



News Brief Update 47

14 May 2023

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Russia's war with Ukraine

(Update covering the period 20 March-14 May 2023)

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Overview

For several months the war has involved nearly static frontlines and has now largely become a war of attrition. Russian forces still hold nearly a fifth of the country and Ukraine's western allies continue to supply military and financial aid to Ukraine. Ukraine is expected to soon mount a [counter-offensive](#) with the aim of reclaiming all its occupied territory. There has been intense speculation about when and where the counter-attack could start. Kyiv faces a larger army that has been digging into its defensive positions for months, with the UK Ministry of Defence [assessing](#) that Russia has built "some of the most extensive systems of military defensive works seen anywhere in the world for many decades" in the areas it controls in Ukraine as well as in its own border regions. However, the discipline and motivation of the Russian forces is [questioned](#) by some western analysts.

Director of national intelligence in the Biden administration, Avril Haines, [said](#) on 4 May that Russian forces in Ukraine are so degraded they cannot mount any significant offensive moves and are focused for now on consolidating control of occupied territory, with the aim of prolonging the conflict until western support for Kyiv wanes. However, Russian missile and artillery attacks on civilian infrastructure have continued. On 8 May, Moscow [launched](#) another large-scale drone and missile attack on Ukraine, including 60 Iranian-made kamikaze drones, while Russian artillery attacks killed 21 civilians in Ukraine's [Kherson region](#) on 3 May.

A major wave of cruise missile strikes during 26-28 April caused multiple fatalities. In the central Ukrainian city of Uman, for example, 23 people, including six children, were killed in the [missile strike](#). Ukraine's air force [claimed](#) on 6 May to have downed a Russian hypersonic missile over Kyiv using newly acquired US Patriot defence systems, the first known time the country has been able to intercept one of Moscow's most modern missiles.

Although Ukraine almost never publicly claims responsibility for attacks inside Russia and on Russian-controlled territory in Ukraine, such attacks appear to be increasing (see below).

Peace talks have remained stalled since March, with China's position on the war becoming increasingly central to prospects for diplomacy (see below). Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said he held a "long and meaningful" [phone call](#) with Chinese leader Xi Jinping on 26 April, in their first known contact since Russia's full-scale invasion more than a year ago. [Xi told Zelensky](#) that China would send special representatives to Ukraine and hold talks with all parties seeking peace, Chinese state media reported. The White House [welcomed the call](#) but said it was too soon to tell whether it would lead to a peace deal. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg also [welcomed](#) the discussion between the two leaders and acknowledged the possibility of the war ending at the "negotiating table".

The expected Ukrainian counter-offensive

On the 12 May Russia [said](#) some of its troops fell back "to more advantageous defensive positions" near a reservoir north-west of Bakhmut. It was Moscow's first admission that Ukraine was successfully recapturing ground around the largely destroyed eastern Ukrainian city Russia has been trying to conquer for more than 10 months. Wagner Group founder Yevgeny Prigozhin, whose troops have done most of the fighting in and around Bakhmut, [said](#) that what the Russian Defence Ministry had described was in fact a "rout" that had seen troops flee. Earlier Prigozhin [warned](#) that the expected Ukrainian

counteroffensive could turn into a "tragedy" for Russia, and complained that his fighters lacked ammunition. Prigozhin has frequently clashed with Moscow's defence establishment over the conduct of Russia's campaign in Ukraine, and he has frequently [threatened](#) to pull his forces back from Bakhmut because of heavy losses and inadequate ammunition supplies.

According to the Ukrainian Interior Ministry, the country has formed [eight new "storm" brigades](#) comprising up to 40,000 troops to take part in a future counteroffensive amid growing speculation about its timing and whether it can inflict serious defeats on Russia. The Ministry added that the brigades would need further training before being ready to fight. Earlier on 27 April, the NATO Secretary General [said](#) that Ukraine had taken delivery of 1,550 armoured vehicles and 230 tanks (more than 98% of the combat vehicles promised to Ukraine), along with large amounts of ammunition from the alliance and partner nations. He also said that NATO countries have trained and equipped nine new armoured brigades—in Western militaries, a brigade has between 3,000-5,000 troops suggesting that more than 30,000 new troops are available—leaving Ukraine in a "strong position" to continue to take territory.

Ukrainian attacks inside Russia and Crimea

According to Russia, the alleged [drone attack on the Kremlin](#) on 3 May was a planned terrorist act and an attempt on the life of President Putin. Ukraine denied any involvement and the incident was most likely either a 'warning shot across the bow' by Kyiv or a false-flag operation by Moscow designed to justify more intense attacks in Ukraine or more conscription. However, it highlighted what appears to be a covert, low-level campaign of attacks within Russia that has been going on for several months, using drones and possibly special forces to strike targets like fuel depots and pipelines. Although Ukraine has repeatedly denied launching attacks on Russian soil—"We don't attack Putin or Moscow. We fight on our territory. We are

defending our villages and cities" President Zelensky [said](#) during a visit to Helsinki on 4 May—the evidence is beginning to stack up. On 4 May, for example, the Ilsky oil refinery near the Black Sea port of Novorossiysk in the Krasnodar region was [attacked by four drones](#), while a day earlier, a fuel depot further to the west caught fire near a bridge linking Russia's mainland with the occupied Crimea peninsula due to a [suspected drone attack](#)

In addition, according to Russian authorities the western region of Bryansk, which borders Ukraine and Belarus, has seen multiple attacks by pro-Ukrainian sabotage groups in the 14 months since Russia invaded. For example, two Russian freight trains were derailed in the region—one on [2 May](#) and the other on [1 May](#)—after explosive devices were reportedly detonated on the rail tracks. In another example, four people were [reportedly](#) killed in a Ukrainian strike on the Russian border village of Suzemka on 30 April. Elsewhere, a huge fire in the Crimean port city of Sevastopol on 29 April was [attributed](#) to a Ukrainian drone strike on fuel tanks at a Russian navy depot. A Ukrainian military intelligence official said more than 10 tanks of oil products with a capacity of about 40,000 tonnes intended for use by Russia's Black Sea Fleet were destroyed. Finally, leaked Pentagon documents (see below) show that Kyiv was preparing an attack on Moscow on the anniversary of the Russian invasion, but according to The Washington Post, Ukraine [held off](#) at Washington's behest. Western countries that have been supplying weapons to Ukraine have insisted that they must not be used against Russian territory, and have generally refused to supply weapons that could be used for this purpose, such as long-range missiles and combat aircraft.

The Pentagon leaks

In April, two sets of classified US foreign intelligence documents began circulating on social media, although some of the earliest posts dated to October 2022. The US justice department launched an [investigation](#) into the release of the documents and on 14 April the FBI [arrested](#) a 21-year-old air national guardsman, Jack Teixeira, suspected of being

responsible for the leak. The photographed documents, many of which appear to be from the Pentagon or the CIA, cover a range of highly sensitive issues—primarily the Russia-Ukraine War, but also foreign intelligence assessments concerning North Korea, China, Iran and the United Arab Emirates. Both the US and allies were forced into [denials](#) over the contents. The documents [suggested](#), for example, that as many as 354,000 Russian and Ukrainian soldiers have been killed or injured in the war, which is grinding towards a protracted conflict that may last well beyond 2023.

Other documents discussed the number of western [special forces](#) present in Ukraine and the impact of the war on Russian special forces. According to the files, US officials assessed at the time that of the 97 special forces from NATO countries active in Ukraine, the UK had the largest contingent of 50, followed by Latvia (17), France (15), the US (14) and the Netherlands (1). The documents suggested the special forces could form part of a NATO special forces command coordinated by the alliance's special operations headquarters, but precise details of how the forces are organised were not specified. The documents also [suggested](#) that the war has taken a major toll on Russia's special forces after their heavy deployment to the front lines with commandos suffering a high number of casualties. The overreliance by Russian commanders on the "spetsnaz" special operation units led to speculation by US officials that it will take Moscow several years to rebuild them.

The documents also [said](#) Russia's Wagner Group has ambitions to operate in African states as well as Haiti, and that it planned to source arms covertly from NATO member Turkey. Other documents touched on related matters, such as alleged Egyptian plans to transfer arms to Moscow. Still others showed evidence of US spying on allies, such as Israel and South Korea.

Ukraine's NATO membership application

At the Bucharest Summit in 2008, NATO member states agreed that Ukraine will become a NATO member, and Ukraine formally requested an accelerated procedure for NATO membership in September 2022. However, despite support from some, mainly eastern members of the alliance, Ukraine's path to membership remains vague. Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said in article in [Foreign Affairs](#) on 25 April that it is time for NATO to "stop making excuses" and accept Ukraine as a member, as the country has demonstrated its readiness and has much to offer. Kuleba said the political will of the alliance had been "sorely lacking" on the issue of admitting Ukraine.

Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Iceland backed Ukraine to become a member of NATO and the EU in a [joint statement](#) after President Zelensky's visit to Finland on 3 May. "The Nordic NATO members will continue to support Ukraine on its path towards future membership", the statement said. And during a visit to Ukraine on 24 April, Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas [said](#) she backed Kyiv's efforts to join NATO and the EU "as soon as conditions allow". Kallas also voiced hope that EU membership talks could begin this year: "It will be a hard process and the requirements need to be fulfilled 100%," she said. Estonia has been one of Ukraine's largest donors per capita and this was Kallas's first visit after her party won a landslide victory for her pro-Ukraine platform last month.

In addition, NATO, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg [said](#) on 20 April during his first visit to the country since Russia's invasion 14 months ago that Ukraine's future lies in NATO. He pledged continued military support for Ukraine, saying: "NATO stands with you today, tomorrow and for as long as it takes" and he invited the Ukrainian president to the NATO summit in Vilnius in July. Zelensky [said](#) NATO needed to invite Ukraine to become a member and give it a timeframe for accession. "There is not a single objective barrier to the political

decision to invite Ukraine into the alliance," he said.

Xi Jinping's state visit to Moscow

On 20-22 March, President Xi Jinping conducted a 3-day state visit to Moscow, where he held talks with President Putin. The visit occurred only days after the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued a warrant for Putin's arrest on charges of war crimes in Ukraine (see below). Russia and China "share the same, or some similar goals", Xi Jinping told Putin during informal talks at the Kremlin on the first day of his visit. The Russian news agency Tass reported that Xi [said](#): "China and Russia are good neighbours and reliable partners". Putin told Xi he welcomed Beijing's proposal to end the "acute crisis" in Ukraine and he viewed the plan with respect. "You know that we are always ready for negotiating and we will discuss all those questions, including your suggestions," the Russian leader [told](#) his Chinese counterpart at the Kremlin. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken [criticised](#) Xi for providing "diplomatic cover" for Russia to continue committing war crimes. Blinken said the visit "suggests that China feels no responsibility to hold the Kremlin accountable for the atrocities committed in Ukraine". Blinken voiced scepticism over China's peace proposals (see below) to end the Ukraine conflict, warning they could be a "stalling tactic" to help Russian troops on the ground in Ukraine. Oleksiy Danilov, the secretary of Ukraine's national security and defence council [reiterated](#) that the formula for the successful implementation of China's peace plan must include the restoration of Ukraine's "sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity", he posted on Twitter.

The Chinese and Russian leaders [signed](#) a series of documents on a "strategic cooperation" after what Putin described as "successful and constructive" talks which showed that China-Russian relations were at the "highest point" in "the whole history of our two countries". Xi said China had an "impartial position" on the conflict in Ukraine and that it supported peace and dialogue, Russian state media reported. Xi said talks with his Russian

counterpart had been “open and friendly”. Putin, speaking at the joint news conference, said Beijing’s proposal to end the Ukraine conflict could be the basis for a peaceful settlement – when the west is ready for it. Xi invited Putin to visit China later in the year. Xi Jinping’s visit to Russia was a “journey of friendship, cooperation and peace”, a Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin [said](#). He also reiterated Beijing’s claims that it remained neutral in the Ukraine conflict and said China would “continue to play a constructive role in promoting a political settlement of the Ukrainian issue”. White House national security council spokesperson John Kirby [said](#) the US does not see China as capable of being an impartial mediator between Moscow and Kyiv over the war in Ukraine. He noted that China has continued to buy Russian oil and said that China “keeps parroting the Russian propaganda”.

Overall, however, the visit was largely all talk and little substance. Despite the rhetoric of a mutually beneficial relationship and shared goals, Russia has very little to offer China. The fact that both countries share similar foreign policy goals does not currently equate to policy alignment. China has all the leverage in the relationship.

Stalled diplomacy

While much of the world wants this war to end as soon as possible, in an interview with the Spanish newspaper El País on 9 May, the UN Secretary General António Guterres [said](#) there is currently no prospect of peace between Russia and Ukraine because “both sides are convinced that they can win”. Despite repeated calls from the UN Secretary General for the war to end, few other voices seem to share this view.

China has increasingly positioned itself (or is being touted by others) as a potential mediator in the conflict (see NATO Watch [Update 45](#)), but is seen by the West as favouring Russia. China stepped up its efforts to play the role of potential peacemaker on 26 April when President Xi Jinping spoke to President Zelensky for the first time since Russia’s

invasion. The [phone call](#) between the two leaders followed Xi’s state visit to Moscow in March (see above) and the release of a Chinese 12-point “[position paper](#)” on the conflict on 24 February. According to the Chinese Foreign Ministry’s [readout](#) of the phone call, Xi Jinping maintained that Beijing would remain neutral in the conflict, its only priority being facilitating negotiations and pushing for peace. The Ukrainian readout of the conversation was generally positive, though there was no evidence of any serious progress towards a negotiated settlement. “Peace must be just and sustainable, based on the principles of international law and respect for the UN Charter. There can be no peace at the expense of territorial compromises. The territorial integrity of Ukraine must be restored within the 1991 borders”, Zelensky [wrote](#) in his Telegram channel. Generally, however, Ukraine has been careful not to dismiss China’s emerging role. “I think some of the Chinese proposals respect international law, and I think we can work on it with China”, President Zelensky had [said](#) earlier in March.

Among Western nations, however, only France has been consistently pushing for China to play a role in forging a peace deal to end the war. French President Emmanuel Macron and European Union executive head Ursula von der Leyen [visited](#) China on 5-6 April seeking to “reset” ties while also discussing the situation in Ukraine. “The Russian aggression in Ukraine has dealt a blow to [international] stability”, Macron [said](#) in a joint press conference with Xi Jinping. “I know I can count on you to bring back Russia to reason and everyone back to the negotiating table”, he added. Xi Jinping, for his part, [said](#) peace must come through a “political solution” and urged “restraint from all political partners” in Ukraine.

Germany may also be open to China playing the role of mediator. Germany’s Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, while speaking alongside her Chinese counterpart, Qin Gang, at a press conference in Berlin on 9 May, [said](#) China could play a decisive role in ending the war in Ukraine. Baerbock said that as a permanent member of the UN Security

Council, China had the power to be influential in the conflict and bring it to an end.

Other potential mediators include Pope Francis who on 30 April [said](#) that the Vatican is involved in a peace mission to try to end the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. “I am willing to do everything that has to be done. There is a mission in course now but it is not yet public. When it is public, I will reveal it”, Pope Francis told reporters during a flight home after a three-day visit to Hungary.

In addition, Brazilian president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva has [proposed](#) a “peace club” with China and a group of “non-aligned” countries that would generate negotiations and mediate peace talks between Russia and Ukraine. The idea is to include countries that have not clearly taken a side in the Ukraine war so far. Potential candidates would be countries such as Brazil, India, China and Indonesia, whose apparent “neutral” stance in the war would lead to more productive negotiations. President Lula da Silva [said](#) on 15 April that the US should stop “encouraging war” in Ukraine “and start talking about peace”. In that way, the international community would be able to “convince” the Russian and Ukrainian presidents that “peace is in the interest of the whole world”, Lula told reporters in Beijing at the end of a visit where he met President Xi Jinping. The US heavily criticised Brazil’s approach to the war and the US national security council spokesperson John Kirby [said](#) on 18 April: “In this case, Brazil is parroting Russian and Chinese propaganda without at all looking at the facts”. A day earlier, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov [thanked](#) “our Brazilian friends for their clear understanding of the genesis of the situation (in Ukraine)”, after meeting his Brazilian counterpart Mauro Vieira in Brasília at the start of a Latin American tour. President Lula da Silva again called for a “negotiated political solution” in [remarks](#) on 22 April.

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. Andriy Sybiha, the deputy head of the president’s office suggested in an [interview](#) in the Financial Times on 6 April that Ukraine may be willing to discuss the future of Crimea with Moscow if its forces reach the border of the Russian-occupied peninsula. But Mykhailo Podolyak, another senior adviser to Zelensky, ruled out peace talks until Russian forces have left all of Ukraine, including the Russian-occupied Crimea. Posting to [Twitter](#) the same day, Podolyak said there was “no question of any territorial concessions or bargaining of our sovereign rights”. Crimea has been under Russian occupation since February 2014 and was illegally annexed by Moscow the following month [after a sham referendum](#). For its part, Russia shows no signs of being ready to respect Ukraine’s sovereignty and pre-war borders.

Prisoner exchanges represent one of the few areas of cooperation between Ukraine and Russia. The two sides have returned hundreds of each other’s soldiers, as well as the bodies of fallen troops, since the war began. For example, 130 Ukrainian prisoners of war were released and returned home in a “great Easter exchange”, a senior Ukrainian presidential official [said](#) on 16 April. It was not clear how many Russians were sent back the other way. And earlier in the month, more than 200 Russian and Ukrainian soldiers were [returned](#) home in a prisoner swap.

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 21 April. International backing for Ukraine holds “strong and true”, [said](#) the US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin as he opened the Contact Group meeting in Germany with allies to discuss further support for Kyiv. Austin confirmed the US is helping to train nine Ukrainian “storm” brigades for the counteroffensive and stressed the need to make Ukraine’s air defence system “robust” and “rigorous”. The Canadian Government [announced](#) \$39 million in new military assistance for Ukraine including 40 sniper rifles, 16 radio sets and a donation to a NATO fund to help in the war. Ukraine’s Defence Minister Oleksii Reznikov tweeted about the meeting [saying](#) that Ukraine is “de facto already a part of the alliance’s security space” having reached “unprecedented levels of interoperability”.

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 \$34 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 \$25 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.

New US announcements

Since the war began in February 2022, the US has provided nearly 40 assistance packages to Ukraine, with four new packages announced in the last eight weeks. On 9 May a “[new security assistance package](#)” to help bolster Ukraine’s air defences and artillery ammunition needs was said to total up to \$1.2 billion and is being provided under the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative (USAI). On 19 April the US [announced](#) \$325 million in new military aid for Ukraine, including additional ammunition for high mobility artillery rocket systems (Himars), advanced missiles and anti-tank mines. A US package [announced](#) on 3 April included \$2.1 billion in additional commitments for procurement under the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative, as well as a drawdown of equipment from US inventories valued at \$500 million. And finally, a \$350 million aid package in weapons and equipment [announced](#) on 20 March included ammunition for the high-mobility artillery rocket systems (Himars).

US officials [said](#) on 21 March that a refurbished older model of the Abrams battle tank would be delivered to Ukraine. The original plan was to send 31 of the newer M1A2 Abrams tanks, but the older M1A1 version, which can be taken from army stocks and will be easier for Ukrainian forces to learn to use and maintain, will be sent to Ukraine instead.

New European announcements

The German Government [announced](#) on 13 May a further €2.7 billion of military aid to Ukraine, its biggest package since the Russian invasion. Earlier on 29 March, Germany [agreed](#) to spend an additional €12 billion on military support to Ukraine: about €8bn to be spent directly on purchasing weapons and equipment for Ukraine and the other €4bn on replenishing the stocks of the German military. Germany, Poland and Ukraine signed an [agreement](#) on 21 April for a hub to repair Leopard tanks used in Ukraine to fight Russian forces, Germany’s Defence Minister Boris Pistorius said at the Ukraine Defence Contact

Group meeting. The hub will cost €150-€200 million a year and could begin operations at the end of May.

The UK [confirmed](#) on 11 May that it is donating long-range Storm Shadow missiles to Ukraine. The exact number being donated has not been disclosed (the UK holds an estimated stock of between 700 and 1,000 missiles). With a range of more than 250km there are concerns that the Storm Shadow missiles could be used to strike targets deep inside Russia's internationally recognised borders. A UK-led group of European countries had earlier [asked](#) for expressions of interest to supply Ukraine with long-range missiles. The call for responses from companies who could provide the munitions with range of up to 300km was included in a notice posted last week by the International Fund for Ukraine—a group of countries including Britain, Norway, the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden—set up to send weapons to Kyiv.

Denmark and the Netherlands [announced](#) on 20 April that they would jointly donate 14 Leopard 2 tanks to Ukraine. Denmark's acting Defence Minister Troels Lund Poulsen said they were not Danish tanks, but tanks "which are bought in collaboration with the Netherlands". The Foreign Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen described it as "a very significant contribution". Norway [said](#) on 20 March that it had delivered eight Leopard 2 tanks to Ukraine, and that it would also send four special-purpose tanks from its armoured engineering and bridge layer category, the exact selection depending on what Ukraine needed the most. Estonia [announced](#) in late March additional military aid of sniper rifles and special forces equipment for Ukraine. Valued at \$527,000, the latest tranche also includes semi-automatic rifles and ammunition. Estonia will also supply patrol boats, medical equipment, and tactical capabilities such as thermal cameras, binoculars and other special equipment.

EU ministers reached a [deal](#) on 20 March to supply Ukraine with 1 million rounds of shells. EU foreign and defence ministers had still to fine-tune the €1 billion plan for the joint

procurement of ammunition by the Brussels-based European Defence Agency, but the agreement was a significant moment for the EU, which has limited experience of the joint purchase of military supplies. About 15 countries are expected to take part in the voluntary initiative. However, a shortage of explosives is hampering the efforts of European countries to provide Ukraine with arms, according to a [report](#) in the Financial Times on 19 March. Industry insiders said that gunpowder, plastic explosives and TNT are in short supply and could delay planned increases of shell production by as much as three years. It could also mean that Europe's defence industry may be unable to meet expected EU orders for Ukraine.

Supplies of combat aircraft

Only two states have so far agreed to supply combat aircraft to Ukraine: Poland and Slovakia (see NATO Watch [Update 46](#)). Slovakia [confirmed](#) on 17 April that it had handed over all 13 MiG-29 fighter jets it had pledged to Ukraine. Poland will send 14 MiG-29 fighter jets to Ukraine, Polish President Andrzej Duda [said](#) at a joint news conference with President Zelenskyy on 5 April. Poland has led the way in mobilising western military and political support for Kyiv since the start of Russia's full-fledged invasion.

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 advanced combat aircraft to Ukraine. While combat aircraft have rarely featured in the war to date, the use of uncrewed aerial vehicles (UAV) has been ubiquitous since the start of Russia's invasion. According to a [report](#) in late March, Ukraine has been pushing to build its own army of drones, pledging to spend \$550 million on UAVs in 2023, with a focus on local supply.

The UK's proposed supply of ammunition made with depleted uranium

The UK said on 20 March that it could supply “armour piercing rounds which contain depleted uranium” to Ukraine. President Putin condemned the UK proposal and [warned](#) on 21 March that Russia would be forced to react. Similarly, Russia’s Foreign Ministry warned that “this decision will not remain without serious consequences both for Russian-British bilateral relations and at the international level”, while Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Britain’s decision took the situation to new and dangerous levels.

Financial support

On 31 March the International Monetary Fund’s executive board [approved](#) a four-year \$15.6 billion loan programme for Ukraine, part of a global \$115 billion package of economic support. The decision cleared the way for an immediate disbursement of about \$2.7 billion to Kyiv, and requires Ukraine to carry out ambitious reforms, especially in the energy sector, the fund said. It is the IMF’s [first loan to a country at war](#). UK finance minister Jeremy Hunt [said](#) on 12 April that Britain is ready to provide an extra \$500 million of loan guarantees to Ukraine, taking the total this year to \$1 billion. Hunt said the British loan guarantees had been important to underwrite the broader IMF package of support.

Military assistance to Russia

On 11 May the US ambassador to South Africa, Reuben Brigety, [accused](#) the country of covertly providing arms to Russia. He claimed that South Africa had loaded weapons and ammunition on to a Russian vessel at a naval base near Cape Town in December 2022 and that the arms were then transported to Russia. The allegations drew an angry rebuke from Pretoria, and the next day South Africa’s Foreign Ministry [summoned](#) the US ambassador over the issue. External military support to Russia so far has been limited to a handful of states, principally Belarus, [Iran](#) and [North Korea](#). On the 30 March, the BBC [reported](#) a US claim that Russia was sending a delegation to North Korea to offer food in

exchange for weapons. An arms deal between North Korea and Russia could violate UN Security Council resolutions.

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](#). The Groupe de recherche et d’information sur la paix et la sécurité (GRIP), has produced a comprehensive [database](#) of arms deliveries to Ukraine from January–November 2022 (in French). The Group also published a [factsheet](#) and [methodology](#), both in English and French.

Humanitarian consequences of the war

Exact figures for the number of war fatalities, both military and civilian, are difficult to verify and confirm. According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project ([ACLED](#)), a disaggregated data collection, analysis and crisis mapping project, there were a total of 57,767 conflict-related fatalities in Ukraine between 24 February 2022 and 28 April 2023: 30,101 in explosions/remote violence; 26,347 in battles; 1,315 in violence against civilians; and 4 in protests. [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 196,000 Russian soldiers in the war to date. The White House [estimated](#) on 1 May that Russia’s military has suffered 100,000 casualties in the past five months in fighting against Ukraine, mostly in the Bakhmut region. National security spokesperson John Kirby told reporters the figure, based on US intelligence estimates, included more than 20,000 dead, half of them from the Wagner group.

The official Ukrainian armed forces’ casualty toll is a secret, but leaked US military briefings put the number of Ukrainian dead at between 15,500 and 17,500 with more than five times

that injured. Speaking on Ukrainian tv on 2 December, Kyiv's presidential adviser Mykhailo Podolyak [said](#) up to 13,000 Ukrainian soldiers had 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 7 May, 8,791 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 13, 602 people by 10 May. From this number, 4,373 were killed and 8,689 were injured. Ninety-four per cent (12, 336) of civilian casualties have occurred in populated areas.

There are thought to be 174,000 square kilometres which are [contaminated](#) by landmines in Ukraine. Ukraine is consequently the largest mined territory in the world surpassing such former frontrunners as Afghanistan and Syria. The area requiring clearance is still very difficult to assess or access since fighting is ongoing. The World Bank estimates de-mining Ukraine is going to cost at least \$37.4 billion.

The number of refugees from the conflict has surpassed 8 million. As of 9 May, there were 8,207,977 [refugees](#) from Ukraine recorded across Europe, 5,093,606 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 over nuclear power plants

The head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Rafael Grossi plans to present an agreement with Russia and Ukraine on protecting the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant to the UN Security Council later in May, indicating a deal is close, four diplomats [told](#) Reuters. Grossi has been trying for months to secure an agreement to reduce the risk of a catastrophic accident from shelling at the Russian-occupied nuclear power station in south-eastern Ukraine, Europe's biggest. Russian forces are planning to "evacuate" more than 3,000 workers from the town that serves the nuclear power plant, resulting in a "catastrophic lack" of personnel, Ukraine's state-owned Energoatom company [claimed](#) on 10 May. A Moscow-installed official in the Russia-controlled parts of the Zaporizhzhia region had earlier [said](#) on 8 May that a total of 1,679 people, including 660 children, had been evacuated from areas near the nuclear plant. Grossi [warned](#) on 13 April that "we are living on borrowed time" following two landmine explosions near the plant. Earlier, Grossi [described](#) the situation at the nuclear plant as "very dangerous" and unstable.

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On outcomes and consequences of the war

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On the risk of nuclear war

Risks of a direct military confrontation between Russia and the United States are steadily growing, the Tass news agency quoted a senior Russian diplomat as saying on 23 April. Vladimir Yermakov, the foreign ministry's head of nuclear non-proliferation, [told](#) the Russian state news agency that Washington was

escalating the risks through its conduct with Moscow. 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.

Russia-Belarus nuclear sharing agreement

Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov [said](#) on 22 March that the risk of a nuclear conflict was at its highest level in decades. Russia was committed to keeping the world "safe and free" from the threat of nuclear war, he said, but added later that business could not continue as usual, given that Moscow was now "in a de facto state of open conflict" with Washington. Three days later President Putin upped the nuclear ante by [saying](#) that Russia would station tactical nuclear weapons in neighbouring Belarus. Such a move would not violate nuclear nonproliferation agreements, President Putin said, adding that the United States had stationed nuclear weapons on the territory of European NATO allies. NATO [criticised](#) Russia for its "dangerous and irresponsible" nuclear rhetoric. Oleksiy Danilov, the secretary of Ukraine's national security and defence council, said the Kremlin had taken Belarus as a "nuclear hostage". Josep Borrell, the EU foreign policy chief, [cautioned](#) Belarus against hosting Russian nuclear weapons: "Belarus hosting Russian nuclear weapons would mean an irresponsible escalation and threat to European security. Belarus can still stop it, it is their choice. The EU stands ready to respond with further sanctions". The G7 meeting on 18 April also [criticised](#) Russia's threat to station nuclear weapons in Belarus and promised to intensify sanctions on Moscow for its war on Ukraine. Units from Belarus returned home from Russia on 22 April after [training](#) on how to use the Iskander tactical missile system to launch nuclear weapons, the Belarusian defence ministry said.

The war in Ukraine just became even more toxic and lethal: the UK supply of 'depleted uranium' ammunition to Ukraine and Russia's 'nuclear sharing' with Belarus, NATO Watch [Briefing Paper No.105](#), 31 March 2023

Suspension of New START

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. Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov [said](#) on 30 March that Moscow will continue to give the US advance notice about its missile tests despite suspending participation in the treaty, reversing a [statement](#) he made a day earlier. The White House [said](#) on 28 March that the US had told Russia it would cease exchanging certain data on its nuclear forces after Moscow's refusal to do so.

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On investigation of war crimes in Ukraine

On 6 May Russia was accused of attacking the besieged city of Bakhmut with incendiary phosphorus weapons, BBC News [reported](#). Ukraine's military shared drone footage of what appeared to be fires in Bakhmut as white phosphorus rained down. White phosphorus weapons are not banned, but their use in civilian areas is considered a war crime. Russia has been [accused](#) of using them before during the war, as well as other inhumane weapons, including [cluster munitions](#) and [landmines](#).

Ukraine's President Zelensky [called](#) on Vladimir Putin to be brought to justice for his war during a visit to The Hague (where the International Criminal Court, ICC, is based) on 4 May. "We all want to see a different Vladimir here in the Hague, the one who deserves to be sanctioned for his criminal actions here, in the capital of international law", Zelensky said in a [speech](#). "I'm sure we will see that happen when we win," he said, adding: "Whoever brings war must receive judgment".

The [UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination](#)— a body of independent experts that monitors implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination— [said](#) on 28 April that it is deeply concerned about human rights violations by Russian forces and private military companies in Ukraine, including enforced disappearances, torture, rape and extrajudicial executions. In its findings on

Russia, the UN Committee called on Russian authorities to investigate the allegations of human rights violations. Meanwhile, the parliamentary assembly of the Council of Europe passed a [resolution](#) on 28 April that the forced detention and deportation of children from Russian occupied territories of Ukraine shows evidence of genocide.

The UN human rights chief, Volker Türk, [said](#) on 31 March that "severe violations" of human rights and international humanitarian law have become "shockingly routine" in Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The number of civilian casualties in Ukraine was far higher than official figures showed, Türk said in an address to the UN's human rights council in Geneva, where he said Ukraine was a nation "struggling to survive" in the face of Russia's invasion. Meanwhile, the head of the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine, Matilda Bogner, at a press conference in Kyiv on 24 March [expressed](#) deep concern over summary executions of prisoners of war by both Russian and Ukrainian forces on the battlefield. A new report from the UN's office of the high commissioner for human rights said its monitors had documented dozens of the executions by both sides, that the actual number was likely higher and that they "may constitute war crimes".

The US ambassador-at-large for global criminal justice, Beth Van Schaak [said](#) on 27 March that the United States supports the creation of a special tribunal to prosecute the crime of aggression against Ukraine. She also said the court might be located elsewhere in Europe, at least at first, in order "to reinforce Ukraine's desired European orientation".

The prosecutor for the ICC Karim Khan [said](#) on 20 March that the world needs to "have the stamina" to enforce international law by trying those accused of war crimes in Ukraine. His remarks came four days after the court [issued](#) an arrest warrant for Putin and Russia's children's commissioner, Maria Lvova-Belova, on the grounds that they had overseen the forcible transfer of thousands of children. Khan also challenged the Kremlin to allow Ukrainian children abducted to Russia to return home.

Selected investigations Feb 2022-Feb 2023

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.

Ukrainian President Zelensky [called](#) the arrest warrant against Putin a "turning point" in the conflict. In his address on 19 March, he said the

warrant marked a "truly significant international legal result for Ukraine, for justice ... The moment after which it becomes undeniable that the end of this aggression for Russia will be the full range of its responsibility".

The ICC on 17 March [issued](#) an arrest warrant for President Putin for overseeing the [mass abduction](#) of Ukrainian children (see NATO Watch [Update 46](#)). 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.

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On sanctions against Russia and post-war reconstruction in Ukraine

The US and other allies of Ukraine are considering an outright ban on most exports to Russia to increase economic pressure on Russian President Putin. The [report](#) by Bloomberg on 20 April said discussions are under way ahead of the G7 leaders' summit in May. It is thought that it will be followed by similar actions by EU member states. Meanwhile, the EU [added](#) Russia's Wagner

group to its sanctions list on 13 April for “actively participating in the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine”. The mercenary group had already been placed on another EU sanctions list in February for violating human rights and “destabilising” countries in Africa.

Sanctions – an overview

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.

Britain and France’s sports ministers [insisted](#) on 23 April that Russian and Belarusian athletes must never compete as neutrals as recommended by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) because they could still be funded by their governments. The IOC sanctioned Russia and Belarus after Moscow invaded Ukraine in February 2022 with Minsk’s support, but recommended on 28 March that their athletes be allowed to [return to international competition](#) as neutrals. A decision regarding next year’s Olympics in Paris and the Milan-Cortina Winter Olympics in 2026 would be taken “at the appropriate time”, it said. Germany’s interior minister, Nancy Faeser, said in a [tweet](#) that the committee’s

decision was “a slap in the face for all Ukrainian athletes”. And it prompted Ukraine on 14 April to [bar](#) its national sports teams from competing in Olympic, non-Olympic and Paralympic events that include competitors from Russia and Belarus.

Rebuilding Ukraine’s economy is now expected to cost \$411 billion, 2.6 times Ukraine’s expected 2022 gross domestic product, a new [study](#) published on 22 March by the World Bank, United Nations, European Commission and Ukraine found. During a meeting between Italy’s President Sergio Mattarella and the Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal on 24 April, Mattarella [said](#) that Italy wants to play a major role in the reconstruction of Ukraine and urged EU bodies to back the rebuilding. Meanwhile, the World Bank [said](#) on 12 April it would finance \$200 million to help fix Ukraine’s energy and heating infrastructure, with partners and others to provide another \$300 million as the project expands.

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On the Black Sea grain agreement and global food security

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu [said](#) on 10 May that he thought the Ukraine Black Sea grain deal could be extended for at least two more months, as officials held the first day of talks on an extension in Istanbul. Russia has said it would not extend the agreement beyond 18 May unless a list of demands is met to remove obstacles to its own grain and fertiliser exports. Cavusoglu was speaking to reporters on his return from a trip to Moscow. Russia has effectively stopped the Black sea grain deal, which expires on 18 May,

by refusing to register incoming vessels, Ukraine's reconstruction ministry [said](#) on 8 May. The Black Sea grain deal was initially brokered between Russia and Ukraine by the UN and Turkey in July 2022 and was [renewed](#) on 18 March. 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.

Moscow has continually threatened to quit the agreement, which is meant to help ease a global food crisis. For example, Russia's envoy to the UN in Geneva [said](#) on 26 April that no real progress had been achieved in resolving issues raised by Moscow, while earlier on 23 April, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov [said](#) that Moscow had seen "practically no results" from the grain deal that also aims to help Russia's grain and fertiliser exports. Lavrov blamed western countries for creating a deadlock. UN Secretary-General António Guterres had [proposed](#) to President Putin a "way forward aimed at the improvement, extension and expansion" of the deal. Russia's Defence Ministry meanwhile accused Ukraine of attempting to attack its ships in the Black Sea, which it said was threatening prospects of extending 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.

The European Commission [said](#) on 28 April that five EU countries have agreed on a deal to allow the transit of Ukrainian food exports, after temporary bans were imposed on the foodstuffs amid protests by farmers. The agreement with Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia comes as limits on Ukraine grain's export channel via the Black Sea necessitate export overland via the country's neighbours.

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Wim Zwijnenburg and Iryna Nikolaieva, [Research: Bombing of agro-industry in Ukraine poses serious environmental health risks](#), PAX, 5 April 2023

On energy security in Europe (and the Nord Stream attack)

Europe is striving to diversify its energy supply sources to curb its dependence on Russia. Gas shortages occurred across Europe during 2022 but now appear to have eased. Questions continue as to who blew up the Nord Stream pipelines in September 2022. Sweden's prosecution authority [said](#) on 6 April that it remains unclear who was behind the sabotage. Prosecutor Mats Ljungqvist told Reuters that "the clear main scenario" was that a state-sponsored group was behind the sabotage, but that an independent group was still "theoretically possible". The UN Security Council on 27 March [declined](#) a Russian request to set up a commission to investigate the attack. Russia, China and Brazil voted in favour of the resolution, but it failed as it lacked the nine votes needed in the 15-nation Council. The US deputy ambassador Robert Wood said there was no need with separate investigations already under way.

A Russian navy vessel specialising in submarine operations was photographed near the pipelines just days before the explosions, [according](#) to the Danish daily newspaper Information. The prosecutor leading Sweden's investigation into the sabotage of the pipelines linking Russia to Germany confirmed the existence of the previously publicly unknown photographs. Earlier in March, 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.

Meanwhile, a joint [investigation](#) by the public broadcasters of several Nordic countries alleged that Russia has established a programme using spy ships disguised as fishing vessels aimed at giving it the capability to attack windfarms and communications cables in the North Sea.

International Crisis Group, [Rethinking Gas Diplomacy in the Eastern Mediterranean](#), Middle East Report N°240, 26 April 2023

Rene Tebel, [Germany and Nord Stream Sabotage: Victim or Confidant?](#) Geopolitical Monitor, 19 April 2023

Rene Tebel, [State or Non-state? An Overview of Possible Nord Stream Saboteurs](#), Geopolitical Monitor, 21 March 2023

On China's position on the war

China's position on Russia-China relations and on the Russia-West confrontation is not uniform. However, the Chinese Government has presented a relatively consistent and developed position, namely that, first, the war undermines the stability of the international system and that a zero-sum game must be avoided, and second, that any use of nuclear weapons is a 'red line' that should not be crossed. China is also 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](#)).

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. Indeed, the US

President Joe Biden [said](#) on 24 March he believed China had not sent arms to Russia: "I've been hearing now for the past three months China is going to provide significant weapons to Russia ... They haven't yet", he told a news conference. "Doesn't mean they won't, but they haven't yet", he added. In addition, the Financial Times [reported](#) that a leaked US intelligence report showed that China refused a request from the Wagner Group for weapons. Wagner's request in early 2023 suggested "it had some confidence Beijing would be open to arming Moscow, going beyond other non-lethal forms of support for the military campaign provided by Chinese companies", according to the FT. Moreover, China's Foreign Minister Qin Gang [said](#) on 14 April that his country would not sell weapons to parties involved in the conflict in Ukraine and would regulate the export of items with dual civilian and military use.

On the other hand, leaked US government documents (see above) suggest that China has approved the provision of lethal aid to Russia for its war in Ukraine but wanted any shipments to remain a secret. A classified US intelligence summary dated 23 February [states](#) that Beijing had approved the incremental provision of weapons to Moscow, which it would disguise as civilian items, according to a report in the Washington Post. In addition, a senior adviser in President Zelensky's office [told](#) Reuters on 17 April that Ukrainian forces are finding a growing number of components from China in Russian weapons used in Ukraine.

As sign of growing cooperation between Beijing and Moscow, and in addition to the leaders meeting in March (see above), President Putin met Chinese Defence Minister Li Shangfu in Moscow on 16 April and both men [welcomed](#) military cooperation between the two nations. And on 26 April, China and Russia [signed](#) a memorandum of understanding designed to strengthen maritime law enforcement cooperation on terrorism, illegal migration, drug smuggling and weapons, and illegal fishing. However, as the EU's foreign policy chief, Josep Borrell, [said](#) on 24 March, the "friendship" between China and Russia has

limits, and he indicated that Europe should welcome any attempts by Beijing to distance itself from Moscow's war in Ukraine. He added that China "has not crossed any red lines for us", and that Beijing's proposals to end the war showed it did not want to fully align with Russia.

Sam Etheridge, [A China–Russia Alliance is Likelier Than We Think](#), RUSI Commentary, 4 May 2023

Paul Poast, [Xi's Moscow Visit Was More Than a Symbolic Victory for Putin](#), World Politics Review, 31 March 2023 (paywall)

On developments within Russia

Russia may formally "denounce" the 1990 Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE), according to a [decree](#) signed by President Putin on 10 May. The CFE Treaty was negotiated and concluded during the last years of the Cold War and established comprehensive limits on key categories of conventional military equipment in Europe (from the Atlantic to the Urals) and mandated the destruction of excess weaponry. Russia suspended its participation in the CFE Treaty in 2007 and 'halted' compliance entirely in 2015, although it never formally withdrew.

Concerns in the Russian leadership about vulnerability to attack and the potential for public protests over the Ukraine war contributed to the decision to [cancel many Victory Day parades](#) on 9 May. Six Russian regions, occupied Crimea and 21 cities cancelled their parades.

The Russian army replaced its highest ranking general in charge of logistics, Colonel General Mikhail Mizintsev, on 30 April. In a [statement](#), the Russian Defence Ministry said Alexei Kuzmenkov – a former official from the National Guard – had replaced Mizintsev as "deputy defence minister of the Russian Federation, responsible for the logistical support of the Armed Forces". The statement did not say why Mizintsev was replaced after just seven months in the job. Earlier in April, following significant losses in the Donbas, Putin [sacked](#) Colonel-General Rustam Muradov, commander of the Eastern Group of

Forces. These are the most high-profile dismissals by Russia so far.

On 28 April President Putin [signed](#) a decree giving people living in parts of Ukraine that are under Moscow's control a route to Russian citizenship. But it also means that those who decline it, or do not legalise their status, potentially face deportation. The decree – which covers Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia – sets out ways that Ukrainian citizens living there can start the process of becoming Russian citizens or legalise their status.

Russian authorities continue to repress freedoms in Russia, with independent media shut down and leading opposition figures behind bars or in exile. On the 27 April, for example, a Moscow court [ordered](#) the dissolution of the SOVA Centre, a prominent research centre specialising in racism and xenophobia in Russia. On 22 April a former police officer was [convicted](#) of publicly spreading false information about the country's military after he criticised the war in Ukraine to his friends over the phone. The ex-officer, Semiel Vedel, was sentenced to seven years in prison and barred from working in law enforcement for four years after his release. Former Moscow councillor and Kremlin critic Ilya Yashin [lost an appeal](#) on 19 April against what his supporters say was a politically motivated decision to jail him for eight and a half years. And on 17 April a court in Moscow sentenced the opposition activist Vladimir Kara-Murza to 25 years in prison, in one of the most high-profile cases to date of a Russian dissident being jailed for opposing the invasion of Ukraine. The UN's human rights head, Volker Türk, [urged](#) Russia to release him, while Baltic neighbour Latvia sanctioned 10 Russian officials and lawyers involved in the case. Meanwhile, the Russian opposition figure Alexei Navalny [said](#) he is being investigated on terrorism charges that could see him sentenced to 30 years in prison. He is currently serving sentences totalling 11 and a half years on charges including fraud and contempt of court, which human rights groups say were made up to silence him.

The United States and more than 40 other countries said in a [joint statement](#) on 17 April that they were deeply concerned over Russia's detainment of Wall Street Journal reporter, Evan Gerhovich, who was arrested on 29 March. The statement urged Russia to "release those they hold on political grounds, and to end the draconian crackdown on freedom of expression, including against members of the media". It is the first time since 1986 that a US reporter has been held for alleged espionage in Russia.

President Putin on 23 April [signed a decree](#) establishing temporary control of the Russian assets of two foreign energy firms and signalled that Moscow could take similar action against other companies if need be. The decree – outlining possible retaliation if Russian assets abroad are seized – showed Moscow had already taken action against Uniper SE's Russian division and the assets of Finland's Fortum Oyj.

A Russian combat aircraft [accidentally](#) fired a weapon into the city of Belgorod near Ukraine on 20 April, causing an explosion and damaging buildings. Belgorod's regional governor, Vyacheslav Gladkov, said two women had been injured and four apartment buildings and four cars damaged.

According to [reports](#), the head of the Wagner Group Yevgeny Prigozhin is trying to seize control of the St. Petersburg branch of 'A Just Russia'—a Russian political party—widely regarded as one of the party's most valuable assets and gaining a position at the federal level. Meanwhile, Prigozhin, [said](#) on 25 March that more than 5,000 former criminals were pardoned after finishing their contracts to fight in the Wagner Group against Ukraine. The Wagner group, originally staffed by veterans of the Russian armed forces, took on a much more prominent role in the Ukraine war after the Russian army suffered a series of defeats last year, Reuters reported.

On 11 April Russia [tightened its conscription law](#), including introducing electronic military draft papers, that will make it significantly harder for Russians to dodge the draft while automatically banning registered conscripts

from leaving the country. Meanwhile, President Putin [signed](#) a decree on 30 March calling up 147,000 Russian citizens for statutory military service as part of a spring conscription campaign, Russian state media reported. The Russian leader last signed a routine conscription campaign in September, calling up 120,000 citizens for statutory service, the Tass news agency said. The general staff of the armed forces of the Russian Federation stated that it was not a second wave of mobilisation.

A prominent pro-war Russian military blogger Vladlen Tatarsky was [killed](#) in a bomb attack on 2 April in a cafe in central St Petersburg. A day later, Russian police [arrested](#) a woman suspected of delivering the bomb.

Russia assumed charge of the UN Security Council on 1 April—causing fury inside Ukraine with President Zelensky, labelling the situation "absurd and destructive ... It's hard to imagine anything that proves more the total bankruptcy of such institutions". Andriy Yermak, the Ukrainian president's chief of staff, [wrote](#): "It's not just a shame. It is another symbolic blow to the rules-based system of international relations". The Kremlin has said it will "exercise all its rights" in the role. Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov chaired the meeting when Russia assumed the council presidency.

Anna Kruglova, [The National Republican Army: A Potential Force of Resistance in Russia?](#) RUSI Commentary, 2 May 2023

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On developments within NATO

NATO Foreign Ministers meeting, 4-5 April 2023 – Finland becomes 31st member state

The two-day NATO Foreign Ministerial meeting in Brussels accepted the formal accession of Finland to the alliance (see below). In addition, four other main issues were discussed:

Continuing support to Ukraine; The global consequences of Russia's war against Ukraine and the growing influence of Russia and China; Threats and challenges in the South, including instability, terrorism and the growing influence of Iran; and Investing more in defence. The key activities and decisions taken by the NATO Foreign Ministers were as follows:

- Finnish Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto took up Finland's seat among NATO allies for the first time on 4 April – the alliance's seventy-fourth anniversary. NATO's frontier with Russia has grown more than 800 miles with the addition of its 31st member, Finland.
- NATO Foreign Ministers reconfirmed strong support for Ukraine and agreed to start work on a multi-year support programme. But despite repeatedly stating its desire to be a part of NATO, the path towards membership remains vague (15 years after NATO first agreed to accept Ukraine and Georgia as members of the alliance).
- Deepening cooperation with Indo-Pacific partners Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea is anticipated in areas such as cyber defence, new technologies and countering disinformation.
- It was deemed important to continue to increase military spending. At the Vilnius Summit, a new military investment pledge is likely to be approved, with 2% "as a floor not a ceiling".
- The long-term challenges posed by China were discussed, but seemingly no new policy commitments were made.

Finland joins NATO as Foreign Ministers renew pressure on China: A review of the NATO Foreign Ministers meeting, Brussels, 4-5 April 2023, [NATO Watch Briefing Paper No.106](#), 1 May 2023

Japan and NATO

Japan is in talks to open a NATO liaison office, the first of its kind in Asia, the country's foreign minister told CNN in an [interview](#) on 10 May, saying Russia's invasion of Ukraine has made the world less stable. From 24 to 26 April 2023, a [military delegation](#) from NATO travelled to Japan to meet with senior military representatives to discuss the current military

cooperation and opportunities to foster a stronger partnership. NATO and Japan have been engaged in dialogue and cooperation since initial contacts in the early 1990s. Japan is one of several "partners across the globe" with which NATO is developing relations. Since 2014, cooperation has been taken forward through an Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme. This was renewed in June 2020.

Secretary General's Annual Report

On 21 March 2023, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg released his [Annual Report](#) for 2022. The Annual Report "reflects the evolving security environment" and covers NATO's "key decisions and activities in the previous year". It also includes the details of national defence expenditures for the member states, as well as the latest opinion polls conducted by NATO across the alliance. It is also said to be "part of NATO's commitment to transparency and accountability".

The NATO Secretary General's annual report: PR gloss or a useful contribution to greater accountability? [NATO Watch Briefing Paper No.104](#), 26 March 2023

NATO Innovation Fund

At the 2022 Madrid Summit, 22 NATO member states launched the NATO Innovation Fund, the world's first multi-sovereign venture capital fund. Since then, significant steps have been made to fully establish the Fund by NATO's Vilnius Summit in July 2023. The 22 Allies participating in the NATO Innovation Fund have [completed](#) the formation of the nine-member Board of Directors: Prince Constantijn of the Netherlands (Dutch Tech Envoy); Kusti Salm (Permanent Secretary of the Estonian Ministry of Defence); Karl-Christian Agerup (Partner at Antler and co-founder of Northzone Ventures); Ebru Dorman (angel investor from Türkiye); Dr. Ari Kristinn Jónsson (former President of Reykjavik University); Raj Shah (Founder of Shield Capital and former Managing Partner of the United States' Defense Innovation Unit); Dr. Klaus Hommel (founder and chair of venture capital firm Lakestar); Dame Fiona Murray (Associate Dean

of Innovation and Inclusion at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) School of Management); and Dr. Roberto Cingolani (former Italian Minister for Ecological Transition and founder of the Italian Institute of Technology). Together, the nine Directors will play a supervisory and advisory role for the NATO Innovation Fund's investment management arm. They will work to ensure that the investment strategy is executed successfully and in line with the Fund's strategic objectives. The Netherlands will host the headquarters for the Fund's investment management arm, with further regional offices to be set up across the alliance. The Fund will invest EUR €1 billion in early-stage start-ups developing emerging and disruptive technologies and other venture capital funds developing dual-use emerging and disruptive technologies.

Poland's air and border defences

The UK has signed a £1.9 billion [deal](#) with Poland to provide the country with a British-designed air defence system. About 22 Polish air defence batteries will be equipped with common anti-air modular missiles (Camms) and launchers as part of the arrangement. It expands on pre-existing UK defence ties with Poland, where Camms are already deployed with the British army following Russia's invasion. Meanwhile, Poland [announced](#) on 18 April plans to install thousands of cameras and motion sensors along its border with Russia's Kaliningrad enclave to prevent what Warsaw says are illegal migrant crossings orchestrated by Moscow. Polish interior minister Mariusz Kaminski said the system would join a barbed wire fence being built on the 200-kilometre frontier.

Switzerland and NATO

The Swiss Defence Minister, Viola Amherd, [visited](#) NATO Headquarters on 22 March 2023 for talks with Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, and to participate in the North Atlantic Council—the first-ever Swiss minister to do so. Switzerland contributes almost 200 troops to the NATO KFOR mission in Kosovo and has provided humanitarian support to Ukraine, including through NATO's Comprehensive Assistance Package.

Stoltenberg urged the Swiss government to reconsider its position on barring re-export of Swiss-made arms and ammunition to Ukraine.

18th Annual NATO Conference on Arms Control, Disarmament and WMD Non-Proliferation

The United States and NATO co-hosted the 18th Annual NATO Conference on Arms Control, Disarmament and Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) Non-Proliferation, on 17-20 April 2023 in Washington, D.C. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman delivered remarks at the opening session of the conference and participated in a Q&A session with in-person attendees. Only the opening session was livestreamed on the U.S. Department of State website. The conference was chaired by US Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Control Bonnie Jenkins and was closed to the public. The conference was preceded by a high-level civil society public event in partnership with Howard University's Ralph J. Bunche International Affairs Center to discuss the evolving challenges in arms control, disarmament, nonproliferation, and other areas of global security, as well as ideas on how to build a safer, more secure world. Since 2004, the Annual NATO Arms Control, Disarmament and WMD Non-Proliferation Conference has been organized by NATO with an ally as a co-host to provide an opportunity for informal discussions on WMD threats by senior national officials. The 18th Annual Conference was hosted for the first time in North America and included approximately 175 participants from over 50 NATO allies, invitee, partners and international organizations.

Nordic air defence

Air force commanders from Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark [agreed](#) on 24 March to create a unified Nordic air defence aimed at countering the rising threat from Russia, they said. The intention is to be able to operate jointly based on already known ways of operating under NATO, according to statements by the four countries' armed forces. The Danish air force commander, Major

General Jan Dam, said: “Our combined fleet can be compared to a large European country”.

NATO military spending

Europe’s military spending grew at a record pace in 2022, reaching a level unseen since the cold war following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, according to the latest [data](#) from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. The rise in Europe helped global military expenditures reach an eighth straight record at \$2.24tn, or 2.2% of the world’s gross domestic product. Military spending by NATO members totalled \$1232 billion in 2022 (55% of the global total), which was 0.9 per cent higher than in 2021.

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On Finland and Sweden joining NATO

Finland became the 31st member of NATO after its Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto [signed an accession document](#) and handed it to the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, at a ceremony in Brussels on 4 April. Sergei Shoigu Russia's Defence Minister said the accession of Finland [increased](#) the risks of wider conflict. US President Biden welcomed Finland's ascension and urged Turkey and Hungary to conclude their ratification processes for Sweden. The Turkish parliament was the last among the 30 members of the alliance to [ratify](#) Finland's membership on 31 March, after Hungary's legislature [approved](#) a similar bill on 27 March (voting 182 for and six against with no abstentions). Finland will participate in NATO nuclear planning and support operations, the Finnish defence ministry [said](#) on 13 April, although it has decided not to allow any nuclear arms on its soil. Russia plans to increase air defences over its north-western border to counter Finland's accession to NATO, Lt Gen Andrei Demin, the deputy commander-in-chief of Russian aerospace forces [said](#) on 10 April.

Sweden's parliament formally [approved](#) a bill on 22 March to allow the country to join NATO, however the process continues to be held up by Turkey and Hungary, which have yet to ratify Sweden's membership. 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 invitation to Finland and Sweden represented a major geopolitical shift in Europe with the two countries move away from neutrality.

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan [said](#) on 17 March that Turkey's willingness to consider ratifying Sweden's NATO bid would "depend on the solid steps Sweden will take". 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. A Quran-burning [protest](#) in Stockholm in January (see NATO Watch [update 40](#)) further complicated matters.

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