

Ukraine

CONFLICT UPDATE

Institute for the Study of War, Russia Team
February 25

ISW published its most recent [Russian offensive campaign assessment](#) on February 25 at 3:00 pm Eastern Time.

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

Key Takeaways February 25

- Russian forces entered major Ukrainian cities—including Kyiv and Kherson—for the first time and carried out additional air and missile strikes on military and civilian targets.
- Russian forces entered the outskirts of Kyiv on the west bank of the Dnipro River as Russian sabotage groups in civilian clothing reportedly moved into downtown Kyiv.
- Ukrainian forces have successfully slowed Russian troops on the east bank of the Dnipro, forcing them to bypass the city of Chernihiv after stout resistance. Russian airborne forces have concentrated in southeastern Belarus, likely for use along the Chernihiv-bypass axis toward Kyiv in the next 24 hours.
- Russian forces will likely envelop Kharkhiv in the next 24 hours after failing to enter the city through frontal assaults on February 24-25.
- Russian forces have achieved little success through frontal assaults or envelopments against Ukrainian forces in Donbas but may not have intended to do more than pin Ukrainian forces in the east.
- North of Crimea, Russian forces fully captured Kherson and are likely on the verge of seizing Melitopol in the east. Unconfirmed reports indicate that Russian forces bypassed Kherson earlier and headed directly for Mykolaiv and Odessa.
- Russian forces may be assembling in Stolín, Belarus, to open a new line of advance against Rivne in western Ukraine.
- Western intelligence officials told *CNN* on February 25 that Russian President Vladimir Putin intends to invade all of Ukraine and could install a pro-Kremlin regime within days.
- Russian opposition groups and citizens opposing the Russian war in Ukraine may be laying the foundations of a coordinated anti-war movement that will be unlikely to alter Putin's decision making but will likely provoke harsher domestic crackdowns, further eroding Putin's domestic popularity.
- The United States, United Kingdom, and European Union expanded their sanctions on Russia to target Putin and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on February 25, but sanctions to sever Russia from SWIFT remain unlikely.
- NATO activated its 40,000-troop Response Force for the first time ever on February 25 to reinforce NATO's eastern flank in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.
- The International Criminal Court (ICC) announced possible investigations into alleged Russian war crimes amid Russian denials.

Key Events February 24, 4:00 pm EST – February 25, 4:00 pm EST

Military Events:

Russian forces entered major Ukrainian cities—including Kyiv and Kherson – for the first time on February 25. Russian forces’ main axes of advance focused on Kyiv, successfully isolating the city on both banks of the Dnipro River. Poorly planned and organized Russian military operations along Ukraine’s northern border have been less successful than those emanating from Crimea so far. Determined and well-organized Ukrainian resistance around Kyiv and Kharkiv has also played an important role in preventing the Russian military from advancing with the speed and success for which it had reportedly planned. The Russian military has deployed forces beyond those it likely planned to use against Ukraine to offset these challenges. However, Russian forces remain much larger and more capable than Ukraine’s conventional military. Russia will likely defeat Ukrainian regular military forces and secure their territorial objectives at some point in the coming days or weeks if Putin is determined to do so and willing to pay the cost in blood and treasure.

Russian forces carried out additional air and missile strikes on Kyiv and other major cities around 3:00 am local time on February 25. ISW cannot confirm the frequency and targets of overnight Russian strikes at this time. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces are increasingly targeting civil infrastructure and residential buildings “to intimidate the population of Ukraine.” Russian forces continue to refrain from using the likely full scale of Russian air and missile capabilities, likely seeking to limit the negative imagery of heavy Ukrainian civilian casualties. However, Russian forces will likely increase their use of bombardment in the coming days to overcome heavier-than-anticipated Ukrainian resistance.

Russian ground forces are advancing on four primary axes:

1. **Kyiv Axis:** Russian forces entered the outskirts of Kyiv on the west bank of the Dnipro on February 25. Russian forces have so far failed to enter Kyiv’s eastern outskirts. They have abandoned for now the failed attempt to take the city of Chernihiv and are instead bypassing it. Elements of the 76th VDV (Airborne) division have concentrated in southeastern Belarus likely for use along the Chernihiv-bypass axis toward Kyiv in the next 24 hours.
2. **Kharkiv Axis:** Russian forces will likely envelop Kharkiv in the next 24 hours after failing to enter the city through frontal assaults on February 24. Russian forces are now advancing on a broad front along the northeastern Ukrainian border as of February 25.
3. **Donbas Axis:** Russian forces may not have intended to do more than pin Ukrainian forces in the east. The Russians have not weighted their ground offensive efforts toward breaking through Ukrainian defensive positions on the line of contact, taking Mariupol from the east, or driving rapidly through Luhansk Oblast to the north. Ukrainian forces remain largely static on the line of contact.
4. **Crimea Axis:** Russian forces fully captured Kherson and are likely on the verge of seizing Melitopol in the east. Unconfirmed reports indicated that Russian forces had bypassed Kherson earlier and headed directly for Mykolaiv and Odessa.

Russian Activity

Kremlin officials and Russian government media advanced the dual narratives that Ukrainian “nationalists” are the only Ukrainians fighting and that Russian forces are easily succeeding in Ukraine throughout coverage on February 25 to counteract the growing unpopularity of the war in Russia. TASS falsely claimed Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics (DNR and LNR) forces are advancing toward the administrative borders of Donetsk Oblast and Luhansk Oblast late on February 25.¹ Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova falsely claimed Russian forces are only striking Ukrainian military infrastructure, not Ukrainian cities or civilians. Zakharova also claimed that Ukrainian “nationalists” threaten ethnic Russians with “direct reprisals” in Ukraine.² Russian domestic media additionally amplified a Russian Defense Ministry announcement claiming Ukrainian nationalist battalions are destroying bridges and civilian infrastructure to prevent other Ukrainians from surrendering.³ Russian TV channels reported that the West and Ukraine are artificially insinuating panic across all Ukrainian cities to amplify mobilization and mass nationalist revolts by supplying Ukrainian civilians with weapons.⁴ Russian Defense Ministry Spokesperson Major General

Igor Konashenkov claimed that Russian forces neutralized 11 Ukrainian military aircraft, 18 tanks and armored vehicles, and 211 military infrastructure facilities but did not mention Russian losses.⁵ Konashenkov also claimed that Russia's seizure of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant prevented "Ukrainian nationalists" from using the power plant to conduct a "nuclear provocation."⁶ Kremlin media amplified false Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) claims that the Ukrainian 36th and 53rd Brigades "laid down their arms."⁷

Russian President Vladimir Putin called on Ukrainian soldiers to stage a military coup during a Russian Security Council meeting on February 25, indicating continued Kremlin misunderstanding of the scale of Ukrainian resistance. Putin updated the Russian Security Council on the progress of the operation in Ukraine and claimed that Russian forces are primarily clashing with "Ukrainian nationalists," not Ukrainian Armed Forces personnel.⁸ Putin told Ukrainian forces to prevent Ukrainian "nationalists" from using civilians as "human shields," likely aimed at bolstering the false Kremlin claim of a genocide of ethnic Russians in Ukraine.⁹ The Kremlin's continued calls for Ukrainians to reject "nationalists" and that Russia's operations are only directed at the government in Kyiv may indicate the Kremlin falsely expected the Ukrainian military to collapse quickly or for Russian troops to be greeted as "liberators," as Putin has claimed.

Russian opposition groups and citizens opposing the Russian war in Ukraine may be laying the foundations of a coordinated anti-war movement that will be unlikely to alter Putin's decision making but will likely provoke harsher domestic crackdowns, further eroding Putin's popularity.¹⁰ Russian police detained 1,012 anti-war demonstrators in Moscow, 458 in St Petersburg, and more than 300 in other Russian cities in total as of February 25 according to rights group OVD-Info.¹¹ Russian independent newspaper Novaya Gazeta condemned the Kremlin's war on Ukraine on February 25 and emphasized that "only the antiwar movement of Russians" can help peacefully resolve the situation.¹² The Yeltsin Center and more than 180 Russian academics from the Russian Academy of Sciences called for an immediate end to the war in Ukraine.¹³ Separately, a Russian human rights group, the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers, condemned the Russian military for sending conscripts to the frontlines with less than four months of training, laying the potential groundwork for an influential anti-war bloc even among Putin's grassroots supporters.¹⁴ Russians withdrew more than \$1.3 billion in cash on the first day of the war with Ukraine as Russia's financial markets plummeted, demonstrating public unease with the Russian government's ability to handle the economic consequences of the invasion.¹⁵ Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov condemned Russian protests against the war and warned Russian citizens they will face consequences if they continue violating the law by protesting.¹⁶ Russia enacted a "partial restriction" of Facebook following accusations that Facebook blocked several Russian media outlets on the website on February 25.¹⁷ Protests are highly unlikely to affect Putin's decision making on the war, but will require the Kremlin to expend further resources on domestic crackdowns and will likely accelerate Putin's declining popularity.

Belarusian Activity

N/A

Ukrainian Activity

The Kremlin and Ukrainian Presidential Office confirmed on February 25 that Ukraine and Russia are negotiating a time and location for talks, during which the Kremlin will likely seek to impose maximalist surrender demands. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky offered to "sit at the negotiation table to stop deaths of people" with Putin on February 25.¹⁸ Zelensky vaguely stated that Ukraine "is not afraid to discuss neutral status" with Russia due to its current lack of NATO membership, but his advisors clarified that media misrepresented Zelensky's statements.¹⁹ Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov confirmed that Putin is ready to send a presidential, Defense and Foreign Ministry delegation to Minsk after discussing Zelensky's offer with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko. Peskov later claimed that Ukraine counteroffered to hold meetings in Warsaw before breaking off negotiations, which Ukrainian officials denied.²⁰ Peskov and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov issued incongruous statements on Russian-Ukrainian dialogue terms. Peskov said that the Kremlin "positively" welcomes Zelensky's consideration of neutrality status

and officially recognizes his presidency.²¹ Lavrov, however, claimed that he does not believe that Zelensky wants to negotiate and stated that Ukrainian Armed Forces must surrender before the dialogue.²²

US Activity

Western intelligence officials told CNN on February 25 that Russian President Vladimir Putin intends to invade all of Ukraine and could install a pro-Kremlin regime within days, refuting Russia's claims that it is conducting a "limited operation."²³ UK Defense Secretary Ben Wallace stressed that intelligence suggests Russia's ultimate objective remains a full invasion of Ukraine but that Russian troops have failed to achieve their major military objectives as of February 25. Unnamed American intelligence officials told CNN that Russian troops may take Kyiv by March 1 and that Russia will install a "Russia-friendly proxy government."²⁴ US intelligence sources told CNN that it is unclear if Russia will continue to hold Ukrainian territory after installing a proxy government. Notably, the Pentagon reported that the Russian offensive has lost momentum and has been unable to seize control of Ukrainian airspace.²⁵ US Senate Intelligence Committee Chair Senator Mark Warner added that Russian cyber-attacks in support of the invasion have been more muted than anticipated, likely due to deliberate restraint rather than diminished cyber capacity.²⁶

The European Union (EU), United States, and United Kingdom expanded their sanctions on Russia to target Putin and Foreign Minister Lavrov on February 25, but sanctions to sever Russia from SWIFT remain unlikely.²⁷ The EU approved an additional sanctions package on February 25 largely targeting Russia's financial sector in conjunction with US and UK sanctions packages.²⁸ EU Foreign Policy Chief Josep Borell denied that a third EU sanctions package is under preparation but affirmed the EU is ready to supplement existing sanctions based on Russian activity and EU consensus.²⁹ The EU asked the European Commission and European Central Bank (ECB) to assess the ramifications of further cutting off Russian institutions' access to the EU financial system, including Russian access to the SWIFT high-security payment network. The European Council emphasized that "all options are on the table."³⁰ French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire said cutting Russia from SWIFT is an option of "last resort" on February 25.³¹ UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson urged NATO and EU leaders to immediately remove Russia from SWIFT and announced new UK sanctions suspending export credit and investment guarantees for Russia.³² *Bloomberg Wealth* reported that international sanctions cost Russia's wealthiest citizens a cumulative 39 billion USD within 24 hours of Russia's invasion.³³ Taiwan announced that it will join international economic sanctions against Russia on February 25.³⁴ Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov warned on February 25 that Russia will retaliate against international sanctions.³⁵ Russia's Federal Air Transport Agency, Rosaviatsiya, banned all UK-based airlines from landing in Russia and crossing Russian airspace on February 25 after the United Kingdom banned Russian airline Aeroflot on February 24.³⁶

NATO and EU Activity

NATO activated its 40,000-troop Response Force on February 25 in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.³⁷ Elements of the NATO Response Force will remain on standby to help support NATO countries in Eastern Europe should Russia threaten their territorial integrity.³⁸ NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg stated that elements of the Response Force, including the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force, a land brigade of approximately 5,000 troops, can deploy rapidly where needed to bolster eastern flank security.³⁹ NATO heads of state, along with those of Finland, Sweden, and the European Union, reinforced their commitment to NATO's Article 5 and their support for Ukrainian sovereignty during a call on February 25.⁴⁰ Stoltenberg emphasized that Russia and Belarus will be held economically and politically accountable for Russia's aggression against Ukraine.⁴¹ Separately, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said on February 25 that Ukraine requested military, financial, and humanitarian aid from European leaders and that France was ready to help "if necessary."⁴² French President Emmanuel Macron stated that France will provide Ukraine with military defense equipment and an additional 300 million euros in budgetary assistance.⁴³

Other International Organization Activity

The International Criminal Court (ICC) announced possible investigations into alleged Russian war crimes amid Russian denials, and several states and international organizations began preparing humanitarian aid packages on February 25. ICC prosecutor Karim Kahn said on February 25 that the ICC may investigate possible war crimes in Ukraine and urged all sides to respect international humanitarian law.⁴⁴ US officials reported that about 200 Russian missiles have hit residential areas in Ukraine as of February 25.⁴⁵ The Russian Defense Ministry denied claims that Russia is indiscriminately targeting civilian and military targets and said Russia would not endanger civilians by attacking cities.⁴⁶ Russian Presidential Spokesman Dmitry Peskov declined to state if the Kremlin had data on civilian deaths.

The Kremlin denied UN reports of at least 127 civilian deaths and a UN assessment that the invasion could cause up to five million Ukrainian refugees to flee abroad.⁴⁷ Polish border officials reported that about 29,000 Ukrainian refugees entered Poland on February 24.⁴⁸ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi estimated that about 100,000 Ukrainians were displaced from February 24-25.⁴⁹ United Nations Aid Chief Martin Griffiths reported that aid operations in Ukraine will require about 1 billion USD over the next three months to provide humanitarian aid to fleeing Ukrainians. US Chairman of the State and Foreign Operations Subcommittee Senator Chris Coons announced his support for a minimum \$10 billion US aid package to support Eastern European and NATO countries taking in Ukrainian refugees.⁵⁰

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe Special Monitoring Mission (OSCE SMM) announced on February 25 that it could not safely run ground patrols due to heavy fighting and that it would continue monitoring the conflict from limited listening posts and with a reduced posture.⁵¹ Doctors Without Borders also suspended its operations in Eastern Ukraine due to the conflict on February 25 but announced plans to station medical teams in neighboring countries.⁵²

Individual Western Allies' Activity

N/A

Other International Activity

China has not cohered a consistent public approach to the Russian war against Ukraine; The Chinese government is beginning to comply with US sanctions on Russia while calling for negotiations and declining to fully denounce Russian aggression. Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin discussed Ukraine on February 25. Xi called for rejecting Cold War mindsets and reaching a balanced, effective, and sustainable European security mechanism through negotiations. Xi emphasized China's claimed respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity and said that China will work with the international community to safeguard the UN-based international order.⁵³ Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin reiterated that China seeks to resolve Ukraine issues in line with UN principles and that sanctions are an ineffective tool during a February 25 press conference.⁵⁴ Two of China's largest state banks, the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC) and Bank of China (BOC), also began complying with US sanctions and started restricting financing for Russian commodities on February 25. The ICBC is still offering limited Chinese Yuan-based lines of credit to select Russian clients, pending senior approval.⁵⁵ Chinese banks have largely complied with US financial sanctions against Iran and North Korea in the past to retain access to US dollar markets.



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