

Ukraine

CONFLICT UPDATE

Institute for the Study of War, Russia Team
with the Critical Threats Project, AEI
March 18, 2022

ISW published its most recent [Russian campaign assessment](#) at 5:30 pm EST on March 17.

The ISW Russia team is relaunching its Ukraine Conflict Updates as a semi-weekly synthetic product covering key political and rhetorical events related to renewed Russian aggression against Ukraine. This update covers events from March 15 – March 17.

Key Takeaways March 15-17

- **Russian and Ukrainian negotiators have likely agreed that Ukraine will not join NATO, but the Kremlin maintains maximalist demands of Ukraine that it is unlikely to drop in the coming weeks.**
- **Russian media continues to amplify government officials and “experts” who falsely claim that the United States is preparing to wage biological or chemical war on Russia.**
- **Russian President Vladimir Putin blamed Ukraine for allegedly developing nuclear weapons with foreign assistance and falsely claimed that Ukraine planned to conduct a nuclear attack against Russia.**
- **The Kremlin continued to claim that Ukraine is the aggressor and that Russia’s invasion is going according to plan and will soon accomplish its objectives.**
- **The Kremlin downplayed the impact of sanctions on the Russian economy and took additional steps to mitigate and counter their effects.**
- **Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko stated on March 15 that Belarusian soldiers will not enter Ukraine and accused Ukraine of trying to drag Belarus into the war.**
- **The Kremlin is kidnapping local leaders to set conditions for controlling and subduing occupied Ukrainian territory.**
- **NATO defense ministers agreed to deploy additional troops to NATO’s eastern borders but reiterated that the Allies will not create a no-fly zone over or send troops to Ukraine.**

- **Russian President Vladimir Putin asked China for military and economic support for the war in Ukraine. China has neither confirmed nor denied whether they will provide aid to Russia.**

Key Events March 15 – March 17, 5:00 pm EST

Negotiations:

Russian and Ukrainian negotiators have likely agreed that Ukraine will not join NATO but disagree on Ukraine’s neutrality, disarmament, and territorial claims as of March 17.

The Financial Times reported on March 15 that Russian and Ukrainian negotiators were considering a 15-point deal stipulating that Ukraine renounce its NATO ambitions and promise not to host foreign military bases or weaponry in exchange for security guarantees from states like the United States, United Kingdom, and Turkey.¹ Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky acknowledged on March 15 that Ukraine will not join NATO, citing NATO state reservations rather than Russian demands.² Zelensky and Ukrainian Presidential Advisor Mikhaïlo Podolyak stated on March 16 that Ukraine needs powerful allies with clearly defined and “legally verified” security guarantees as opposed to protocols resembling the Budapest Memorandum, the 1994 agreement in which Russia, the United States, and other states promised security to Ukraine in exchange for Ukraine giving up its nuclear weapons. Kyiv would likely intend such guarantees to compensate for the lack of formal NATO membership.³ Kremlin officials have long decried Ukraine’s NATO prospects and falsely claimed Western expansion into Ukraine provoked Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Ukrainian Presidential Office Deputy Head Ihor Zhovkva said on March 15 that certain Russian “territorial demands” are “completely unacceptable,” indicating that Ukraine remains unwilling to recognize the Russian proxy Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics in Donbas and the Russian annexation of Crimea.⁴

The Kremlin continues to make maximalist demands Kyiv is unlikely to agree to, however. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on March 16 that Ukraine should not possess weapons that threaten Russia and NATO states should not supply these weapons to Ukraine, attempting to frame the existence of the Ukrainian military as a threat to Russia.⁵ The Russian delegation proposed on March 16 that Ukraine adopt a demilitarization and neutrality model like Austria and Switzerland.⁶ Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Head Russian negotiator Vladimir Medkinsky claimed that the Ukrainian delegation proposed this neutrality and demilitarization model on March 16, but head Ukrainian negotiator Mikhaïlo Podolyak refuted this claim and rejected this model on March 16.⁷ Podolyak said that talks should focus on security guarantees, not neutrality models.⁸ The Ukrainian Presidential Office announced on March 17 that Zelensky and Putin will meet once the Ukrainian and Russian delegations formalize a preliminary peace agreement.⁹

Ukraine asked Turkey to serve as a guarantor for any Ukrainian-Russia peace deal after Turkish diplomatic visits to Moscow and Kyiv.

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu discussed a possible ceasefire and diplomatic talks with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Moscow, Russia on March 16 and Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba in Lviv, Ukraine, on March 17.¹⁰ Cavusoglu stated on March 17 that Kuleba suggested Turkey and Germany as guarantor countries in a proposed “collective security agreement” and added that Russia did not object to the proposal after Cavusoglu’s March 16 visit to Moscow.¹¹ Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan reiterated his offer to host Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in Turkey for de-escalation talks during a phone call with Putin on March 17.¹² Erdogan stated on February 28 that Turkey cannot abandon ties with Russia or Ukraine despite Turkey’s military and political support for the latter.¹³ Instead, Turkish officials have positioned Turkey as a diplomatic

channel between Russia and Ukraine to negotiate possible de-escalation and ceasefire opportunities. The Kremlin is likely additionally taking advantage of Turkey as an avenue to issue demands of Ukraine.

Russian Domestic Opposition and Censorship:

The Kremlin increased censorship measures against Russian and international media on March 14-16 and experienced domestic opposition on March 15. Roskomnadzor blocked access to at least 31 media sites, including Bellingcat and BBC's main site on March 16.¹⁴ Kremlin Spokesperson Maria Zakharova stated that recent steps were "only the beginning of retaliatory measures" in an information war she claimed the West launched against Russia.¹⁵ The Russian Prosecutor General's Office also submitted a proposal to recognize Facebook's parent company, Meta, as an extremist organization March 16.¹⁶

Kremlin Narratives:

Russian media continues to amplify government officials and "experts" who falsely claim that the United States is preparing to wage biological or chemical war on Russia. Russian President Vladimir Putin suggested on March 16 that Ukraine is "strenuously trying to cover up" Russian claims that Pentagon-sponsored biolaboratories are building biological weapon components in Ukraine near Russia's border.¹⁷ Russian media amplified on March 16 a Russian military expert's claim that US biolabs in Ukraine violate the Convention on the Non-Creation of Bioweapons and a Russian virologist's claim that US biolabs in Ukraine threaten the entire world.¹⁸ The Russian Foreign Ministry similarly claimed on March 15 that the alleged Ukrainian biolabs are a danger to Europe and demanded that the international community investigate them within the framework of the Convention on the Prohibition of Biological and Toxin Weapons (BWC).¹⁹ Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova claimed on March 17 that the Kremlin supports strengthening the BWC and threatened to invoke BWC Articles 5 and 6, which require multilateral cooperation in investigating and solving alleged BWC violations.²⁰

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken warned on March 17 that the United States believes Russia may use chemical or biological weapons in Ukraine.²¹ US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan met with Russian Council Secretary Nikolay Patrushev on March 16 to warn of "consequences and implications" should Russia employ chemical or biological weapons.²² Russian media called Blinken's previous March 16 statement about concerns on Russian use of chemical weapons a deflection from Russian allegations of US-backed military biological programs in Ukraine.

Russian President Vladimir Putin blamed Ukraine for allegedly developing nuclear weapons with foreign assistance and falsely claimed that Ukraine planned to conduct a nuclear attack against Russia. Putin called the "Nazi Kyiv regime's" alleged intent to develop nuclear weapons a "real threat" to Russia on March 16 and claimed that Ukraine had intended to develop its own nuclear weapons to target Russia prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.²³

The Kremlin continued to claim that Ukraine is the aggressor on March 15-17 while claiming that Russia's invasion is going according to plan and will soon accomplish its objectives. Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev claimed on March 15 that the Kremlin obtained evidence that Ukraine planned to invade Donbas and Crimea.²⁴ Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova claimed on March 16 that Russia waited until the last possible moment to begin its military operation.²⁵ Zakharova claimed on March 16 that the West never planned to have Ukraine follow the Minsk II Accords or reintegrate Donbas.²⁶ Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed on March 16 that residents of Donbas suffered through eight years of genocide and stated that

a Ukrainian offensive in Donbas was only a matter of time.²⁷ Russian Federation Council Vice Speaker Kosachev claimed on March 17 that the operation in Ukraine prevented a Third World War.²⁸

Putin claimed on March 16 that the Ukraine invasion is “developing successfully and according to plan.”²⁹ Russian Duma International Affairs Committee Deputy Dmitry Novikov predicted on March 16 that the first phase of Russia’s operation—the demilitarization of Ukraine—would be completed by May, when he expects that the Ukrainian Armed Forces would have depleted their resources. Novikov said that the next phase would include the “de-Nazification” of Ukraine and “the formation of a new future for the country.”³⁰ Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council Dmitry Medvedev stated on March 17 that Russia has enough power “to put enemies in their place” and that Russia “will continue to fight for the world order” that suits Russia.³¹

The Kremlin continued to employ adversarial rhetoric against Western responses to the invasion of Ukraine on March 16 and 17, framing the West as siding with “Nazis.” Russian President Vladimir Putin falsely compared Western actions against Russia with “anti-Semitic inclinations” and pogroms in Nazi Germany during a speech on March 16.³² Kremlin Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov condemned US President Joe Biden’s March 16 statement calling Putin a war criminal as “unacceptable and unforgivable.”³³ Russian Foreign Ministry Maria Zakharova claimed that Ukrainian “Nazis” use civilians in Mariupol as human shields.³⁴ Zakharova falsely accused NATO of doctoring videos depicting Russian shelling of civilian infrastructure and falsely stated that “anyone who claims that Russian shells hit civilian targets in Ukraine is lying.”

The Kremlin amplified Chinese statements about Russian military action in Ukraine on March 17 in a likely attempt to frame China as aligned with Russia against the West. Russian media underlined Chinese Ambassador to the United States Qin Gang’s March 15 op-ed in the *Washington Post*, which claimed that China did not know about Russian plans to invade Ukraine.³⁵ Russian media additionally amplified Chinese Commerce Ministry Spokesperson Gao Feng’s statement that China stands against unilateral sanctions that do not take international legal norms into account.³⁶ Russian state-run media outlet *TASS* highlighted a Chinese *Global Times* editorial that blamed NATO for provoking a crisis in Ukraine and argued Western states’ responses to the conflict demonstrate their “pronounced madness.”³⁷

Russian Reactions to Sanctions:

The Kremlin underplayed the impact of sanctions on the Russian economy and took additional steps to mitigate and counter their effects. Kremlin and Russian Foreign Ministry officials rejected claims that sanctions have crippled the Russian economy, claimed Russia had necessary funds to avoid default, and warned that the United States and European Union will suffer from reciprocal damage in several statements between March 15-18.³⁸ Russian President Vladimir Putin also claimed on March 16 that the US and EU defaulted on their financial obligations to Russia and that Russia’s reserves “can simply be stolen” after numerous Western states froze Russian foreign assets.³⁹ The US, UK, and EU member states announced new sanctions against Russian individuals, assets, and exports on March 15.⁴⁰

Russian Prime Minister Sergey Mishustin announced on March 17 that the Kremlin will invest 40 billion rubles to promote employment in Russia.⁴¹ State-owned Russian Railways announced on March 16 that some Russian shippers are refusing to supply cargo to “unfriendly” countries and reoriented export supplies to Asia instead.⁴² The Russian Foreign Ministry also banned US President Joe Biden, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and 12 other US officials from entering Russia in response to

rising sanctions on March 15.⁴³ The Russian Foreign Ministry also blacklisted 313 Canadian nationals, including Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, on March 15.⁴⁴

Russian media praised countries that have not imposed sanctions on Russia, including China, Japan, and Serbia, on March 16. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov praised China for not bending to the “unprecedented pressure” of the United States on March 16.⁴⁵ Russian media amplified Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida’s March 16 statement that Japan may experience economic blows from Russian counter-sanctions.⁴⁶ Russian media circulated Serbian Parliament Speaker Ivica Dacic’s statement that Serbia’s national interests “suggest that Serbia will not impose sanctions on Russia.”⁴⁷ Russian media reported that Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi warned Dutch Foreign Minister Wopke Hoekstroy of the consequences of sanctioning Russia in a phone conversation on March 16.⁴⁸

Belarus:

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko stated that Belarusian soldiers will not enter Ukraine but continued to falsely claim that Ukraine seeks to drag Belarus into the war on March 15. Lukashenko claimed on March 15 that Ukrainian forces launched a Tochka-U missile toward Belarusian territory and that Russian and Belarusian forces intercepted the missile over Pripjat, Ukraine, on March 13.⁴⁹ Lukashenko framed this missile as evidence of baiting Belarus to participate in the war in Ukraine.⁵⁰ Russia may have launched the attack as a false flag to force Lukashenko to join the war against Ukraine; Russian jets likely bombed several Belarusian towns on March 11 to that end.⁵¹ Lukashenko claimed on March 15 that Belarusian forces will not enter the war because Belarus would not be able to make a “unique” contribution to Russian operations.⁵²

Russian Occupation:

The Kremlin is setting conditions to control and subdue occupied Ukrainian territory. The Russian military has kidnapped several Ukrainian mayors, protest leaders, and political dissidents since March 11.⁵³ Russian forces allegedly kidnapped Melitopol Mayor Ivan Fedorov on March 11, Dneprorudny Mayor Yevhen Matveyev on March 12, and Skadvosk Mayor Alexander Yakovlev and his Deputy Yuri Paliukh on March 16.⁵⁴ Russian forces also allegedly kidnapped anti-Russian protest coordinator Olga Gaisumova on March 12; a Ukrainian journalist in Kakhova, Ukraine, on March 13; and the husband of Melitopol Deputy of the Regional Council Irina Slavova, Sergey Slavov, on March 16.⁵⁵ US Ambassador to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Michael Carpenter previously warned on March 3 that Russia will very likely order kidnappings of Ukrainians “to force the population to cooperate through intimidation.”⁵⁶ Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov denied all accusations of Russian kidnappings.⁵⁷

Drivers of Russian Threat Perceptions:

NATO defense ministers agreed to deploy additional troops to NATO’s eastern borders but reiterated that they will not create a no-fly zone over or send troops to Ukraine.⁵⁸ The Kremlin likely intends to test NATO redlines and air defenses while demonstrating to neighboring states that NATO may have a higher threshold for intervention than eastern European member states would prefer.

- NATO Defense Ministers held an extraordinary meeting in Brussels, Belgium on March 16. US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin met with his Italian, French, German, Turkish, and British counterparts on the sidelines of the NATO Defense Ministers meeting to discuss military

assistance to Ukraine and strengthening the Eastern European borders of the alliance.⁵⁹ NATO defense ministers directed member-state military commanders to plan for additional troop deployments in Eastern Europe that may become permanent in June 2022.

- Recent drone incidents in Poland, Croatia, and Romania have magnified NATO concerns that the war could inadvertently spill over into bordering countries.⁶⁰ The Ukrainian Air Force Command claimed on March 15 that a Russian unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) entered NATO airspace in Poland and then returned to Ukrainian airspace, where Ukrainian air defenses shot it down.⁶¹ An unidentified drone carrying a large bomb crashed and exploded near the Croatian capital on March 13 and another unidentified drone entered Romanian airspace on March 14.⁶²
- NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz insisted that NATO will not intervene in the war with military force or create a no-fly zone to avoid escalations that could result in a NATO-Russia conflict. Russian media amplified the German cabinet's March 16 statements that opposed a proposal to deploy a NATO military contingent in Ukraine.⁶³
- The White House continues to oppose a no-fly zone over Ukraine, reiterating that a no-fly zone could result in an uncontrolled escalation of the conflict.⁶⁴
- Polish Deputy Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski called for an international peacekeeping mission in Ukraine following his March 15 meeting with leaders from Czechia, Poland, Slovenia, and Ukraine in Kyiv, Ukraine.⁶⁵

NATO and EU countries continued to provide lethal and non-lethal military aid to Ukraine and bordering NATO countries.⁶⁶

- US President Joe Biden announced on March 16 that the United States will provide an additional \$800 million in security assistance to Ukraine in response to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's same-day appeal to the US Congress for additional aid to Ukraine and sanctions on Russia on March 16.⁶⁷ This package includes direct transfers of equipment from the US Department of Defense to the Ukrainian military, including 100 Switchblade drones, 800 Stinger anti-aircraft systems, 2,000 Javelin missiles, 1,000 light anti-armor weapons, 6,000 AT-4 anti-armor systems, small arms, ammunition, and other equipment.⁶⁸ A senior US official stated on March 16 that the United States had already sent Soviet-era SA-8, SA-10, SA-12, and SA-14 mobile air defense systems to Ukraine.⁶⁹
- Slovakia has preliminarily agreed to send Soviet-era S-300 air defense systems to Ukraine on March 16 but has requested that NATO backfill the air defense systems to avoid a security gap.⁷⁰
- The UK Defense Ministry announced on March 17 it will deploy its Sky Sabre air defense system to Poland along with 100 troops to operate it to defend Polish airspace.⁷¹
- German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock announced on March 16 that Berlin is ending direct weapons assistance to Ukraine but is considering funding Ukrainian weapons purchases.⁷²

Foreign Involvement:

Russian President Vladimir Putin asked China for military and economic support for the war in Ukraine. China has neither confirmed nor denied whether they will provide aid to Russia.⁷³

- White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki stated on March 14 that China will face "significant consequences" should they provide military or other assistance to Russia that violates international sanctions against Russia.⁷⁴

- NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg called on China to condemn Russia's actions in Ukraine on March 15, appealing to their membership in the UN Security Council.⁷⁵
- Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated on March 16 that increased sanctions on Russia will impede the restoration of the global economy and that they cause unjustified harm to people in all countries.⁷⁶

Japan, Turkey, and India plan to maintain energy cooperation with Russia, but a new US Senate resolution could threaten Russia's energy economic lifeline.⁷⁷

- Japan refused to stop nuclear energy cooperation with Russia on March 17, likely due to their significant reliance on fuel imports and unwillingness to impose sanctions that could harm Japan's economy.⁷⁸ However, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida stated on March 16 that Japan will revoke Russia's most favored nation trade status in response to the Ukrainian invasion.⁷⁹
- India is in talks with Moscow about increasing oil imports from Russia to neutralize spiraling prices and preserve their bilateral relationship.⁸⁰
- Turkish Deputy Energy Minister Alparslan Bayraktar said Turkey will continue to import oil from Russia.⁸¹ Turkey relies on Russia for 45% of its natural gas, 17% of oil, and 40% of gasoline, according to Bayraktar.
- The US Senate is preparing to introduce a resolution to sanction all Russian banks—including Gazprombank—that allow Russia to receive payments for its oil and gas exports.⁸² If passed, the resolution would likely disrupt other countries' vital energy imports from Russia. Initial US sanctions on Russian banks excluded Gazprombank to allow gas imports to US allies and partners.

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- ¹³ <https://www.reuters.com/world/erdogan-says-turkey-cannot-abandon-ties-with-russia-or-ukraine-2022-02-28/>
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