

Ukraine

CONFLICT UPDATE

Institute for the Study of War, Russia Team
February 27

ISW published its most recent Russian campaign assessment at 4pm, February 27.

This daily synthetic product covers key events related to renewed Russian aggression against Ukraine.

Key Takeaways February 27

- Russian President Vladimir Putin put Russia's nuclear and strategic missile forces, described as "deterrence forces," on their highest alert status in response to "aggressive statements in the West" on February 27.
- Russian forces likely conducted an operational pause on the Kyiv axis on February 26-27 to deploy additional supplies and forces forward. Russian forces will likely resume offensive operations against Kyiv in the next 24 hours.
- Russian forces largely conducted an operational pause on their current broad front of advance between Chernihiv and Kharkiv. Ukrainian forces continue to delay and inflict losses on the Russian advance but will likely not be able to halt further advances if the Kremlin commits additional reserves.
- Russian forces entered the city of Kharkiv for the first time on February 27 but remain unlikely to take the city without the use of heavier firepower.
- Russian forces have encircled Mariupol from the west and began initial assaults on the city. Russian forces have not made any major territorial gains from the east in Donbas after four days of fighting. Russian forces likely intend to pin Ukrainian forces in place on the line of contact to enable Russian forces breaking out of Crimea to isolate them.
- Russian forces continued to advance north from Crimea towards Zaporzhia and, in conjunction with Russian advances on Mariupol, threaten to isolate Ukrainian forces on the line of contact in Donbas if they do not withdraw.
- Russian forces failed to seize Kherson after Ukrainian counterattacks reclaimed it on February 26. An unknown concentration of Russian forces remains on the eastern bank of the Dnipro River and threatens Mikolayiv, however.
- Russian successes in southern Ukraine are the most dangerous and threaten to unhinge Ukraine's successful defenses and rearguard actions to the north and northeast.
- The Belarusian government is setting information and legal conditions to justify a Belarusian offensive against Ukraine and the imminent deployment of Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus as of February 27.
- US and allied sanctions against Russian banking will likely crush Russian foreign currency reserves, depleting the value of the ruble and risking Russian hyperinflation.

- **The European Union announced direct military aid to Ukraine for the first time in EU history on February 27.**
- **Germany announced a dramatic reorientation of its foreign policy to mitigate the threat that Russia poses to Germany and its allies. Germany will prioritize military spending and energy independence despite short-term economic costs.**

Key Events February 26, 5pm EST – February 27, 5pm EST

Military events:

The Russian military has likely recognized that its initial expectations that limited Russian attacks would cause the collapse of Ukrainian resistance have failed and is recalibrating accordingly. The Russian military is moving additional combat resources toward Ukraine and establishing more reliable and effective logistics arrangements to support what is likely a larger, harder, and more protracted conflict than it had originally prepared for. The tide of the war could change rapidly in Russia's favor if the Russian military has correctly identified its failings and addresses them promptly, given the overwhelming advantage in net combat power Moscow that enjoys. Ukrainian morale and combat effectiveness remain extremely high, however, and Russian forces confront the challenge of likely intense urban warfare in the coming days.

Russian forces largely conducted an operational pause on February 26-27 but will likely resume offensive operations and begin using greater air and artillery support in the coming days. Russian airborne and special forces troops are engaged in urban warfare in northwestern Kyiv, but Russian mechanized forces are not yet in the capital. Russian forces conducted limited attacks on the direct approaches to Kyiv on both banks of the Dnipro River, but largely paused offensive operations in northeastern Ukraine. Russian forces likely paused to recalibrate their – to date largely unsuccessful – approach to offensive operations in northern Ukraine and deploy additional reinforcements and air assets to the front lines.

Russian ground forces are advancing on four primary axes, discussed in turn below:

1. **Kyiv Axis:** Russian forces likely conducted an operational pause on the Kyiv axis on February 26-27 to deploy additional supplies and forces forward. Russian forces will likely resume offensive operations against Kyiv in the next 24 hours. Russian forces committed additional reserves to fighting west of Kyiv. Russian troops have not yet committed heavy armor and artillery forces to fighting in Kyiv and will likely need to do so to take the city. Ukrainian forces are unlikely to capitulate.
2. **Northeast Axis:** Russian forces largely conducted an operational pause on their current broad front of advance between Chernihiv and Kharkiv. Russian forces entered the city of Kharkiv for the first time on February 27 but remain unlikely to take the city without the use of heavier firepower. Ukrainian forces continue to delay and inflict losses on the Russian advance but will likely be unable to halt further advances if the Kremlin commits additional reserves. Russian forces in northeast Ukraine have been halted on a line roughly running down the P67 highway since roughly 11am local time on February 26.[1] Russian forces in northeast Ukraine continue to face morale and supply issues, likely due to poor planning and ad hoc command structures, as ISW previously forecasted.[2]
3. **Donbas Axis:** Russian forces have encircled Mariupol from the west and began initial assaults on the city. Russian forces have not made any major territorial gains from the east in Donbas after four days of fighting. Russian forces likely intend to pin Ukrainian forces in place on the line of contact to enable Russian forces breaking out of Crimea to isolate them. The Russians may be content to leave them there while concentrating on capturing Kyiv and imposing a new government on Ukraine. They may alternatively seek to encircle and destroy them or force them to surrender.
4. **Crimea Axis:** Russian forces continued to advance north towards Zaporzhia and threaten to isolate Ukrainian forces on the line of contact in Donbas if they do not withdraw. Russian forces failed to seize

Kherson after Ukrainian counterattacks reclaimed it on February 26. An unknown concentration of Russian forces remains on the eastern bank of the Dnipro River and threatens Mikolayiv, however.

Russian Activity

Russian President Vladimir Putin put Russia's nuclear and strategic missile forces, described as "deterrence forces, on their highest alert status in response to "aggressive statements in the West" on February 27.[3] Putin's announcement followed a meeting with Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu and Chief of Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov wherein Putin cited "illegitimate sanctions" and aggressive NATO statements against Russia as motivating factors for his decision.[4] White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki accused Putin of "manufacturing threats that don't exist in order to justify further aggression." [5] US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield called the move "totally unacceptable" and accused Putin of using "whatever tools he can to intimidate Ukrainians and the world." [6]

Russian and Ukrainian delegations agreed on February 27 to negotiate "without preconditions" on Russia's war against Ukraine in Gomel, Belarus, on February 28.[7] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky agreed with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko that Ukrainian and Russian delegations would meet on the condition that Belarus will ground all planes, helicopters, and missiles before the Ukrainian delegation's arrival in Gomel.[8] Russian Presidential Aide Vladimir Medinsky stated the parties "can achieve a constructive result by the end of the day" while Kremlin Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov stated that Moscow does not plan to suspend Russia's military operation during the negotiations.[9] Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba stated Ukraine will "hear what Russia has to say" but will not "give up one inch of Ukrainian territory." [10] Russian State Duma Committee on International Affairs Head Leonid Slutsky emphasized on February 27 that Russia must find a "constructive approach" with the Ukrainian delegation in Belarus. Slutsky also threatened that Ukraine will bear responsibility of unspecified "further events" if negotiations fail.[11] US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda-Thomas Greenfield stated the US "will look forward" to the negotiations' outcome on February 27.[12]

Kremlin-sponsored media claimed Russian President Vladimir Putin has a "historic responsibility" to reunite Russia and Ukraine on February 26-27. Russian state news agency RIA Novosti published and retracted an essay on February 26 claiming "Ukraine has returned to Russia" and resolved the "national humiliation" that Russia suffered when Ukraine left the Soviet Union.[13] The essay claimed that Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus jointly operate in a new world order, where the Russian bloc challenges the West. RIA Novosti retracted the essay one minute after publishing, indicating it was likely prewritten ahead of an anticipated swift Russian victory and was published accidentally.[14] Russian television amplified the possibility of "NATO-Russia war" in reports about Putin putting nuclear and strategic missile forces on alert.[15] Prominent Russian Propagandist Dmitry Kiseyov said that thousands of Russian nuclear missiles can completely wipe out the US and NATO because "no one needs the world without Russia in it." [16] Russian media is justifying the Kremlin's failure to gain control over Ukraine by claiming that Ukrainian "nationalists" are escalating aggression against the Russian Armed Forces and civilians, while Ukrainian military forces massively surrender.

Russian oligarchs openly called on the Kremlin to end Russia's war in Ukraine for the first time on February 27 as Russian protests continued to grow despite intensifying crackdowns. Russian Alfa-Bank co-owner Mikhail Fridman and Russian industrialist Oleg Deripaska became the first two Russian oligarchs to openly call on the Kremlin to end the war in Ukraine on February 27.[17] Thousands of Russian citizens continued holding countrywide protests against Russia's war in Ukraine, with Russian authorities detaining over 2,000 Russian protesters from 48 different demonstrations across Russia on February 27 alone.[18] The Kremlin will likely intensify crackdowns against anti-war protesters. Russia's Prosecutor General threatened high treason charges against any Russians who provide "assistance to a foreign state" during the Russia's "special operation" in Ukraine on February 27.[19]

Belarusian Activity

The Belarusian government is setting information conditions to justify a Belarusian offensive against Ukraine and the imminent deployment of Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus as of February 27.

27. Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko said on February 27 that he would ask Russian President Vladimir Putin to deploy nuclear weapons in Belarus if the United States or NATO deployed nuclear missiles to Poland and Lithuania.[20] Lukashenko's official press pool claimed Lukashenko and Putin agreed to deploy "weapons that neither the Poles nor the Lithuanians would want to fight" - likely implying nuclear weapons - to Belarus on February 27.[21] Lukashenko slandered Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky as "little Napoleon" and implied current Russian operations in Ukraine is just the first phase of Russian aggression.[22] Lukashenko accused Ukrainians of planning terrorist attacks against Belarus and threatened a "special operation" in Ukraine but claimed there are no Belarusian soldiers, armor, or vehicles in Ukraine as of February 27.[23] Lukashenko said that Belarus will not betray Russia by "allowing attacks" by western states against Belarus.[24] Lukashenko admitted that Russian soldiers in Belarusian territory fired two or three rockets at Chernobyl around 23:00 on February 23, but claimed that he did not give the order to fire and that the strikes were a response to alleged Ukrainian provocations.[25] Lukashenko claimed that Belarusian troops along the southern border with Ukraine are protecting against Ukrainian sabotage and reconnaissance group penetrations.[26] Meanwhile, a Belarusian Commander of the Brest Air Assault Brigade, Valery Sakhshchik, called on Belarusian servicemembers sitting in the woods near Ukrainian border to refuse to fight in Ukraine.[27] Sakhshchik stated that Belarus will lose its dignity for generations to come fighting in a war against a country that has never harmed Belarusian sovereignty.

Belarus adopted a new constitution on February 27, likely granting Russia more direct military control over Belarus.

[28] Russian and Belarusian media reporting on the referendum was abnormally sparse on February 27. Belarusian citizens protested against Russia's war in Ukraine at multiple referendum polling places across Belarus on February 27.[29] Official Belarusian sources have not confirmed whether the constitution adopted on February 27 is the same one that Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko proposed on December 27, 2021.[30] The December 27 proposed constitution advanced the Kremlin's campaign to deepen Russian control over Belarus by removing the constitution's clause about Belarus being a "neutral" state and a nuclear-weapons-free zone. Lukashenko offered to host Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus in November 2021 and repeated similar offers on February 27, 2022. The Kremlin may have leveraged its military pressure in Belarus to extract an even more Kremlin-preferable constitution that cements Kremlin control over Belarus' government.

Ukrainian Activity

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky announced Ukraine is creating a volunteer-based International Legion of Territorial Defense of Ukraine to capitalize on the success of civilian forces in slowing the advance of Russian troops and organize international volunteers on February 27.

[31] The New York Times reported that "due to strong resistance of the civilian population, units of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, the National Guard, and the National Police, [Russian] attempts to take control of large cities were unsuccessful." [32] The Washington Post reported that civilian defense forces apprehended and detained a Russian armored vehicle in Sumy.[33] The New York Times reported that civilians in Dnipro worked to provide a military hospital with water and clothes and manufactured Molotov cocktails and firebombs to support the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

US Activity

US and allied sanctions against Russian banking will likely crush Russian foreign currency reserves, depleting the value of the ruble and risking Russian hyperinflation.

- The United States, Canada, and European allies removed select Russian banks from the SWIFT global financial network and agreed to additional measures that could significantly increase economic pressure on Russia on February 26. Those measures included freezing Russian Central Bank assets that could otherwise be used to mitigate the effect of sanctions on Russia's economy.[34]

- Russian citizens are searching for hard currency, particularly dollars, in anticipation of hyperinflation caused by US and allied sanctions. *The Financial Times* reported that many Russian banks in Moscow ran out of cash on February 27, the first day after the United States and its allies announced sanctions against Russia's Central Bank.[35]
- Japan announced it will join Western states in limiting Russian access to SWIFT on February 27.[36] The United States commended Japan's decision and emphasized the unity of the G7 states in sanctioning Russia.[37]
- The European Commission announced on February 27 that it will ban Belarusian exports to the EU due to Belarusian participation in and support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Sanctioned products include mineral fuels, tobacco, wood and timber, cement, iron and steel.[38]
- The US Treasury Department is in the early stages of considering sanctions against Russian cryptocurrency usage. Sanctions against Russian holders of cryptocurrencies would be unprecedented and difficult for the United States to enforce, but could limit Russia's ability to monetize its energy production capabilities to mitigate US and allied sanctions.[39]
- The US Ambassador to the United Nations told *CNN* that sanctions on Russia's energy sector are not off the table but that the United States will work to limit the impact of its sanctions on the US economy.[40]
- Norway announced on February 27 that it would divest its sovereign wealth fund from any Russian assets.[41]
- British Petroleum (BP) announced on February 27 that it would divest itself from its \$14 billion stake in the Russian state-owned oil company Rosneft. The UK government likely pressured BP to divorce itself from Rosneft; BP's 19.75% stake in Rosneft made up more than half of BP's oil reserves.[42]

NATO and EU Activity

The European Union announced it will directly provide military aid to Ukraine for the first time in EU history on February 27. Australia, Spain, Romania, Poland, and Denmark also announced additional military aid to Ukraine on February 27.

- European Union Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced that the EU will ban all Russian aircraft from EU airspace, finance weapons donations to Ukraine, expand sanctions on Belarus, and ban Russian state-funded broadcasters Russia Today and Sputnik on February 27.[43] Von der Leyen's announcement marks the first time the EU will finance the purchase and delivery of military equipment to a country under attack. EU Foreign Policy Chief Josep Borrell stated EU members will provide Ukraine with fighter jets.[44] Some European countries which operate older jet fighters used by Ukraine are reportedly considering providing them directly to Ukraine.
- Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced that Australia will work with NATO to help supply lethal weapons to Ukraine.[45]
- The Ukrainian Armed Forces stated that Australia is providing Ukraine with unspecified "military assistance" on February 27.[46]
- Spain sent military equipment, including personal protective gear, to Ukraine on February 27.[47]
- The Romanian government announced on February 27 that it will send ammunition and military equipment to Ukraine and expressed Romania's readiness to receive wounded Ukrainian soldiers.[48]
- Polish National Defense Deputy Minister Marcin Ociepa announced that a convoy carrying unspecified ammunition arrived in Ukraine on February 27.[49]
- The Ukrainian Armed Forces announced that the Ukrainian Air Forces received a "large batch" of air-to-air missiles from an unspecified western country on February 27.[50]
- Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu called Russia's invasion of Ukraine a war on February 27, thereby allowing Turkey to block certain warships involved in conflict from the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits under the 1936 Montreux Convention.[51] Banning warships from the straits would inhibit Russian access to the Black Sea. Ukraine asked Turkey to deny passage to Russian vessels on February 24.[52] The closure is symbolically important for Turkey's relationship with Ukraine but is

unlikely to limit Russian naval capabilities in the Black Sea, as much of Russia's naval capabilities are already concentrated in the region.

- Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen announced Denmark will donate 2,700 anti-tank weapons to Ukraine on February 27.[53]
- US Democratic Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer stated the Biden administration will ask Congress for \$6.4 billion dollars in economic and military aid for Ukraine.[54]
- Finnish Defense Minister Antti Kaikkonen stated Finland is considering directly sending weapons to Ukraine on February 27. Finland does not historically export weapons to war zones.[55]

The European Union, Canada, and the United Kingdom have banned all Russian-owned, registered, and controlled aircraft from their airspace as of February 27.[56] Russia may ban all EU-based airlines from its airspace in coming days, further harming its domestic economy and currency supplies in coming months.

- Many EU states, including the UK, Norway, Iceland, and North Macedonia announced flight restrictions prior to the comprehensive EU announcement.[57]
- Russian President Vladimir Putin responded with counter-restrictions against participating countries' airlines on February 24 and 25.[58]

Other International Organization Activity

N/A

Individual Western Allies' Activity

Germany is reorienting its foreign policy to prioritize defense spending, European security interests, and energy independence despite potentially high economic costs to Germany. German politicians expressed broad political support for this fundamental reorientation of German foreign policy, which will prioritize mitigating the threat Russia poses to Germany and its allies.

- German Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced Germany would immediately invest \$113 billion into its military on February 27.[59] This new investment fund is equivalent to almost 200% of current annual German military spending. Scholz called the construction of new ships tanks, aircraft, and armed drones a top priority for Germany. Scholz stated the new military equipment will be built in Europe in partnership with other European countries, particularly France.[60]
- Scholz pledged to increase Germany's contribution to reinforcing NATO's eastern flank in Lithuania, Slovakia and Romania.[61] Scholz stated Germany has increased its number of troops deployed in Lithuania and expanded an air policing mission in Romania. Scholz stated he plans to set up a new task force in Slovakia and use the German navy to assist with policing in the Mediterranean and the Baltics. He stated that the German Airforce is prepared to defend the airspace of Eastern European countries that border Russia.
- Scholz pledged to raise annual Germany military spending to over 2% of GDP.[62] This additional military spending is separate from the \$113 billion investment fund.
- Germany plans to build two Liquid Natural Gas (LNG) ports in Brunsbuttel and Wilhelmshaven, northern Germany, and to create a strategic natural gas reserve, limiting long-term German reliance on Russian energy imports. Scholz stated that Germany's energy policy must consider not only the economy and climate, but also security concerns.[63]
- Scholz' shift secured broad non-partisan support among German politicians. Social Democratic Party (SPD) Parliamentary bloc Chairman Rolf Mutzenich and CDU leader Friedrich Merz expressed support for increased defense spending.[64] Finance Minister and German Liberal Democratic Party (FDP) member Christian Lidner called increased military spending "an investment in [Germany's] freedom." [65]

Other International Activity

Ukrainian refugee flows increased on February 27 as several international states sent humanitarian aid shipments. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi announced that 368,000 Ukrainians fled Ukraine as of February 27.[66] Approximately 300,000 have sought refuge in EU member states.[67]

- European Union Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson warned EU members to expect millions of Ukrainian refugees on February 27.[68]
- Likely Russian cyber actors attacked a Ukrainian border control station with data-wiping software on February 25, slowing Ukrainian refugee flows into Romania. The Ukrainian government's cyber service expects similar attacks in the future, which will exacerbate backlogs at border stations already struggling to process refugees leaving Ukraine.[69]
- The US Agency for International Development and the US Department of State announced additional humanitarian assistance for Ukraine totaling \$54 million on February 27.[70]
- The World Health Organization warned of looming medical oxygen supply shortages in Ukraine on February 27.[71]
- Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida announced that Japan will extend \$100 million in emergency humanitarian aid to Ukraine.[72]
- Spain dispatched a cargo plane carrying medical equipment to Ukraine on February 26.[73]
- Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett announced that Israeli will send 100 tons of humanitarian aid to Ukraine on February 27.[74]
- Romanian Government Spokesperson Dan Kerbunaru announced that Romania will supply fuel and medical equipment exceeding \$3.3 million to Ukraine on February 27.[75] Hungary, Poland, and Austria are running daily evacuation trains to and from Chop, Ukraine as of February 27. [76]
- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky announced that Ukraine filed a complaint against Russia to the International Court of Justice for manipulating the term "genocide" to justify its aggression against Ukraine on February 27. Zelensky requested the court to immediately order Russia to halt its invasion and said that he expected trials to start next week.[77]



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