

RUSSIAN OCCUPATION OF UKRAINIAN NUCLEAR INFRASTRUCTURE

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THE NORTH GROUP

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Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is moving much slower than many analysts expected. The Russian Armed Forces has superiority in terms of equipment, experience, and manpower, yet the ground forces have not advanced very far in the first two weeks. Despite reaching the suburbs of Kyiv in the first few days of hostilities, the city remains under Ukrainian control—as do most other Ukrainian cities. Russian forces have not achieved air superiority, have strained their logistics capabilities, and are losing the information war.

To understand why Russia has prosecuted the war so poorly, consider that the apparent slow progress may be a Western misconception about Russian war goals. The primary goal of the Russian invasion may not be to take and hold territory, but to verify the existence of Ukrainian CBRN weapons and subsequently eliminate them.

Assessment

The Russian Federation is not moving slowly, nor is it losing the war, despite high casualty numbers. Russia is strategically positioning ground forces in regions that allow Russian troops to surround and secure Ukrainian nuclear infrastructure.

This is a military-led, geopolitical effort to deny Ukraine the capability to house a nuclear weapons program before 2026, when the New START Treaty will be updated to identify which nations are allowed to possess nuclear weapons. entry into New START would enable Ukraine to better protect its sovereignty and security from the Russian Federation. The Russian Federation considers Ukrainian armament a major security threat and would not hesitate to start a global conflict to deny Ukraine access to nuclear weapons.

Russia likely intends to occupy eastern Ukraine, which houses the most nuclear-capable infrastructure within the country, to prevent or destroy any Ukrainian nuclear weapons program.

NATO is unwilling to allow Ukraine to become a member state. NATO and the European Union are wary of providing overt support to Ukraine, as Russia would consider this an act of war or a threat to Russia's security. Closer relations between NATO and Ukraine may provoke fears in the Kremlin that the country will be included in the 2026 New START treaty, an inclusion which Russia cannot tolerate.

Rather than NATO and the European Union overtly protecting Ukraine, granting Ukraine permissions to house a nuclear weapons program would allow Ukraine to protect itself without Russia setting its sights on war with NATO & the European Union.

It is assessed that Russia aims to occupy Eastern Ukraine to seize control of nuclear infrastructure since most nuclear-capable facilities are in the east. This explains the lack of Russian military activity in western Ukraine. Occupying Eastern Ukraine and seizing the nuclear sites prevents Ukraine from gaining nuclear weapons and potentially joining New START. While this is may not be Russia's primary strategic objective, the targeting of nuclear facilities is consistent with a strategic goal of verifying, destroying, and preventing the acquisition of Ukrainian WMDs.

Justification

On 24 February, the first day of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine, the closed nuclear facility of Chernobyl was seized and occupied by Russian Federation forces. At first glance, this seems like a traditionally military effort to seize key terrain. On 1 March, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, speaking at the Geneva Disarmament Meeting, said that ““Russia is in danger of Ukraine acquiring nuclear weapons and it requires a Russian response.”



“Russia is in danger of Ukraine acquiring nuclear weapons and it requires a Russian response.”

–Sergei Lavrov

The verbiage used by Lavrov at the Geneva Disarmament Meeting is in line with the Russian Military Readiness doctrine, which articulates that if something is identified as a threat to Russian security, it is a justification for a military response. This is articulated in the Russian Military Readiness doctrine, in its four steps of escalation. Russian officials will use these key phrases during press releases that are indicative of their current state of escalation.

- 1) Peacetime: Normal Operational Tempo
- 2) Heightened: Increased security risk – Taking precautionary measures
- 3) Threat of War: Something is directly affecting Russian security that “requires a response”; Lethality is increased

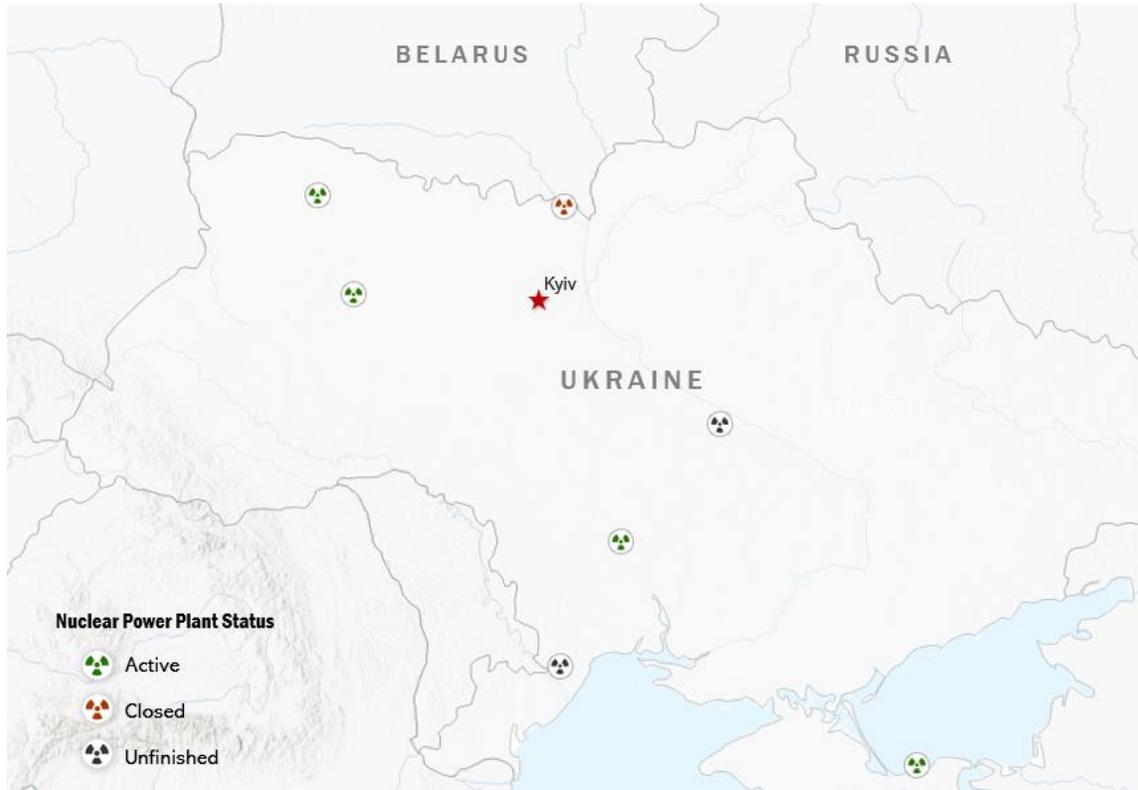
Events

On 3 March, two days Lavrov addressed the UN, Russian forces seized Zaporizhzhia – Ukraine’s largest nuclear power plant.

Two days following these events, on 5 March, intelligence reports and media coverage revealed that Russian Forces were advancing toward a third nuclear infrastructure facility.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy indicated that the third plant currently under threat is the Yuzhnoukrainsk nuclear power plant, located approximately 75 miles north of Mykolaiv, one of several cities the Russians were trying to keep encircled Saturday. The North Group has identified Russian troop disposition in relation to all Ukrainian nuclear infrastructure and concluded that Russian progress is probably acceptable to the Kremlin should it prove that nuclear targets, rather than territory, are a major objective. Contrary to the popular belief that Russia was having difficulty in taking Ukraine, Russian forces are moving quickly to control Ukrainian nuclear facilities.





Russian Troops are strategically positioned in regions that allow the Russian forces to occupy and deny Ukrainian access to both active and inactive nuclear infrastructure. Russia’s desired end state may not be only to conquer Ukraine—though Russia will certainly take a portion of it—but to deny Ukraine access to nuclear infrastructure capable of creating weapons.

Current events suggest Russia may have intelligence indicating Ukraine is building a nuclear weapons program or bioweapon program. A Ukrainian WMD program would pressure Russia to take pre-emptive action. Additionally, the Kremlin views Ukraine’s desire to join NATO and the European Union a direct security threat to the Russian Federation. Russia outlined these instances as a threat to the state in 2020, when Russian President Putin approved “The Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation.”

“The Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation.”

Russia is insistent that Ukraine has turned against Russia because of NATO expansion and Western influence. In particular, the overthrow of the Ukrainian government in 2014 is viewed by Russia as a US-backed coup d’état, with the aim of

diminishing Russia’s regional influence. Additionally, Russian leadership has a difficult time comprehending Ukrainian nationalism. The Kremlin’s suspicion is that an independent Ukraine can only exist as a puppet government of the West.

In a further attempt to justify its invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin alleged Ukraine of developing dirty biological weapons. Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs claimed on March 6 that the Security Service of Ukraine and Azov Battalion “mined a reactor at an experimental nuclear facility at the Kharkov Institute of Physics and Technology” in order to “accuse Russia of creating an ecological catastrophe.”

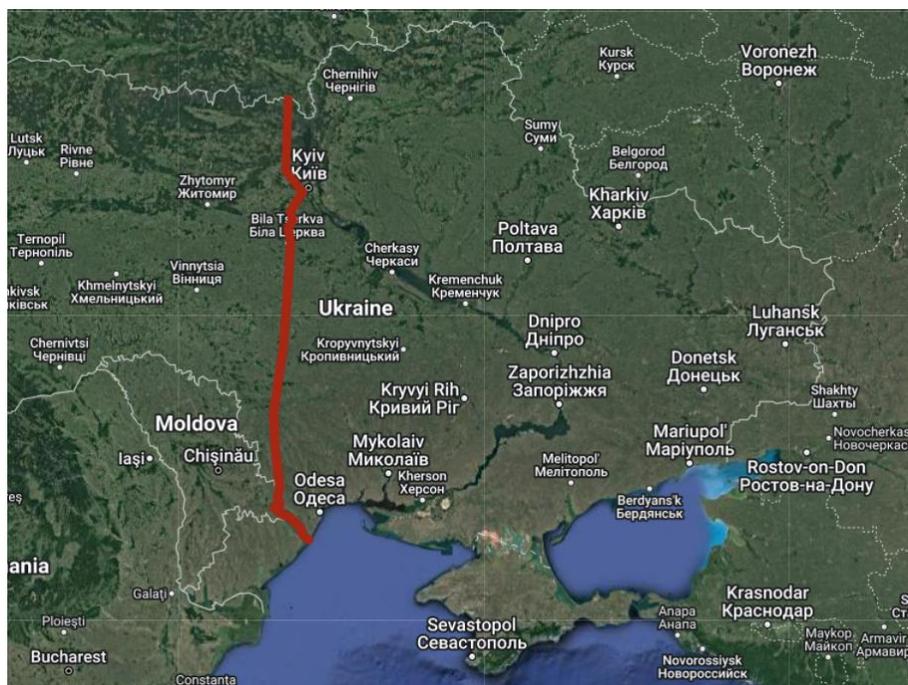
On February 7, the Kremlin insisted in its allegations. According to TASS, Ukraine operated bioweapon facilities in Kharkiv, Poltava, and Lviv, and shared “thousands of patient serum samples” with the Walter Reed Naval Hospital near Washington DC.

It is important to note that the alleged Ukrainian Biolabs are coincidentally located in same locations as 3 of the nuclear-capable sites listed above.

Predictive Analysis of Threats to Global Security

If Russia does seize all nuclear-capable facilities in eastern Ukraine, Russia would then likely push to occupy everything in Ukraine east of Kyiv. This new border would split Ukraine in half from north of Kyiv all the way south to Odesa. This would give Russia control over nuclear sites and make it easier to police the eastern occupied portion of Ukraine. This would be a direct response to the perceived nuclear and military threat from Ukraine. Should Russia do this, Russian military forces would likely decrease their operational tempo, permitting diplomatic talks between Russia, Ukraine, and any mediating powers.

Relations between Ukraine, NATO, the US, and the EU have already degraded since the invasion. Ukraine continues to beg global powers for humanitarian and military aid with a negative response because NATO, the US, and the EU are open in their unwillingness to initiate anything that may incite a war with Russia. Ukraine is likely to grow resentful of global powers because of this and may negatively affect future dealings between Ukraine, NATO, the US, and the EU.



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