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

Russia's war with Ukraine

(Update covering the period 28 July – 13 September)

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Ukraine's stalled counteroffensive: time for a renewed diplomatic offensive

In early June, Ukraine launched a long-anticipated, large-scale counteroffensive into Russian-controlled territory in the east and south of the country. Since then, however, progress on the ground or the lack of it has been mired in the fog of war, with contrasting opinions on whether it should be deemed a success or failure. Some reports have suggested that Ukraine's strategy led to tensions between Washington and Kiev, with the US pushing for more aggressive attacks in the south with the aim of reaching the Sea of Azov and splitting Russian forces.

Clearly, the offensive has gone slower than many of its overly optimistic advocates anticipated. In a BBC interview on 10 September, the chairman of the US joint chiefs of staff, Gen Mark Milley, said it was too early to say whether the counteroffensive had failed, but said Ukraine was "progressing at a very steady pace through the Russian front lines", adding that the offensive probably has a "reasonable amount of time, probably about 30 to 45 days, worth of fighting weather left". Milley, it should be stressed was one of the more critical voices, having originally said in November last year that the war "is not winnable anymore, militarily".

Unsurprisingly, Ukrainian officials have stressed the military gains, while also criticising the levels of support from allies. President

Zelensky blamed "slower" arms shipments from western countries for threatening the counteroffensive and called for more powerful and long-range weapons, a theme reiterated by Ukraine's new Defence Minister, Rustem Umerov, in a speech on 9 September. The Biden administration appears to be listening and is reportedly close to approving the shipment of longer-range missiles—either Army Tactical Missile Systems with a range of over 30 km or Guided Multiple Launch Rocket System missiles with a 70 km range, with both dispersing cluster munitions—that would give Kyiv the ability to cause significant damage deeper within Russian-occupied territory.

Nonetheless, Ukraine has reported territorial gains on both the eastern and southern fronts. Deputy Defence Minister Hanna Maliar said in televised comments on 11 September that Ukrainian troops had regained about 315 square kilometres of territory since the start of the counteroffensive. The general leading the southern counteroffensive, Brig Gen Oleksandr Tarnavskiy, said on 2 September that Ukrainian forces had decisively breached Russia's first defensive line near Zaporizhzhia and expected faster gains as they pressed the weaker second line. Tarnavskiy estimated Russia had devoted 60% of its time and resources into building the first defensive line and only 20% each into the second and third lines because Moscow had not expected Ukrainian forces to get through. "We are now between the first and second defensive lines", he said. Similarly, White House spokesman John Kirby said on 1 September that the US had seen "notable progress" by Ukrainian forces in the south near the Zaporizhzhia. The commander of Ukraine's ground forces Oleksandr Syrskyi acknowledged on 6 September, however, that the situation along the eastern frontline remained difficult and the main task for Ukraine's troops was to ensure reliable defence and prevent the loss of strongholds.

Despite the slow progress, the near universal enthusiasm for Ukraine's battlefield prospects among Western policymakers, analysts and editorial writers in the mainstream media, retired generals, and other experts in the US and European foreign policy establishments

has continued. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said on 7 September, for example, that while the counteroffensive has involved "heavy and difficult fighting", Ukrainian forces are "gradually gaining ground". And during a visit to Ukraine on 6 September, the US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken described progress as "very, very encouraging". Military analysts Michael Kofman and Rob Lee noted that, despite stiff resistance, "Ukrainian forces have made steady gains in a set-piece battle against a heavily entrenched force", while military historian Phillips O'Brien wrote that "in the coming weeks and months, Ukrainian forward movements look set to continue".

A few critical voices see the situation rather differently. The US political scientist and international relations scholar, John Mearsheimer, described the counteroffensive as a "colossal failure", with (as reported by the *New York Times*) as much as 20 per cent of the weaponry Ukraine sent to the battlefield being damaged or destroyed in the first two weeks of the counteroffensive (more recently this includes at least one of the 14 British Challenger 2 tanks sent to Ukraine), while Ukrainian troops are widely reported to have suffered enormous casualties. Rather than gathering pace, therefore, the likeliest 'best case' outcome of the counteroffensive is that Ukraine will only regain some limited amounts of occupied territory, but not enough to either threaten Russia with outright defeat or cause the collapse of Putin's regime. A 'worst case' scenario could see Ukraine weakened and vulnerable to a new Russian offensive next year.

At any case, with Ukraine unable to prevail on the battlefield, the prospects deepen for a bloody stalemate, or what Martin Stanton, a retired US army officer, describes as an eastern European Passchendaele – with drones. He adds that stalemates of this nature should (logically) produce negotiations, but like World War I, the Ukraine war has turned into a "grudge match", with neither side inclined to compromise.

During the wars in Vietnam (1955-75) and Afghanistan (2001-21), senior political and

military leaders knew that the wars were unwinnable yet continued to mislead parliaments and the public into escalating stalemates that cost millions of lives. The reality on the ground appears to not only suggest a battlefield stalemate, but also an escalation of the conflict into Russian territory and the potential risk of escalation into NATO territory, as well as the potential spectre of nuclear weapons use, a risk that rises inexorably as alternatives appear less attractive. It is not too late for a change of course, however. A negotiated end to the conflict could and should have been pursued earlier, but to further delay diplomacy makes little sense. The battlefield situation and humanitarian consequences are only likely to get worse for Ukraine. In addition to the high numbers of people killed and injured, and the widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure, the challenges of post-traumatic stress disorder in Ukraine will be immense. Ukraine's Ministry of Health is already predicting that some 15 million within Ukraine's general population will require different kinds of psychological support and around 3-4 million people will need medication to manage mental health problems resulting from the war.

The damage too to the collective capacity for global governance at a time of multiple rising threats to social and economic stability must not be ignored. It is not just climate change negotiations that have been damaged by the strategic divisions between the great powers, but also the management of nuclear arsenals, efforts to address the loss of biodiversity, the risk of further pandemics and other challenges that will be on the agenda for next year's Summit of the Future.

Diplomacy will require Kyiv and the West, as well as Moscow, to make concessions. Regrettably, however, there continues to be no diplomatic solution in sight, an attachment to a righteous binary struggle, and little political will among the protagonists or their backers to start negotiations.

The collapse of the Black Sea grain agreement and a new theatre of war

Since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Ukrainian exports of grain have been severely disrupted. For over four months, Russian military vessels blocked Ukrainian ports in the Black Sea. On 22 July 2022, an agreement was brokered by the United Nations and Türkiye to open a safe maritime humanitarian corridor in the Black Sea (the Black Sea Grain Initiative). Over 1000 ships full of grain and other foodstuffs left Ukraine from three Ukrainian ports (Chornomorsk, Odesa and Yuzhny/Pivdennyi) during the implementation of the initiative, which was extended three times, most recently in May.

In July 2023, however, Russia refused to renew the agreement (see NATO Watch Update 49) and reimposed a de-facto blockade of Ukraine's Black Sea ports. Since then, Kyiv has sought to use its Danube River ports and a "humanitarian corridor" along the western Black Sea coast near Romania and Bulgaria to export grain. By early September four vessels had reportedly passed through this temporary shipping corridor. In addition, Ukraine and Croatia agreed on 31 July to the possibility of using Croatian ports on the Danube and the Adriatic Sea for the export of Ukrainian grain.

Russia responded, however, by attacking Ukrainian port infrastructure on the Danube. According to the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry, Russian airstrikes destroyed an estimated 180,000 metric tonnes of grain crops in the space of nine days in July. And in another example, a Russian drone attack on the port of Izmail on the Danube on 23 August destroyed 13,000 tonnes of grain destined for Egypt and Romania. In remarks to a BRICS summit in South Africa the same day, President Putin said Russia would remain a "responsible supplier" of food and grain to African countries. The Ukrainian President said Russia's attacks on port infrastructure showed that Moscow is intent on creating a "global catastrophe" with a crisis in food markets, prices and supplies. The Ukrainian harvest this year was already the

lowest in a decade, according to a July report from the US Department of Agriculture, and now Ukrainian farmers have even fewer ways to export grain.

This disintegration of one of the few diplomatic breakthroughs in the war has dragged the conflict into the maritime theatre and risks expanding the war in other ways. After weeks of Russian attacks on Ukrainian shipping infrastructure, Kyiv struck back with attacks against Russian ships in the Black Sea with sea drones. In the first attack on 4 August a Russian landing ship, the 112-metre Olenegorsky Gornyak from Russia's Northern Fleet, was struck and disabled in the country's Black Sea port of Novorossiysk, Kyiv said. The Olenegorsky Gornyak, which has been used to transport troops and military hardware into occupied Ukrainian ports, was said to have been sufficiently damaged to have been put out of combat action. Onboard camera footage appeared to confirm the success of the night attack on the ship, while satellite imagery also appeared to show a Russian landing ship leaking oil while docked at a Black Sea port.

In the second attack on 5 August, a Russian tanker suffered a drone strike: a video released by Ukrainian authorities appeared to show an unmanned sea drone striking the side of the 141-metre Russian-flagged Sig at night. Ukraine subsequently declared Russian ports in the region a "war risk area" from August 23 "until further notice". On the 24 August, a Russian warship fired warning shots at a cargo ship in the Black Sea. Meanwhile, Romanian authorities have twice confirmed the discovery of drone fragments on the country's soil amid sustained attacks by Russian forces on Ukraine's Danube ports across the river from NATO member Romania (see the discussion below on the risk of NATO's direct intervention in the war).

Despite subsequent discussions and calls to reactivate the agreement, there is no immediate sign of this happening. There was no breakthrough, for example, during face-to-face talks between the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and President Putin on 4 September. Erdoğan had claimed a deal to

export Ukrainian grain through the Black Sea could be revived, but Putin again accused the west of reneging on earlier promises. The Russian Foreign Ministry proposed an alternative plan on 30 August, whereby Russia would send a million tonnes of grain to Turkey at a discounted price, with financial support from Qatar, to be processed in Turkey and sent to countries most in need. However, Türkiye sees "no alternative" to the original grain export agreement, dismissing the idea of alternate routes or plans. Turkey's Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, during a joint media appearance with his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov on 1 September, said that reviving the Black Sea grain deal is "critical" for food security. However, Lavrov told the UN Secretary Ggeneral António Guterres on 24 August that Russia will return to the deal only if the west fulfils its "obligations to Moscow".

During the Russia-Africa summit in St Petersburg on 27-28 July, the Egyptian President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi and South African President Cyril Ramaphosa both urged Russia to revive the Black Sea grain deal. However, President Putin used the summit to announce that Russia could replace Ukraine as a supplier of grain to African nations, adding that Moscow would be ready to start supplying grain for free to six African countries within three to four months. He named Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Eritrea, Mali, Somalia and Zimbabwe as recipients. Earlier, on 26 July, the UN Secretary-General António Guterres criticised Russia's "handful of donations [of grain] to some countries" which he said does not offset the consequences of the end of the Black Sea initiative.

Poland said on 12 September that it would extend a ban on Ukrainian grain imports unilaterally. In June, the EU agreed to restrict imports of grain from Ukraine to five member states, including Poland, seeking to protect their farmers who blamed those imports for the slump in prices on local markets. The restrictions expire on 15 September and the European Commission has yet to decide whether to let them lapse or extend them.

Russian attacks on civilian infrastructure

Russian missile and artillery attacks on civilian infrastructure have continued, and the following list is just a sample of some of the most devasting in terms of civilian loss of life. Four people were killed and scores wounded on 8 September in Russian air strikes on Ukraine, including one fatality in a missile attack on a police building in President Zelensky's hometown; at least 17 people were killed, including a child, and another 32 injured after a Russian rocket struck a busy outdoor market in the Ukrainian city of Kostiantynivka on 6 September; at least two people were reported killed in Kyiv on 30 August in what authorities described as the heaviest series of Russian airstrikes on the Ukrainian capital for months (with Ukrainian air defences claiming to have shot down all 28 Russian missiles and 15 out of 16 drones); at least seven people were killed and 144 injured in a Russian missile strike that hit a theatre and a central square in the northern Ukrainian city of Chernihiv on 19 August, which Denise Brown, the UN's humanitarian coordinator for Ukraine, condemned as a "heinous" attack; three people were killed, several people were wounded and buildings were damaged in a large-scale air-attack on Ukraine's western region of Lviv and the north-western region of Volyn on 14 August; seven people including a 23-day-old girl were killed by Russian shelling in the Kherson region on 13 August; and two Russian missile strikes killed at least eight people and injured 31 when they hit residential buildings in the eastern Ukrainian city of Pokrovsk in the Donetsk region on 7 August.

On 5-6 August Russia fired ballistic and Kinzhal missiles into several Ukrainian cities with some reports indicating Russian forces were firing missiles from inside Belarusian territory. This multi-wave assault on Ukraine – said to be in retaliation for successful strikes against Russian naval vessels (see below) – killed six people and destroyed a blood transfusion centre in Kupiansk, a city a few dozen kilometres from the Russian border. President Zelensky condemned the "guided air bomb" strike against the medical facility as a war

crime of "beasts". Despite the strikes, Zelensky said Ukraine was seeing "significant results" from US and German air defence systems.

Ukraine's security service said on 7 August that it had foiled a plot to assassinate President Zelensky, after the arrest of a woman suspected of gathering intelligence about his movements. The unnamed woman was said by the security service to be gathering information about Zelensky's visit to the southern Mykolaiv region where Russia was planning a major air assault.

Ukrainian attacks inside Russia and Crimea

As discussed in NATO Watch Updates 47, 48 and 49, a covert, low-level campaign of attacks within Russia and Russian-occupied Crimea has been going on for several months. Russia has repeatedly reported Ukrainian sabotage attempts on its borders, sent helicopters to put down a cross-border incursion in the Belgorod region in May, and there have been increasing reports of SA-5 Gammon missiles striking Russia, with drones regularly hitting Moscow and other areas. These attacks, far beyond the frontlines, appear to be escalating and are regarded as powerful propaganda for Ukraine, though Kyiv rarely claims responsibility for the attacks directly.

Ukrainian drones struck targets in at least six regions deep within Russia on 30 August, for example, in one of the largest-scale attacks on Russia in months. Drones hit an airport in the western Pskov region, and the regions of Moscow, Oryol, Bryansk, Ryazan and Kaluga. The most significant attack appeared to be in Pskov, where Russian officials said four Il-76 military transport planes were damaged. Pskov lies about 660 km north of the Ukrainian frontier, near the borders with Estonia and Latvia. Ukraine's military intelligence said on 1 September that the attack on Pskov was carried out from within Russian territory. Three drones came down in the Bryansk region, two over the Oryol region, one in the Ryazan region, one in Kaluga, and one more in the Moscow region, officials said. No damage or casualties were registered. The UK Ministry

of Defence said in its intelligence update on 31 August that Russia's air defences are struggling to detect and destroy Ukrainian drones launched on its territory, judging by how many have reached their targets. Meanwhile, Russia's Defence Ministry said on 1 September that it had destroyed 281 Ukrainian drones over the past week, including 29 over the western regions of Russia, indicating the scale of the drone war now underway between Russia and Ukraine.

In another flurry of attempted drone strikes on 20 August, four separate regions (Belgorod, Kursk, Moscow and Rostov) were attacked, five people were injured and Moscow's airports were forced to briefly divert flights. A day earlier a Ukrainian drone targeted a military airfield in Russia's Novgorod region, causing a fire and reportedly damaged a Tupolev Tu-22M3 long-range supersonic bomber. And three Ukrainian drones were shot down over Moscow on 31 July damaging a high-rise building containing government offices and briefly shut an international airport, according to reports. After the drones were downed over Moscow, President Zelensky warned that "war is returning to the territory of Russia", adding that this was "an inevitable, natural and absolutely fair process" and that Russia's symbolic centres and military bases would be targeted. According to one report, the Biden administration does not seem overly concerned over these recent Ukrainian efforts to bring the war back to Russia, regarding the escalation risks (especially in relation to nuclear weapons) as being less relevant than at earlier periods of the war.

Ukrainian forces marked the country's independence day on 24 August with a naval raid into occupied Crimea. The national holiday celebrates Ukraine's independence from the former Soviet Union in 1991, but this year it also marked 18 months since Russia's full-scale invasion.

The Wagner Group and death of Yevgeny Prigozhin

Wagner chief Yevgeny Prigozhin and senior Wagner commander Dmitry Utkin were on

board a private Embraer Legacy 600 jet (plane number RA-02795) en route from Moscow to St Petersburg when it crashed near the village of Kuzhenkino in the Tver region on 23 August. All 10 people on board– seven passengers and three crew members–died. The cause of the crash was not immediately clear, but the Russian government has been widely accused of assassinating Prigozhin. Russian investigators opened a criminal investigation. The plane showed no sign of problems until a precipitous drop in its final 30 seconds, according to flight-tracking data.

During a meeting at the Kremlin a day after the crash, President Putin called Prigozhin a "talented businessman" with "a difficult fate", and offered condolences to the families of the 10 people onboard. He said that Prigozhin had returned to Russia from Africa on 23 August and had met "some officials", without specifying whom. A preliminary US intelligence assessment concluded that an explosion onboard probably brought down the plane. Prigozhin's death follows a pattern of "unclarified" fatalities in Russia, Germany's Foreign Minister said. On 25 August President Putin ordered Wagner fighters to sign an oath of allegiance to the Russian state. Russia's investigative committee, which looks into serious crimes, confirmed on 27 August that Prigozhin was among the people killed in the plane crash but did not offer any details as to what might have caused it. However, the Kremlin said on 30 August that Russian investigators were considering the possibility that the plane was shot down on purpose. "It is obvious that different versions are being considered, including … a deliberate atrocity," the Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

Wagner fighters, having taken refuge in Belarus after their short-lived rebellion against Moscow's military leadership in June (see NATO Watch Updates 48 and 49), have prompted concerns from neighbouring countries, especially Poland. Wagner soldiers began training with the Belarus national army, prompting Poland to move more than 1,000 troops and almost 200 units of equipment to the east of the country. Tensions have

continued to increase on the Poland-Belarus border. The Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said on 29 July that a group of 100 mercenaries from the Wagner group moved closer to the Belarusian city of Grodno near the Polish border, raising fears of a potentially "dangerous" situation. A day earlier Lithuanian deputy interior minister Arnoldas Abramavičius said that Poland and Lithuania were considering closing their respective borders with Belarus amid concerns over the group.

Poland said on 1 August it was moving more troops to its eastern border after accusing Belarus of violating its airspace with military helicopters. The Belarusian military denied any such violation and accused Poland of making up the accusation to justify a buildup of its troops. Morawiecki claimed on 3 August that Wagner fighters were being moved close to NATO's eastern flank to destabilise the military alliance, and on 7 August Poland accused Belarus and Russia of orchestrating another migration influx into the EU via the Polish border in order to destabilise the region. The head of the border guard, Tomasz Praga, said that 19,000 people had tried to cross the border illegally in 2023 so far, up from 16,000 in 2022.

On 10 August Poland announced that it would move up to 10,000 additional troops to the border to support the Border Guard. "About 10,000 soldiers will be on the border, of which 4,000 will directly support the Border Guard and 6,000 will be in the reserve", the Defence Minister, Mariusz Błaszczak, said in an interview. The Polish interior minister, Mariusz Kamiński on 28 August repeated the threat to close the borders with Belarus entirely if a "critical incident" involving Wagner mercenaries were to take place. The Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko criticised what he called "stupid demands" from Poland and the Baltic states for Wagner fighters sheltering in his country to leave.

The risk of NATO's direct involvement in the war

While the war in Ukraine is mostly concentrated in the east along the country's border with Russia, the borders of NATO members to Ukraine's north and west are increasingly becoming destabilised. As noted above, mercenaries from Russia's Wagner Group have moved into Belarus, and Russia has been striking Ukrainian port facilities on the left bank of the Danube, just across the river from Romania. The chief of the general staff of the Polish armed forces Gen Rajmund Andrzejczak said on 5 September that President Putin's "gangster" nuclear threats required NATO to adopt a much more aggressive response, including flying more aircraft with nuclear weapons (see the section on the risk of nuclear war below). A day later, Romania's President Klaus Iohannis called for an urgent investigation into apparent drone debris discovered on its soil after Russian attacks on neighbouring parts of Ukraine. Romania had earlier repeatedly rejected claims by Kyiv that Iranian-made Russian drones fell and detonated on Romanian territory during a strike on 3 September on the Ukrainian port of Izmail (see the section on the Black Sea grain agreement above). NATO said in a statement that it stands in "strong solidarity" with Romania, and "we continue to monitor the situation closely".

Subsequently, both Ukrainian and NATO officials sought to downplay the risk of these incidents escalating further. Romania's Defence Ministry said on 7 September that the country did not face any direct threat to its territory or territorial waters from Russian strikes on Ukraine that resulted in the drone debris, while the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg also said there was no sign Russia had launched a deliberate attack on alliance member Romania. Nonetheless Stoltenberg said that it "demonstrates the risk of incidents and accidents". Romania announced on 12 September that it had begun building air raid shelters for residents near the Ukraine border.

Elections

President Zelensky said on 27 August that national elections could take place during wartime if international partners shared the cost, legislators approved, and everyone got to the polls. Zelensky was responding to comments from the US senator Lindsey Graham who, while praising the war effort, said Ukraine needed to show it was different by holding elections in wartime. Meanwhile, Russian-installed authorities began holding regional elections on 31 August in parts of Ukraine Russia claimed as its own last year, seeking to cement Moscow's authority in what it calls its "new territories" despite the ongoing conflict. Russia does not fully control any of the four regions where the votes were held – Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson. Along with Crimea – annexed by Moscow in 2014 – they make up almost a fifth of Ukraine.

On 8 September Ukraine's Foreign Ministry condemned the "sham elections", saying they were "worthless" and would have no legal standing. The Russian regional elections include four Ukrainian regions The US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, also described the voting as "sham elections" and said they were "illegitimate". Russian authorities reported multiple attempts to sabotage the voting, while residents and Ukrainian activists alleged that Russian poll workers made house calls with armed soldiers detaining those who refuse to vote. Russia's Central Election Commission said on 11 September that the country's ruling party had won the most votes in the elections.

Meanwhile, Ukrainians living in Russian-occupied territory are being forced to assume Russian citizenship or face retaliation, including possible deportation or detention, according to a new US report published on 2 August. Yale University researchers found that residents of the Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions were being targeted by a systematic effort to strip them of Ukrainian identity. Ukrainians who do not seek Russian citizenship "are subjected to threats, intimidation, restrictions on humanitarian aid and basic necessities, and possible detention

or deportation, all designed to force them to become Russian citizens," the report said.

A new Ukrainian defence minister

Ukraine's parliament voted on 6 September to approve the appointment of Rustem Umerov as the new defence minister. Umerov is a leading member of the Crimean Tatar community who has represented his country in sensitive negotiations with Russia. He replaced Oleksii Reznikov, who stepped down at Zelensky's instigation after 22 months in the job, submitting his resignation letter to the chairman of parliament on 4 September. Zelensky said on 3 September he had decided to replace his wartime defence minister, and the announcement, made in the Ukrainian President's nightly video address to the nation, represents the biggest shake-up of Ukraine's defence establishment since the start of the war. In an article for the Guardian on 8 September, Reznikov said President Putin remained determined to destroy Ukraine entirely and to "assimilate" its citizens into the Russian Federation. He also warned his western counterparts that negotiations with Moscow would not bring peace. Meanwhile, President Zelensky announced on 13 August the dismissal of all the heads of Ukraine's regional military recruitment centres as part of a drive to root out corruption after officials were accused of taking bribes from those seeking to avoid the frontlines. Ukraine's president described the taking of cash from people who wanted to avoid conscription while others suffered as a form of treachery.

The G20 Summit

At the annual G20 summit held in Delhi on 9-10 September leaders adopted by consensus an 83-paragraph declaration on issues facing the bloc after some disagreement over the wording on the war in Ukraine. All references to Russia in relation to the war in Ukraine that featured in last year's joint statement at the G20 summit in Bali were removed, and instead, the declaration emphasised that states must "refrain from the threat or use of force to seek territorial acquisition" and that "the use or

threat of use of nuclear weapons is inadmissible". The wording on a portion of the declaration on Ukraine noted the "different views and assessments" on Russia's war, but underscored that all states must act in a manner "consistent with the purposes and principles of the UN charter in its entirety". It called for the "timely and effective" implementation to ensure "immediate and unimpeded" deliveries of grain, food stuff and fertilisers from Ukraine and Russia. Brazil and South Africa, the next two G20 presidents, reportedly played a key role in getting Russia to agree to the language, as well as Indonesia, Turkey and Mexico. European countries were keen to use strong language to condemn Russia's invasion, but Russia and China had opposed any reference to the war. The Ukrainian Foreign Ministry described the sections relating to the Russian invasion of Ukraine as "nothing to be proud of".

Stalled diplomacy

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. Nonetheless, a growing number of Global South powers have pushed for a negotiated settlement to end the war. Earlier this year, Brazilian President Lula da Silva called for a coalition of non-Western states to mediate peace talks (see NATO Watch Update 47), and a recent African initiative (see NATO Watch Update 48) was the first since the start of the war to hold separate face-to-face talks with both the Russian and Ukrainian leaders.

During the second Russia–Africa Summit in St. Petersburg on 27-28 July 2023, President Putin offered tepid support for the African peace initiative, but said that negotiations over a ceasefire could not start while the Ukrainian counteroffensive is ongoing. "There are provisions of this peace initiative that are being implemented, but there are things that are difficult or impossible to implement", Putin said. "[T]he Ukrainian army is on the offensive, they are attacking, they are implementing a large-scale strategic offensive operation… We cannot cease fire when we are under attack", he said. Brazilian President Lula da Silva said on 2 August that while he still hoped to help negotiate peace in Ukraine, he didn't see an opportunity for talks in the near future. "For the time being, both of them are in that phase that 'I will win, I will win, I will win,'" Lula said.

Track 1.5 US-Russian diplomacy

Although President Putin has apparently rejected a US offer to discuss the war, lower-level meetings between US foreign policy elites and Russian officials have been taking place at least twice a month, according to an anonymous former US official involved in the talks, the Moscow Times reported on 27 July. The former official said that the biggest sticking point for Russian leaders is that "they don't know how to define victory or defeat". The anonymous ex-official said one goal of the meetings was to communicate that the United States is "prepared to work constructively with Russian national security concerns". These meetings between Russian leaders and former US officials, suggest that the United States is seeking secretive, less formal pathways to discuss and possibly end the conflict with Moscow.

The Saudi peace summit

Saudi Arabia hosted a peace summit organised by Kyiv in the Red Sea coastal city of Jeddah on 5-6 August. National security advisers and other senior officials from about 40 countries, including China, India, the United States and Ukraine, took part. Russia was not invited, and prior to the summit, Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said that he would not attend due to Russia's exclusion. "If there's acceptance from both Ukraine and Russia to look for solutions to achieve peace, we'll participate," Lopez Obrador said, and he called for a swift end to the "irrational" war. Russia said that it would follow the developments in Jeddah and that "any attempt to promote a

peaceful settlement deserves a positive evaluation".

The Saudi summit was effectively a continuation of the meeting held in Denmark in late June that was attended by a number of European officials as well as representatives from Brazil, India, Turkey and South Africa — where Ukraine sought to consolidate support, particularly among countries from the Global South, for its own vision for peace: a 10-point peace plan that Ukraine's President Zelenskyy announced in November 2022, which called for the restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity, the withdrawal of Russian troops, the release of all prisoners, a tribunal for those responsible for the aggression and security guarantees for Ukraine. Andriy Yermak, the head of the Ukrainian president's office and his main envoy for the talks in Jeddah, said "The Ukrainian Peace Formula contains 10 fundamental points, the implementation of which will not only ensure peace for Ukraine, but also create mechanisms to counter future conflicts in the world. We are deeply convinced that the Ukrainian peace plan should be taken as a basis, because the war is taking place on our land". Kyiv has been trying to get neutral nations to support this conception of a peace deal to strengthen its position in any eventual negotiations. In short, Ukraine and Western officials were hoping that these talks might culminate in a peace summit later this year or early in 2024 where global leaders would sign up to shared principles for resolving the war.

China did not attend the June meeting in Copenhagen, so Beijing's participation in Jeddah was significant. China's Foreign Ministry said the Saudi talks helped "consolidate international consensus". China's special envoy for Eurasian affairs, Li Hui, "had extensive contact and communication with all parties on the political settlement of the Ukraine crisis … listened to all sides' opinions and proposals, and further consolidated international consensus", the Foreign Ministry said. Li Hui met separately with White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and acting deputy secretary of state Victoria Nuland while in Jeddah, and which the US State Department later described as "productive".

Although the summit ended with no concrete action beyond a commitment to further consultations, Ukraine said it was "very satisfied" with the outcome.

NATO official rows back on 'territory for peace' suggestion

An illustration of how difficult it is to break out of the 'righteous binary struggle' mindset (see comment above) was provided by the minor ruckus in August over a discussion point made by a senior NATO official. At a panel event in Norway on 15 August, Stian Jenssen, the chief of staff to the NATO Secretary General Jens suggested that Ukraine could cede some territory in exchange for NATO membership as "a possible solution" to the war. Zelensky advisor Mykhailo Podolyak responded on Twitter, calling the idea "ridiculous" and arguing that such a proposal would amount to "deliberately choosing the defeat of democracy". Jenssen subsequently apologised and clarified his comments, while Jens Stoltenberg weighed in and said "it is the Ukrainians, and only the Ukrainians, who can decide when there are conditions in place for negotiations, and who can decide at the negotiating table what is an acceptable solution".

Other peace proposals

The Vatican has been pursuing diplomatic efforts in Ukraine and the papal peace envoy, Cardinal Matteo Zuppi, travelled to Beijing on 13 September to continue "the search for paths that can lead to a just peace". On 2 August, Pope Francis urged Europe to find "courageous courses of peace" to end the war in Ukraine. He said: "Where are you sailing, if you are not showing the world paths of peace, creative ways for bringing an end to the war in Ukraine?". And in a virtual address to a congregation of 400 in St Petersburg that gathered for the annual Catholic youth day on 28 August, he urged young Russians to be "sowers of seeds of reconciliation".

The leaders of 11 Balkan and eastern European countries signed a joint declaration backing Ukraine's territorial integrity at a summit in Athens on 21 August. In the presence of President Zelensky, they expressed their "unwavering support for Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders" in the face of Russia's aggression.

> 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 (virtual) meeting took place on 18 July, where NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg outlined the major decisions taken at the Vilnius Summit to support Ukraine. Earlier, at its Madrid Summit NATO agreed 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 single provider of military assistance to Ukraine, having committed roughly $47 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 €53 billion ($57 bn) 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 €5.6 billion in assistance.

New US announcements

Since the war began in February 2022, the US has provided about 40 military assistance packages to Ukraine. The three most recent packages were announced on 14 and 29 August and 6 September. The security assistance announced on 14 August by the Pentagon was valued at $200 million and included air defence munitions, artillery rounds, and additional mine-clearing equipment. The second August package announced by the US State Department was worth about $250 million and included additional mine clearing equipment, missiles for air defence, ammunition for artillery and high bar systems, and over three million rounds of small arms ammunition. (It is unclear whether these were two separate packages or one single package, but with two separate announcements). The money for the August packages represented the first tranche to come from the $6.2 billion in funds that were freed after the Pentagon reported an "accounting error" in June as a result of , overvaluing some of the equipment that had been previously sent to Ukraine. The 6 September package worth more than $175 million (as part of a total aid package totalling more than $1billion), included Himars missile launch systems, Javelin anti-tank weapons, Abrams tanks and other weapon systems.

The Pentagon said it would also send depleted uranium shells for Abrams tanks, a form of ammunition that is controversial since it leaves radiation contamination that is hazardous to human health. The UK has already provided Ukraine with depleted uranium munitions. It was reported on 5 September that one of the 14 Challenger 2 tanks that Britain sent to Ukraine, with the capacity to fire depleted uranium shells, was destroyed in a battle with Russian forces in the village of Robotyne.

The Democratic and Republican leaders of the US Senate expressed support for continued assistance for Ukraine on 5 September, as US lawmakers returned to Washington facing a tight deadline for passing spending bills. President Joe Biden in August asked Congress to approve about $40 billion in additional spending, including $24 billion for Ukraine and other international needs, in a test of the country's willingness to keep supporting Ukraine.

New European and other announcements

Denmark announced on 12 September its largest financial donation to Ukraine since the invasion—5.8 billion kroner ($833 million)—mainly to finance air defences, ammunition and tanks. And Denmark's armed forces said on 8 September that the first 10 Leopard 1 tanks donated by Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands have arrived in Ukraine.

British defence company BAE Systems said on 31 August it had set up a local entity in Ukraine and signed deals with the government there to help ramp up Kyiv's supply of weapons and equipment. The Kremlin said a day later that it took a negative view of the decision and that any facilities producing weapons used against Russia would become targets for Moscow's military.

Sweden said on 15 August that it would donate to Ukraine ammunition and spare parts for previously donated weapon systems worth over $300 million—the military aid package is Sweden's 13th to Ukraine. Germany will deliver a Luna New Generation drone system to Ukraine, Bild am Sonntag reported on 13 August. The equipment will include a ground control station with several drones, a launch catapult and military trucks. And an EU spokesperson said on 11 August that the bloc has delivered 223,800 shells to Ukraine under the first part of a plan to provide a million artillery rounds to aid Kyiv's fight against Russia.

Qatar will provide Ukraine with $100 million in humanitarian aid to support health, education and demining, the Ukrainian prime minister,

Denys Shmyhal, said on 28 July after talks with his Qatari counterpart.

Supplies of combat aircraft and training

The Netherlands and Denmark announced on 20 August that they will donate up to 61 F-16 combat aircraft between them to Ukraine once pilot training has been satisfactorily completed. This means that Ukraine is not expected to be ready to fly combat missions until well into 2024, by which time the war could have been going on for two years. However, the announcements set in place a firm timetable and commitment to transfer the F-16s. US approval for the transfer was reportedly key to the decision. Both the Netherlands and Denmark have F-16s available to donate as their armed forces are transitioning to newer F-35 combat aircraft.

Ukraine has also indicated that it is "getting closer" to obtaining Swedish Gripen combat aircraft. Although Sweden has not made any formal commitment to supply the aircraft to Ukraine, Swedish public radio (SR) reported on 12 September that the government is considering the request. The Swedish government may formally ask the armed forces within days to officially consider the issue, according to the report.

The first two countries to agree to supply combat aircraft to Ukraine (other than F-16s) were Poland and Slovakia (see NATO Watch Update 46). NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg revealed on 15 June that Ukrainian fighter pilots were already being trained to fly F-16 combat aircraft, even though NATO member states at that time had not yet agreed to supply them (see NATO Watch Update 48). The Netherlands and Denmark initiated the international coalition of countries training Ukrainian pilots in June, and in July-August the coalition expanded to 13 countries in total (the eleven additional nations are Belgium, Canada, Greece, Luxembourg, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Sweden, UK and USA). Denmark said on 22 August that it had begun training eight Ukrainian pilots in flying F-16s as part of its commitment to donate aircraft.

The Pentagon [announced](#) on 24 August that the US will begin flight training for Ukrainian pilots on F-16s in October. Several pilots and dozens of aircraft maintenance crew would take the training at Morris air national guard base in Tucson, Arizona, facilitated by the air national guard's 162nd wing. The US could have the first Ukrainian pilots trained on F-16s before the end of the year, though it will be longer than that before they are flying combat missions, the director of the US Air National Guard [said](#) on 12 September. Ukrainian pilots are expected to arrive for training in Arizona by October and depending on their proficiency in English and previous flying experience could complete the training in three months.

A Ukrainian pilot, Andriy "Juice" Pilshchykov, who had travelled to Washington DC last year to meet members of the US Congress and lobby for F-16 combat aircraft was [killed](#) in a midair collision on 25 August along with two other pilots. Ukrainian authorities have launched an investigation into the incident.

Report criticises NATO training

Ukrainian troops trained by NATO are being left underprepared for the realities of the war with Russia, media platform [openDemocracy reported](#) on 8 August. About 63,000 Ukrainian troops have been trained in the West — mostly in the UK and Germany, according to the report. One limitation is that Western armies have been focused on fighting insurgencies in the Middle East in recent years.

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](#). The United States has claimed that Russia and Iran are expanding their defence partnership (see NATO Watch [Update 48](#)). Russia is making steady progress towards its goal of mass producing Shahed-136 drones that can travel more than 1,600km and target Ukrainian cities, the Washington Post [reported](#) on 17 August. Moscow is working on its own version of the Shahed-136 despite delays and sanctions that impact components needed from other

countries, according to the documents cited in the report.

Ukrainian soldiers were observed firing North Korean rockets that they said were seized by a "friendly" country before being delivered to Ukraine, it was [reported](#) on 29 July. On 30 August the White House [said](#) that Russia is in secret, active talks with North Korea to acquire a range of munitions and supplies. "Arms negotiations between Russia and the DPRK are actively advancing," the White House national security spokesperson, John Kirby, said, adding that a key focus of the talks was artillery ammunition. A day later, Russia reportedly [said](#) it intended to deepen ties with North Korea. To this end, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un is due to [meet](#) President Putin to discuss potential weapon sales.

Cuba identified an alleged human trafficking ring aimed at recruiting its citizens to fight on Russia's side in the war in Ukraine, its Foreign Ministry [said](#) on 5 September, adding that it was working to dismantle the "trafficking network that operates from Russia to incorporate Cuban citizens living there". Cuban authorities subsequently arrested 17 people in connection with the trafficking network. The head of criminal investigations for Cuba's Interior Ministry, César Rodríguez, [told state media](#) that at least three of the 17 people arrested were part of recruitment efforts inside the island country.

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](#).

Humanitarian consequences of the war

Exact figures for the number of war fatalities, both military and civilian, are difficult to verify and confirm, with [undercounting and manipulation](#) of the data is common in war. According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project ([ACLED](#)), a disaggregated data collection, analysis and crisis mapping project, there were a total of 54,775 conflict-

related fatalities in Ukraine between 24 February 2022 and 21 July 2023: 26,777 in battles; 26,657 in explosions/remote violence; 1,337 in violence against civilians; and 4 in protests. These may be low estimates of fatalities given that other public sources suggest much higher casualty rates.

The number of battlefield casualties in Ukraine is approaching nearly 500,000 Russian and Ukrainian soldiers, US officials told the New York Times in August. Russia's military casualties are approaching 300,000, the officials claimed, with as many as 120,000 killed in action. Ukraine was said to have close to 70,000 killed and 100,000-120,000 wounded. This casualty data also suggests that the war has escalated dramatically over the past year, with the rate of combined casualties increasing from 20,000 per month to more than 33,000 per month in the war's current phase. Russia has not released official figures for those killed in action since September 2022, when it said 5,937 soldiers had died. Ukraine claims to have killed more than 270,000 Russian soldiers in the war to date.The official Ukrainian armed forces' casualty toll is a secret, but 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 10 September, 9,614 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. The Ukraine prosecutor general's office said on 13 August that 500 children have been killed and 1,097 injured so far in Russia's invasion of Ukraine. More than 1,300 schools have been totally

destroyed in government-held areas of Ukraine since Russia's 2022 invasion, UNICEF said on 29 August. "Inside Ukraine, attacks on schools have continued unabated, leaving children deeply distressed and without safe spaces to learn," it said.

According to Action on Armed Violence (AOAV) the number of civilian casualties from explosive violence in the Ukrainian conflict reached 16,503 people by 11 September. From this number, 4,953 were killed and 11,550 were injured. Ninety-five per cent (15,663) of civilian casualties have occurred in populated areas. According to the Cluster Munition Coalition, more than 900 people were killed or injured by cluster munitions in Ukraine in 2022 amid broad Russian use of the widely banned weapons. On the use of cluster munitions in the war see NATO Watch Update 49.

Ukraine has become the most heavily mined country on Earth after a year and a half of Russian troops laying them down. Soldiers have been unearthing five mines for every square metre in some places, Oleksii Reznikov, then Ukraine's Defence Minister, told the Guardian on 13 August. According to the Washington Post, roughly 30 per cent of the country is now contaminated with unexploded ordnance, a problem that will require decades of effort to solve. The World Bank estimates that Ukraine will need $37.4 billion over the next decade to support its demining work, adding yet another cost for reconstructing the country after the war ends.

The number of refugees from the conflict stood at 6,201,600 as of 6 September, down from 8,207,977 on 9 May. The largest refugee centre established to home Ukrainians fleeing the Russian invasion was closed by Poland at the end of August after it said the sanctuary was no longer required, since most had now found homes elsewhere. However, Ireland said on 7 September that about 500 Ukrainians were arriving in the country a week, joining tens of thousands of their compatriots who had arrived in the last 18 months. But growing pressure on services will mean more will have to be temporarily housed in tents.

Continuing concerns over nuclear power plants

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) warned on 8 September of a potential threat to nuclear safety after a surge in fighting near the Russian-occupied Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant. The IAEA said its experts at Europe's largest nuclear power plant reported hearing explosions over the past week.

Ukraine's state-owned power generating company Energoatom said on 10 August that the plant again lost connection to its last remaining main external power line overnight and was switched to a reserve line. Energoatom said the plant was on the verge of a blackout as the reserve line had less than half of the power capacity of the main power line. Additionally, the station's Russian-installed administration said the Number 4 reactor had been moved from a "hot" to a "cold" shutdown because of signs of a steam leak. Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant with its six reactors has been controlled by the Russian military since the early days of Moscow's invasion in February 2022. Both sides have repeatedly accused the other of endangering the safety of the plant. Ukraine had accused Russia of turning the plant into a shield for its artillery and of dynamiting the reactor roof, turning the site into an atomic bargaining chip (see NATO Watch Update 48). However, the IAEA said on 4 August that it had "finally" been granted access requested a month ago and that it had found no explosives.

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On the risk of nuclear war

Risks of a direct military confrontation between Russia and the United States/NATO are steadily growing. There have been [concerns](#) since the start of the war that it might escalate to the use of nuclear, chemical or biological weapons. Former Russian president Dmitry Medvedev [said](#) on 30 July that Moscow would be "forced" to use a nuclear weapon if Kyiv's counteroffensive was a success and its forces "tore off a part of our land". Medvedev, the deputy chair of Russia's security council, said that in that situation "there would simply be no other option". Medvedev's apocalyptic rhetoric (also see his February [remarks](#)) has been seen as an attempt to deter Kyiv's western allies from getting even more involved in the war.

Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said in an [interview](#) in August for state-owned magazine The International Affairs that the "possession of nuclear arms is today the only possible response to some of significant external threats to security of our country". Lavrov warned that the US and NATO risked ending up in "a situation of direct armed confrontation of nuclear powers". "We believe such a development should be prevented. That's why we have to remind about the existence of high military and political risks and send sobering signals to our opponents", Lavrov said. The head of Russian space agency Roscosmos [said](#) on 1 September that Russia's Sarmat intercontinental ballistic missiles have been put on combat duty. The missiles can carry 10 or more nuclear warheads.

In March Russia [said](#) that it would station tactical nuclear weapons in neighbouring Belarus (see NATO Watch [Update 47](#)) and President Putin [confirmed](#) deployment of the first tranche on 16 June (see NATO Watch [Update 48](#)). Poland's President Andrzej Duda [confirmed](#) on 22 August that Russia had begun shifting some short-range nuclear weapons to neighbouring Belarus. He said the move would shift the security architecture of the region and the entire NATO military alliance. Earlier Poland had [requested](#) that nuclear weapons be deployed on its territory, in what would be the

first expansion of NATO nuclear sharing in more than six decades.

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, while the United States announced on 1 June that it will stop providing Russia with some notifications required under the treaty, including updates on missile and launcher locations.

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On investigation of war crimes in Ukraine

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) will hear Russia's objections to its jurisdiction in a genocide case brought by Ukraine in hearings starting on 18 September, the body said on 22 August. Ukraine filed a case with the ICJ shortly after Russia's invasion began on 24 February

2022, which accused Moscow of falsely applying genocide law to justify the attack.

Selected investigations Feb 2022-Aug 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 Council of Europe, 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, and on 17 March the ICC issued an arrest warrant for President Putin for overseeing the mass abduction of Ukrainian children. 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. A report from the UN-backed Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine published on 16 March 2023 said Russia has committed a wide-range of war crimes in Ukraine including wilful killings, systematic torture and the deportation of children. In an earlier October 2022 report the Commission found reasonable grounds to conclude that an array of war crimes, violations of human rights and international humanitarian law have been committed in Ukraine, with Russian armed forces responsible for the vast majority of the violations identified.

A report published on 7 December 2022 by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (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. A second OHCHR report published on 27 June 2023 said Russian forces have carried out widespread and systematic torture of civilians detained in connection with its attack on Ukraine, summarily executing more than 70 of them. 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.

European leaders convening in Iceland on 15-16 May for a Council of Europe Summit (only the fourth summit of the 46-member Council of Europe since it was founded after World War II) pledged to hold Russia to account for its war against Ukraine and unveiled a new mechanism - a Register of Damages - to track the losses and damage inflicted by Moscow's forces. The UN Secretary-General's Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict in June 2023 called out Russia for killing 136 children in Ukraine in 2022 and also verified that Russian armed forces and affiliated groups injured 518 children and carried out 480 attacks on schools and hospitals.

Finally, a new international office to investigate Russia's invasion of Ukraine opened on 3 July in The Hague, in the first step towards a possible tribunal for Moscow's leadership. The International Centre for the Prosecution of the Crime of Aggression (ICPA), which includes prosecutors from Ukraine, the EU, the United States and the International Criminal Court (ICC), will investigate and gather evidence in a move seen as an interim step before the creation of a special tribunal that could bring Russian officials to justice for starting the Ukraine war.

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On sanctions against Russia and post-war reconstruction in Ukraine

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 almost 1,800 individuals and 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 over 1,500 individuals and entities; 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, but so far only Canada has enacted the authority to do so.

The US State Department on 24 August imposed new sanctions on 13 Russian people and entities it said were reportedly connected to the forced deportation and transfer of Ukraine's children. On 17 August the US imposed sanctions on four Russians it accused of being involved in the 2020 poisoning of now jailed Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny. The US Treasury Department said the four were linked to Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) and included two it said were among the main reported perpetrators of Navalny's poisoning. Finally, the US imposed new sanctions on four "prominent members of Russia's financial elite", the US Treasury Department said in a statement on 11 August. All four have served on the supervisory board of the Alfa Group Consortium, one of Russia's largest financial and investment conglomerates.

On the 8 August the UK imposed 25 new sanctions on individuals and businesses stating it was targeting Russia's access to foreign military supplies. The UK Foreign Secretary James Cleverly said: "Today's landmark sanctions will further diminish Russia's arsenal and close the net on supply chains propping up Putin's now-struggling defence industry. There is nowhere for those sustaining Russia's military machine to hide". In addition, on 31 July the UK added six new designations to its Russia sanctions list targeting judges and officials involved in the trial of Kara-Murza (see below). Meanwhile, according to a New York Times report on 27 July, the UK government has allowed sanctioned Russian oligarchs to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on perks such as private chefs, chauffeurs and housekeepers, thanks to numerous sanction exemptions.

British American Tobacco said on 7 September it would sell its last cigarette in Russia within a month, ending its presence in the world's fourth-largest tobacco market a year and a half after it first promised to do so in response to the invasion of Ukraine. Meanwhile, the Dutch brewing company Heineken completed its lengthy exit from Russia with the sale of its operations there for a symbolic €1, after Moscow clamped down on asset sales in retaliation for western sanctions.

Arkady Volozh, the co-founder of Russian tech company Yandex, has made a formal request to have EU sanctions on him lifted, in a potential test of whether the EU will take a more sympathetic view of figures who distance themselves from the Kremlin. Lawyers for Volozh petitioned the EU to repeal the measures days after he condemned Vladimir Putin's "barbaric" invasion of Ukraine.

French President Emmanuel Macron said on 7 September that the Russian flag has no place at next year's Paris Olympics because of the war crimes committed by Vladimir Putin's regime in Ukraine. The IOC has encouraged governing bodies of individual sports to allow Russians and Belarusians to compete as "neutral athletes" without national symbols or flags in Olympic qualifying events.

The Nobel Foundation reversed its decision to invite ambassadors from Russia and Belarus to this year's Nobel award ceremony in Stockholm, after the move sparked anger in Sweden and abroad. The foundation said on 2 September that it had chosen "to repeat last year's exception to regular practice – that is, to not invite the ambassadors of Russia, Belarus and Iran".

Clara Volintiru and Paul Costello, Winning the peace in Ukraine through local accountability, GMF Insights, 9 August 2023

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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, although Europe's pipeline gas flows from Russia have fallen to historic lows. For example, flows to the EU may fall to 21 billion cubic metres in 2023, almost two-thirds lower than in 2022 and a more than a six-fold drop from 2021, Russian state bank Veb said on 5 September in a forecast. Hence, European countries have sought alternative energy sources. In particular, shipments of cooled liquified natural gas (LNG) have surged, with supplies from all over the world, including Russia, since LNG is not subject to any EU sanctions. According to recent analysis, EU imports of Russian LNG have increased by 40% since the invasion of Ukraine. Member states have bought more than half of Russia's LNG on the market in the first seven months of this year. Spain and Belgium, which act as major gateways for LNG supplies to the EU, have emerged as the second and third-biggest customers of Russian LNG respectively after China.

Questions continue as to who blew up the Nord Stream pipelines in September 2022. Many European governments have suspected Russia, while Vladimir Putin has blamed the US and its allies. Ukraine has strenuously denied any link to the attacks. Investigations by Denmark, Germany and Sweden into explosions on the Nord Stream gas pipelines have not yet concluded. For an overview of the various allegations and media reports on the issue, see NATO Watch Update 47. German magazine Der Spiegel published a lengthy and detailed investigation into the attack on the Nord Stream pipeline on 26 August. It reported that "a striking number of clues point to Ukraine" as being the perpetrator of the attack.

All the Evidence Points to Kyiv, Der Spiegel, 26 August 2023

Simon Pirani, War in Ukraine Makes Just Transition on Energy More Urgent, Foreign Policy in Focus, 24 July 2023

On China's position on the war

Although China's position on Russia-China relations and on the Russia-West confrontation is not uniform, the Chinese Government has presented a relatively consistent and developed position. First, that 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). China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi on 7 August spoke with his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov on the phone, the Chinese Foreign Ministry said in a statement. On the war in Ukraine, Wang told Lavrov that China would uphold an independent and impartial position, actively promote peace talks and strive to find a political settlement to the issue, according to the statement.

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. However, according to an unclassified US intelligence report released on 27 July, China is helping Russia evade western sanctions and likely providing Moscow with military technology for use in Ukraine. "The PRC is providing some dual-use technology that Moscow's military uses to continue the war in Ukraine, despite an international cordon of sanctions and export controls," the report said.

On developments within Russia

Moscow has recruited 280,000 people into the army since the start of the year, ex-president and Security Council chairman Dmitry Medvedev said on 3 September, according to Tass news agency. "Part of them were in the reserves, part of them volunteers and other categories," he said during a visit to the Far Eastern Russian island of Sakhalin. Meanwhile, the rouble fell to its weakest point in almost 17 months in mid-August as a collapse in export revenues and growing military spending increased pressure on Russia's economy. The currency, which has been steadily losing value in a long fall since the beginning of the year, slid past the psychologically important level of 100 to the dollar on the 14 August.

Russia has continued its crackdown against critics at home and abroad. On 24 August Russia extended the detention of the Wall Street Journal correspondent Evan Gershkovich by three months. He was arrested in March and became the first US journalist arrested by Russian authorities on allegations of spying since the cold war. Russian authorities shut down prominent rights group the Sakharov Centre on 18 August, saying it had illegally hosted conferences and exhibitions. In addition, a Russian court placed the co-chair of independent election monitoring group Golos in pre-trial detention until at least 17 October. Moscow also announced sanctions against International Criminal Court prosecutor Karim Khan, who in March issued a warrant against Putin accusing

him of having "illegally deported" thousands of Ukrainian children to Russia.

Alexei Navalny's prison sentence was [extended](#) by 19 years by a Russian court on 4 August and he was also sentenced to a special regime with the harshest prison conditions in the country. Navalny was found guilty on six counts, including inciting and financing extremism, creating an illegal NGO, the rehabilitation of nazism and inciting children to dangerous acts. He and his supporters have rejected the charges as being politically motivated. Daniel Kholodny, an associate of Navalny who worked for his YouTube channel also [stood trial](#) in a Moscow court on 4 August and was found guilty of organising an extremist group and sentenced to eight years in prison.

Russian opposition politician Vladimir Kara-Murza on 31 July lost an [appeal](#) against his 25-year jail sentence, the RIA state news agency reported. Kara-Murza, who holds Russian and British citizenship, was jailed for 25 years in April for treason and spreading "false information" about Russia's war in Ukraine.

Karel Svoboda, Giangiuseppe Pili and Jack Crawford, [Driving Towards a Brighter Past? A 'Brezhnevisation' of Russia's Internal Market](#), RUSI Commentary, 7 September 2023

Kimberly Marten, [Why the Wagner Group Cannot Be Easily Absorbed by the Russian Military—and What That Means for the West](#), Russia Matters, 1 September 2023

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Anatol Lieven and George Beebe, [What Putin would get out of eliminating Prigozhin](#), Responsible Statecraft, 25 August 2023

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On Ukraine's NATO membership application

NATO leaders [agreed](#) at their Vilnius summit (see NATO Watch Update 49) that "Ukraine's future" is in the alliance and the country will join when "allies agree and conditions are met", but failed to provide a timeline for when that will happen.

[Kurt Volker on Missed Opportunities and How NATO Needs Ukraine](#), Kyiv Post, 12 September 2023

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Gerlinde Niehus, [How NATO Is Helping Ukraine](#), Internationale Politik Quarterly, 30 August 2023

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David Cadier and Martin Quencez, [France's Policy Shift On Ukraine's NATO Membership](#), War on the Rocks, 10 AUGUST 2023

[Americans Are Turning Against Ukraine Joining NATO](#), Newsweek, 4 August 2023

Daniel Fried, [Should Ukraine Be Allowed to Join NATO? Yes, Ukraine is Fighting for its Freedom — and Ours](#), The Ripon Forum, Volume 57, No. 4, August 2023

Ivanna Kuz, [A Cloudy Dawn for Ukraine's New NATO Era](#), CEPA Insights, 2 August 2023

Aaron Maté, [John Mearsheimer: Ukraine war is a long-term danger](#), The Gray Zone, 30·July 2023

On developments within NATO

[Summit prepares ground for a more militarized Europe, future Ukrainian membership and expansion into the Indo-Pacific](#), NATO Watch Briefing No.109, 17 July 2023

Sweden

Stockholm on 7 September [voiced hope](#) that Turkish lawmakers would ratify its NATO bid when they reconvene in October, as agreed at the NATO summit in July (see NATO Watch

Update 49). However, the timing of the Turkish parliament's green light for Sweden remains unclear and is further complicated by an apparent linkage with US F-16 combat aircraft sales to Türkiye. Türkiye sought to buy $20 billion worth of Lockheed Martin's F-16s and nearly 80 modernisation kits for its existing warplanes in October 2021, but the United States is linking the sales with Turkish ratification of Sweden's NATO membership bid. President Erdogan said on 10 September that this linkage "seriously upsets" Ankara.

The Swedish government said on 11 September that it wants to increase its military budget by 28%, putting it on track to reach NATO's spending target of 2% of gross domestic product.

On the brink of joining NATO, Sweden seeks to boost its defense spending by 28%, Associated Press, 12 September 2023

Turkey casts fresh doubt on Sweden-Nato deal, EU Observer, 11 September 2023

Türkiye urges US not to link F-16 sale to Sweden's NATO bid, Hurriyet Daily News, 10 September 2023

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Sweden says awaiting NATO ratification by Turkey, Reuters, 7 September 2023

Sebastian Roblin, When Sweden Officially Joins NATO, It Will Bring More Than Meatballs to the Table, Popular Mechanics, 3 September 2023

Swedish foreign minister still hopeful Turkey will ratify NATO bid in October, Reuters, 1 September 2023

Turkey's Interests Taken into Account Concerning Sweden's NATO Accession, Hungary Today, 29 August 2023

Russia spreading false claims about Qur'an burnings to harm Nato bid, says Sweden, The Guardian, 6 August 2023

Sweden's NATO bid still hangs in the balance, despite Turkish support, Jerusalem Post, 6 August 2023

Turkiye in close coordination with Hungary over Sweden's NATO application, says FM, Arab News, 28 July 2023

NATO Mission Iraq

Following a request from the Iraqi authorities and a decision by the North Atlantic Council on 17 August 2023, the scope of NATO Mission Iraq will also include advisory and capacity-building activities in support of the Iraqi Ministry of Interior and Federal Police Command. Established in 2018, NATO Mission Iraq advises Iraqi defence and security officials in the Ministry of Defence, the Office of the National Security Advisor, the Prime Minister's National Operations Centre, and now also the Ministry of Interior and Federal Police Command. The mission also advises Iraq's professional military education institutions in the greater Baghdad area.

NATO Mission Iraq takes on additional advisory and capacity-building tasks, NATO News Release, 17 August 2023

NATO Innovation Fund and DIANA

After announcing plans nearly two years ago, NATO has officially closed its first NATO Innovation Fund to back startups that are building technology strategic to NATO's defence and security goals. Member nations are collectively committing capital totalling €1 billion to the fund, which plans to make both direct investments in startups, as well as indirect investments in other funds that in turn back startups focused on emerging and disruptive technologies that are "responsible and led by fundamental principles: safety, freedom, and human empowerment". Areas of focus will include AI and autonomy, biotechnology, quantum computing, space technology and hypersonic systems, energy, new manufacturing and materials, and next-generation communications.

DIANA – the Defence Innovation Accelerator for the North Atlantic – received proposals from over 1,200 applicants as part of its pilot challenge call to innovators and entrepreneurs. DIANA's first challenges – which closed on 25 August – focus on three

priorities: energy resilience; sensing and surveillance; and secure information sharing.

DIANA, NATO's innovation accelerator, attracts cutting-edge ideas from across the Alliance, NATO News Release, 31 August 2023

Raquel Jorge Ricart, NATO Defense Innovation and Deep Tech: Measuring Willingness and Effectiveness, Carnegie Europe, 29 August 2023

Gordon Feller, NATO ramping up R&D spending, Part II: One program tries a new approach, R&D World, 23 August 2023

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NATO creates $1.1B investment fund to target tech startups, Washington Technology, 9 August 2023

NATO Innovation Fund closes on EUR 1bn flagship fund, NATO News Release, 1 August 2023

NATO announces $1B fund to back startups supporting 'safety, freedom and human empowerment, Tech Crunch, 1 August 2023

NATO's digital transformation

Developed by NATO's Allied Command Transformation (ACT), the alliance's digital transformation plan aims to allow the conduct and transition to multi-domain missions, ensure interoperability across all sectors, enhance situational awareness and facilitate data-driven decisions. NATO's new digital backbone is expected to be in place by 2030. As part of this process, ACT signed an agreement with Latvia in August that will allow NATO member states to assess new capabilities at the country's 5G military test bed. The rising use of 5G in civilian operations has been driving further military applications and highlighting key advantages it can provide to armed forces, including bringing a much higher-speed connectivity to the battlefield.

Latvia to Host NATO 5G Test Bed for Military XR, XR Today, 1 September 2023

NATO to test 5G capabilities in Latvia with virtual reality, drones, Defense News, 31 August 2023

Baltic Sea naval exercise

NATO members led by Germany launched the annual two-week naval exercise Northern Coasts in the Baltic Sea on 9 September to practise how to repel a Russian naval attack in the region. The exercise involved 30 ships and more than 3,000 personnel from Germany, Poland, Lithuania and all other NATO countries on the Baltic Sea (plus soon-to-be member Sweden), as well as from non-Baltic allies Canada, Belgium, France, the Netherlands and the USA. Washington sent the 200m-long Mesa Verde, a ship designed to transport and land around 800 marines in an amphibious assault.

NATO navies hold annual Northern Coasts collective defence exercise in the Baltic Sea, NATO News Release, 9 September 2023

Signal: Nato navies practise Russian response drills for first time, Naval Technology, 5 September 2023

NATO Members To Practice Attacking Russia For The First Time In A Major Naval Drill, Marine Insight, 2 September 2023

Baltic Sea drills to focus for first time on repelling Russian attack, Reuters, 2 September 2023

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