets clipped the drone's propellor, forcing the US to down the damaged drone. Russia admitted its aircraft intercepted the drone but said there was no direct contact and that the drone crashed on its own after making a sharp turn. Pentagon Press Secretary Brigadier General Pat Ryder speaking at a [news conference](#) on 14 March said, it demonstrated the "very unprofessional, unsafe airmanship on the part of these pilots". Russia's Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov [accused](#) the US of attempting to provoke Russia by flying a drone with its transponder turned off near a military zone.

The Russian and US defence ministers and military chiefs held rare phone [conversations](#) on 15 March to discuss the incident. Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu told his US counterpart Lloyd Austin that operating drone

flights near Crimea was provocative and could lead to an escalation, the Russian Defence Ministry said. Russia, the statement said, “had no interest in such a development but will in future react in due proportion”. Austin declined to offer any details on the call, including whether he criticised the Russian actions. But he reiterated at a news conference that the US intended to continue flying where international law allowed and demanded Russian military aircraft operate in a safe and professional manner. The UK Defence Secretary Ben Wallace [accused](#) Russia of acting “unprofessionally”, reflecting an emerging western view that the mid-air incident was a one-off, not immediately meriting anything stronger than diplomatic complaints.

The Pentagon subsequently released a [video](#) showing the aircraft making two exceptionally close passes of the un-crewed drone, spraying fuel in front of it, a harassment tactic that US experts say has not been seen before. The Kremlin said a decision on whether to retrieve the drone from the Black Sea would come from the Russian military. “If they deem it necessary to do that in the Black Sea for our interests and for our security, they will deal with that,” Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov [said](#) on 16 March. US officials [said](#) the debris could be in such deep water that recovery is impossible, and would have no real intelligence value. Russia’s defence secretary, Sergei Shoigu, [presented](#) state awards on 17 March to the pilots of the Su-27 planes for “preventing the violation of the borders of the special operation area by the American MQ-9 Reaper drone”.

ICC issues arrest warrant for President Putin

The International Criminal Court (ICC) on 17 March [issued](#) an arrest warrant for President Putin for overseeing the [mass abduction](#) of Ukrainian children. In granting the request for warrants by the ICC prosecutor, a panel of judges agreed that there were “reasonable grounds” to believe the Russian president and his children’s rights commissioner, Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova, bore responsibility for the “unlawful deportation” of Ukrainian

children. The warrants are the first to be issued by the ICC for crimes committed in the Ukraine war. 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 (see below).

US President Biden backed the ICC’s decision to issue an arrest warrant and [said](#) on 17 March the Russian president had “clearly committed war crimes”, adding “Well, I think it’s justified. But the question is – it’s not recognised internationally by us either. But I think it makes a very strong point”. The German chancellor, Olaf Scholz, also [welcomed](#) the ICC’s decision, saying: “The international criminal court is the right institution to investigate war crimes ... The fact is nobody is above the law and that’s what’s becoming clear right now”. President Zelensky [hailed](#) the ICC’s “historic” decision. Moscow [said](#) the ICC arrest warrant was “meaningless” and legally “void”. “Russia is not a party to the Rome statute of the international criminal court and bears no obligations under it,” Russia’s Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Maria Zakharova, said.

ICC sources [said](#) they thought it was now “very unlikely” Putin would travel to any country currently supporting Ukraine, and that if he did so he risked arrest. The Kremlin is likely to [spin](#) the ICC’s arrest warrant as proof that the west is seeking nothing short of regime change in Russia.

Stalled diplomacy

Ukraine’s Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said he and senior Chinese diplomat Qin Gang [discussed](#) the “significance of the principle of territorial integrity” during a phone call on 16 March. “I underscored the importance of [Ukraine president Volodymyr Zelensky’s] peace formula for ending the aggression and restoring just peace in Ukraine,” Kuleba wrote on Twitter. Qin told Kuleba that China “hopes that all parties will remain calm, rational and restrained, and resume peace talks as soon as

possible”, [according](#) to a Chinese foreign ministry statement.

China has increasingly positioned itself (or is being touted by others) as a potential mediator in the conflict (see NATO Watch [Update 45](#)). However, the United States has deep concerns about China undertaking such a role and promoting a ceasefire, the White House said on 17 March. A ceasefire in Ukraine would “in effect recognise Russia’s gains and its attempt to conquer its neighbour’s territory by force, allowing Russian troops to continue to occupy sovereign Ukrainian territory”, [said](#) the White House national security spokesperson, John Kirby.

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, 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](#) virtually on 15 March. 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.

Poland [detained](#) nine members of an alleged Russian spy ring who they say were gathering intelligence on weapons supplies to Ukraine

and making plans to sabotage the deliveries. Six people have been charged with preparing acts of sabotage and espionage, and charges are being prepared against the other three.

Poland and Slovakia to supply combat aircraft

Poland will be the first country to send combat aircraft to Ukraine. The Polish President Andrzej Duda [said](#) on 16 March that Warsaw would hand over four Soviet-made MiG-29 planes in the coming days and that “the rest are being prepared, serviced”. The White House said Poland’s announcement was a “sovereign decision” and would not prompt Joe Biden to supply Kyiv with American F-16 aircraft. The US president has [previously](#) said the US will not provide the combat aircraft that Ukraine has sought in its fight against Russia. White House spokesperson John Kirby [said](#) on 16 March that President Duda’s announcement “doesn’t change our calculus with respect to F-16s”. Slovakia became the second NATO member state to [pledge](#) combat aircraft a day later on 17 March. Prime Minister Eduard Heger told a news conference his government was “on the right side of history” as it announced the shipment of 13 MiG-29 combat aircraft to Ukraine. Russia [threatened](#) to destroy the aircraft.

Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin [suggested](#) Finland could donate an unspecified number of the Finnish Air Force’s (FAF) Boeing F/A-18C Hornet jets to aid Ukraine’s defence. The service is primed to decommission 62 Hornets jets in its multirole frontline fighter fleet between 2025 and 2030. In December 2021, the FAF decided to spend \$9.4 billion on a deal to procure 64 F-35s from Lockheed Martin to replace the aging Hornets.

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. For obvious reasons, the precise make-up of Ukraine’s air force, most likely around a tenth of the size of Russia’s, remains shrouded in secrecy. However, NATO allies are [unlikely](#) to send more advanced combat aircraft to Ukraine

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](#).

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 164,000 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 12 March, 8,231 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, 887 people by

17 March. From this number, 4,091 were killed and 7,796 were injured. Ninety-five per cent (11,240) 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 39,244 conflict-related fatalities in Ukraine between 24 February 2022 and 10 March 2023: 19,557 in explosions/remote violence; 18,410 in battles; 1,273 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 8,113,170 [refugees](#) from Ukraine recorded across Europe, 4,901,577 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.

Further reading:

On outcomes and consequences of the war

[Explainer: Why NATO allies are unlikely to send more advanced jets to Ukraine](#), CNN, 18 March 2023

Blaise Malley and Connor Echols, [Diplomacy Watch: Laying the groundwork for a peace deal in Ukraine](#), Responsible Statecraft, 17 March 2023

[Poland to be 1st NATO member to give Ukraine fighter jets](#), Associated Press, 16 March 2023

[Poland becomes first to pledge fighter jets to Ukraine](#), CNN, 16 March 2023

Kori Schake, [The U.S. Military Is Taking Notes on the War in Ukraine](#), World Politics Review, 16 March 2023 (paywall)

Robert I. Rotberg, [Putin's Folly, NATO's Rise and Turkey's Role](#), Blog, 16 March 2023

Vitaly Fedchenko, [Nuclear Security During Armed Conflict: Lessons From Ukraine](#), SIPRI Research Policy Paper, March 2023

[NATO Secretary General takes part in virtual Ukraine Defense Contact Group meeting](#), NATO News Release, 15 March 2023

Omer Duru, [Logistical Lessons From Ukraine—and What It Means for Taiwan](#), Lawfare, 15 March 2023

[Jeremy Scahill on Growing Proxy War Between U.S. and Russia & Downing of U.S. Drone in Black Sea](#), Democracy Now, 15 March 2023

Branko Marcetic, [The danger of downplaying the Ukrainian battlefield toll](#), Responsible Statecraft, 15 March 2023

Laura Courchesne, [Digitizing the Battlefield: Using Social Media to Track U.S. Weapons in Ukraine](#), Lawfare, 14 March 2023

Ali Wyne, [Despite the War in Ukraine, the U.S. Pivot to Asia Is Accelerating](#), World Politics Review, 14 March 2023 (paywall)

Connor Echols, [Russian jet hits US drone in apparent 'close pass' gone wrong](#), Responsible Statecraft, 14 March 2023

Geoffrey Roberts, [Whose 'Stalingrad' will Bakhmut be?](#) Responsible Statecraft, 14 March 2023

Tomas R Pickering, [How to Prepare for Peace Talks in Ukraine: Ending a War Requires Thinking Ahead](#), 14 March 2023

[Marin's F-18 proposal fizzles, as a new Finnish NATO tack emerges](#), Defense News, 14 March 2023

Arda Mevlutoglu, [One year into war, what are Ukraine's military capabilities?](#) Anadolu Agency, 13 March 2023

Daniel Fried, [To Secure Peace in Europe, Bring Ukraine into NATO](#), Just Security, 13 March 2023

Mark Hibbs, [The narrow field of options for safely managing Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant](#), Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, 10 March 2023

Kristine Berzina, [Russia's War in Ukraine: Top Ten Lessons](#), GMF, 9 March 2023

Murtaza Hussain, [The War in Ukraine is Just Getting Started](#), The Intercept, 9 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.

Wilfred Wan, Vitaly Fedchenko, Polina Sinovets and Iryna Maksymenko, [Nuclear Security in Ukraine and the Black Sea Region: New Threats, New Risks, New Consequences](#), SIPRI Research Policy Paper, March 2023

On investigations of war crimes in Ukraine

In addition to the issue of an arrest warrant by the International Criminal Court (ICC) on 17 March against President Putin (see above), a [report](#) from the UN-backed Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine published on 16 March said Russia has committed a wide-range of war crimes in Ukraine including wilful killings, systematic torture and the deportation of children. The report was released a year to the day after the Russian bombing of a theatre in Ukraine's south-eastern city of Mariupol which killed hundreds of people.

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. There have also been calls to confiscate already-frozen Russian state assets and Canada has [enacted](#) the authority to do so but has yet to exercise it.

Paul Stephan, [Justice and the Confiscation of Russian State Assets](#), Lawfare, 13 March 2023

On the Black Sea grain agreement and global food security

The Black Sea grain deal was [renewed](#) on 18 March (the date on which the initiative, brokered between Russia and Ukraine by the UN and Turkey in July 2022, was due to expire), according to parties to the agreement. Turkey and the UN announced the initiative was extended, but did not say for how long. A spokesperson for Russia's defence ministry said it had notified other parties that the deal was extended for 60 days, while a Ukrainian minister said the deal was extended for 120 days. The UN, Ukraine and Turkey had [called](#) for a 120-day rollover of the agreement, but Russia said the deal should be renewed for only 60 days.

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.

On energy security in Europe

Europe is striving to diversify its energy supply sources in order to curb its dependence on Russia. Gas shortages occurred across Europe during 2022 but now appear to have eased. Moldova is no longer receiving Russian gas or enduring the “blackmail” imposed by Gazprom over its difficulties in paying for supplies, the country's energy minister Victor Parlicov [said](#) on 15 March. Gazprom had been providing supplies only to Moldova's Russian-backed Transnistria separatist region since December, with none going to central authorities in Chisinau.

Questions continue to churn about who blew up the Nord Stream pipelines in September 2022. The investigative journalist Seymour Hersh reported the sabotage was carried out by the US Navy with remotely triggered explosives during NATO exercises, while according to other reports in the [New York Times](#) (7 March) [Der Spiegel](#) (10 March) the attack was carried out by a team of divers operating from a chartered yacht by a pro-Ukrainian militia (see NATO Watch [Update 45](#)). Investigations by Denmark, Germany and Sweden into explosions on the Nord Stream gas pipelines have not yet concluded. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg [announced](#) on 15 February 2023 the creation of a Critical Undersea Infrastructure Coordination Cell at NATO Headquarters. In January 2023, NATO and the EU also set up a joint task force to protect critical infrastructure.

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos, [Sy Hersh: No follow-up to explosive Nord Stream story](#), Responsible Statecraft, 15 March 2023

[The Nord Stream Bombing: Jeremy Scahill on Why U.S. Remains Most Likely Culprit in Pipeline Sabotage](#), Democracy Now, 15 March 2023

Jeremy Scahill, [Conflicting Reports Thicken Nord Stream Bombing Plot](#), The Intercept, 10 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 Xi Jinping is due to [visit](#) Russia on 20-22 March in an apparent show of support for President Putin. During the visit, the two leaders are expected to sign “important” bilateral documents and discuss issues of further development of comprehensive partnership and strategic interaction between Moscow and Beijing, the Chinese foreign ministry said. President Xi is also expected to subsequently hold a virtual meeting with President Zelensky.

On developments within Ukraine

Kyiv’s wartime curfew will be [reduced](#) by an hour to boost business. The head of Kyiv city administration, Serhiy Popko, said the new curfew period – starting at midnight instead of 11pm – would increase the time for public transport and that reducing its duration “should help reduce social tension, increase production, create new jobs”.

On developments within Russia

According to a [report](#), Russia’s Defence Ministry will start a new recruitment campaign on 1 April, with the aim of recruiting 400,000 professional soldiers to the Russian army. Russian military recruitment offices are trying to compensate for its losses in specialised soldiers, such as tank drivers and artillerymen. In addition, Yevgeny Prigozhin the founder of Russia’s Wagner Group [said](#) in an audio message on Telegram on 18 March, that the

group plans to recruit about 30,000 new fighters by the middle of May. Wagner recruitment centres, which he said last week had opened in 42 Russian cities, were hiring an average of 500-800 people a day, he added. In an earlier interview Prigozhin [said](#) that he had ambitions to turn his private military company into an “army with an ideology” that would fight for justice in Russia. The Wagner Group is also [recruiting](#) in schools and starting youth clubs.

A senior Russian parliamentarian [introduced](#) a bill on 13 March to raise the age of conscription to 21-30 years from the current 18-27 years by 2026. The UK Ministry of Defence [assessment](#) was that the law would probably be passed and come into force in January 2024. Meanwhile, the Biden administration has quietly [resumed deportations](#) of Russian asylum seekers to Russia, including those that were seeking to avoid being drafted into the Russian army, according to a report in the Guardian. This is an apparent reversal of the position adopted after Russia invaded Ukraine just over a year ago, when such removals were suspended.

In an [address](#) to Russia’s business elite on 16 March, President Putin told his country’s leading billionaires that Russia is facing a “sanctions war” and urged them to invest in new technology, production facilities and enterprises to help Russia overcome what he said were western attempts to destroy its economy.

On developments within NATO

NATO military exercises

Recent NATO exercises have included, 20,000 NATO troops, plus Finland and Sweden, training to defend Norway in exercises “[Joint Viking](#)” and “[Joint Warrior](#)”, the largest manoeuvres in Europe’s Arctic this year. In the Mediterranean, ships, submarines and aircraft from nine NATO Allies conducted anti-submarine warfare drills during exercise “[Dynamic Manta](#)”. France is holding its largest military drill in decades as part of “[Orion 23](#)”, involving 19,000 Allied troops over three months. Around 600 German troops are

practicing defending Lithuania during “[Griffin Lighting](#)”. NATO Spokesperson Oana Lungescu [said](#), “these are long-planned defensive exercises. In a more contested and dangerous security environment, they send a clear message: NATO stands strong and ready to defend every inch of Allied territory”.

In February, aircraft carriers from the United States, Italy and Spain trained together in the Mediterranean during the “[Neptune series](#)” of naval drills. US and French troops from NATO’s battlegroup in Romania tested the Alliance’s eastern flank defences, including with HIMARS firings, during “[Eagle Royal 23](#)”. Operating from the US’s northernmost base, the US deployed F-35 fighter jets to Thule air base in Greenland for the first time ever in January as part of “[Noble Defender](#)”. In Estonia, “[Winter Camp](#)” saw the participation of 30 British Challenger 2 tanks and Leopard 2 tanks from Denmark train in winter conditions”.

NATO and arms exports

The US share in global arms exports increased from 33% to 40% in 2018-22, and NATO ally France, the third-largest exporter of weapons, was also a significant beneficiary, with its share increasing from roughly 7.1% to 11%. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) data shows that NATO members US and France were responsible for more than half of all heavy weapons supplied worldwide in the period between 2018 and 2022. As per [the data](#), major European countries, mostly NATO members, increased their arms imports by 47%, in a period when the rest of the world, particularly the countries of the Global South, witnessed a significant decline (5.1%).

NATO and EU launch task force on resilience of critical infrastructure

NATO and the EU [launched](#) a new joint Task Force on Resilience of Critical Infrastructure on 16 March. First announced by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in January, the initiative brings together officials from both organisations to share best practices, situational awareness, and develop

principles to improve resilience. The Task Force will begin by focusing on four sectors: energy, transport, digital infrastructure, and space. NATO-EU cooperation has reached unprecedented levels in recent years, and particularly since the start of Russia’s war against Ukraine.

[NATO is racing to arm its Russian borders. Can it find the weapons?](#) Politico, 18 March 2023

[Secretary General off the coast of Norway: NATO is stepping up protection of critical infrastructure](#), NATO News Release, 17 March 2023

Jack Crawford, [Further Together: An Opening for NATO–EU Sanctions Cooperation](#), RUSI Commentary, 16 March 2023

[Earthquake response: NATO Allies and partners continue to provide aid to Türkiye](#), NATO News Release, 16 March 2023

[NATO and European Union launch task force on resilience of critical infrastructure](#), NATO News Release, 16 March 2023

Elizabeth Kennedy Trudeau, [A comprehensive and coordinated approach to strategic messaging](#), NATO Review, 16 March 2023

[How NATO sees the recent Russian jet incidents](#), Deutsche Welle, 15 March 2023

[Turkey’s anti-Erdoğan opposition vows a reset on EU and NATO](#), Politico, 15 March 2023

[US and NATO allies were responsible for nearly 65% of global arms exports in 2018-22](#), People’s Dispatch, 14 March 2023

[The Arctic is the latest arena for NATO and Russia to flex their military muscle](#), Japan Times, 14 March 2023

[Major exercises demonstrate NATO Allies readiness](#), NATO News Release, 13 March 2023

Robert Ellis, [US needs to clear up its policy on NATO ally Turkey – opinion](#), The Jerusalem Post, 13 March 2023

[Russia Can ‘Incapacitate’ European NATO Air Force In Case US Gets Entangled In A Conflict With China — New Study](#), Eurasian Times, 12 March 2023

[Russian Submarines off U.S. East Coast Spark Cold War Comparisons](#), Newsweek, 10 March 2023

North Atlantic Treaty Organization



[Summit prepares ground for 'NATOisation of Europe' and continues collision course with China and high levels of military spending](#), NATO Watch Briefing No.96, 6 July 2022

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.

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan [said](#) on 17 March that Turkey would start the process of ratifying Finland's NATO membership bid in parliament after Helsinki took "authentic and concrete steps" to keep its promises in a trilateral agreement. He also said Turkey's willingness to consider ratifying Sweden's NATO bid would "depend on the solid steps

Sweden will take". Sweden remained confident it would join NATO, the Foreign Minister Tobias Billström [said](#), adding that separate ratification of Finland and Sweden's bids by Ankara was "a development that we didn't want but it's something that we're prepared for".

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. Aa Quran-burning [protest](#) in Stockholm in January (see NATO Watch [update 40](#)), which it later transpired was [funded](#) by a far-right journalist with links to Kremlin-backed media, further complicated matters.

[Experts react: Turkey moves to approve Finland's NATO membership. Where does that leave Sweden?](#) Atlantic Council, 18 March 2023

[Turkey's president says he will back Finland's NATO bid](#), Associated Press, 17 March 2023

[Turkish president lifts veto on Finland's Nato application](#), The Guardian, 17 March 2023

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[Erdogan hints Turkey may ratify Finland's NATO membership](#), Associated Press, 15 March 2023

[Turkey has made its mind up about our Nato membership, says Finland](#), The Guardian, 15 March 2023

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[Likelihood Finland joins NATO before Sweden has increased, Swedish PM says](#), Reuters, 14 March 2023

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['NATO-hopeful Sweden, Finland must fulfill promises for Ankara's OK'](#), Daily Sabah, 12 March 2023

[Putin's NATO Warning Was 'Game Changer' for Finland-President](#), Newsweek, 12 March 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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