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Key processes

1. In August, Russia continued its slow advance in Donbas and southern Ukraine. The south is its priority. Russia's focus is on "grinding down" Ukraine's manpower and military infrastructure without capturing vast densely populated areas.

2. High-precision Western weapons enable Kyiv to deliver pinpoint strikes on Russian rear targets, but in August it was premature to speak about serious military (rather than media) repercussions of such attacks. At the end of August, Ukraine embarked on its long-announced counteroffensive for Kherson, but initially it looked more like a demonstration.

3. Indications emerged of Ukraine's transition to more asymmetric forms of warfare, which involve attacks and subversive operations behind enemy lines. This trend will grow stronger if Ukraine continues to lose its territory and the core of its mechanised army.

4. A new surge in Western arms deliveries to Ukraine took place. Russia and the U.S. are preparing for a dragged-out war, although the European public is becoming increasingly discontented over its socioeconomic ramifications.

5. Political tensions in the region remain high, with stakeholders actively using non-military escalation methods.

6. Attempts are being made to exploit the progress of the Ukrainian grain agreement in order to commence ceasefire negotiations.

Frontline developments in Ukraine

Throughout August, Russia continued to make slow advances in Donbas and southern Ukraine. The capture of the settlement of Pisky, which had been well fortified by the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU), became quite symbolic. Operations in the south appear to remain Russia's priority. The objective is probably to capture the coast and secure a land corridor to Crimea and Transnistria. However, it turns out the Russian offensive has slowed down even more compared to previous months. From the look of it Russia has dispersed its forces in anticipation of the counteroffensive announced by Kyiv. Moreover, in the second half of August, Ukraine benefitted from high-precision Western weapons to engage targets in the Russian rear area, which further complicates the logistics and offensive capabilities of the Russian army.

According to the Ukrainian defence minister, attacks in the Russian rear are part of a new tactic aimed at destroying the military infrastructure in Crimea and the logistics of the Russian army's supplies in the southeast. The AFU leadership expects that this tactic will pave the way for launching the long-announced counteroffensive for Kherson. Attempts to commence a counterattack were made during the last few days of August, but its scope remained limited, and its media effect became its most conspicuous impact. With only a handful of achievements (several villages were regained), the Ukrainian side suffered serious losses in manpower and materiel.

Russia still enjoys a significant advantage when it comes to weapons. Despite a surge in Western arms deliveries to Ukraine in August, the disparity will likely persist in the coming months. Insufficient supplies are not the only problem that Kyiv is facing, as there are difficulties with getting familiar with Western weapons as well — specialists

take quite long to train to use them effectively, and integration of Western systems and types of equipment can be challenging. This is compounded by dwindling stocks of materiel and equipment in many European countries and the likely increase in public demand for the war to end sooner amid the ongoing economic crisis in Europe.

This will compel Ukraine to rethink its own capabilities, especially given the growing infrastructure damage and massive manpower losses that have forced Kyiv to start registering women for possible military conscription. In this context, another component of Kyiv's emerging new tactics looks understandable — its focus on asymmetric responses, which imply pinpoint strikes and subversive operations behind enemy lines. This tactic has already been quite perceptible, as the number of missile strikes on military and transport infrastructure and weapons depots has increased in Crimea, south-eastern Ukraine and Russia's Belgorod region, as well as judging by reported sabotage against chiefs of military administrations in Russia-controlled territories. Russia has referred to the assassination of Daria Dugina as a result of these tactics as well. Although Ukraine denies its involvement and the investigation has not been completed, it is already safe to say that the corresponding interpretation of the incident will shape Russian political reality and Moscow's decision-making process. Allegations about the creation of an underground guerrilla movement in Russia will be perceived in a similar fashion.

Deliveries of Western weapons to Ukraine

August saw a surge in statements from European countries about their military assistance to Kyiv. Twenty-six countries pledged to boost military supplies at the international donor conference of defence ministers in Copenhagen on 11 August. Germany will also deliver military supplies to Slovakia for that country to send equipment to Ukraine. The entire EU also plans to increase assistance to the Ukrainian army (including in military training).

U.S. arms deliveries are also on the rise. On 9 August, the White House pledged USD 1 billion in direct military supplies to Ukraine. On 24 August, on Ukraine's Independence Day, President Joe Biden announced an almost USD 3 billion Ukraine military aid package, the largest to date. However, he referred to funds from the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative, meaning that armaments cannot be taken from available stocks, but will be produced for Ukraine, which could take months or even years. At the same time, there has been speculation in the Western media that Washington has provided Ukraine with more weapons than the administration has announced publicly.

Escalation spiral in the region

Military, political, and economic tensions continue to escalate in Eastern Europe.

Strategic stability

The remaining pillars of strategic stability keep collapsing, which poses major risks to Eastern Europe. Examples include Russia's decision to suspend U.S. inspections in its territory under the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START). Moscow cited its inability to conduct similar inspections in the U.S. because of the U.S.' restrictions. Furthermore, Washington halted dialogue exploring possibilities for a new treaty to replace New START, which expires in 2026, although on 1 August, Joe Biden reiterated

the U.S.' fundamental interest in negotiating a new framework agreement. The Russian Federation appears to share this interest.

The outcomes of the Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, which took place in New York on 1–26 August, became the second serious blow to strategic stability. Discussions at the conference were expectedly politically overshadowed by the war in Ukraine, and in the end the participating states failed to adopt the final document. Although Russia does not believe the conference failed, it is clear that the entire NPT system is in a state of crisis and that many non-nuclear weapon states have been additionally motivated to reconsider their attitude to the hypothetical acquisition of nuclear weapons.

Militarisation

Russia has redeployed three MiG-31 fighter-interceptors carrying Kh-47M2 Kinzhal hypersonic missiles to the Kaliningrad Region for the purpose of strategic deterrence. The aircraft will be on round-the-clock combat duty. On 25 August, Putin signed a decree to recruit 137,000 more staff into the country's armed forces starting 1 January 2023. The total strength of the Russian army will be 2,039,758, of which 1,150,628 servicemen.

Aliaksandr Lukashenka announced that the conversion of military aircraft so they could carry nuclear arms had been completed. No exact data on the type and number of adapted planes were provided.

Poland approved contracts with South Korean companies to supply a large batch of military equipment, including tanks, self-propelled howitzers, and aircraft. Those were the largest contracts in the history of South Korea's defence industry. Poland is the first foreign customer for K-2 tanks, which are scheduled to be delivered in 2022–2025.

Estonia and Finland are in talks over an integrated missile defence system. According to Estonia's defence minister, the initiative would close access to the Gulf of Finland for Russian warships.

The U.S. plans to name the military mission supporting Kyiv and appoint a general to lead it. This decision, along with the mentioned long-term contracting of arms production for Ukraine, as well as the increase in the total strength of the Russian army, may serve as an indication that Moscow and Washington are preparing for a long-running conflict.

Non-military escalation

Following a drop in natural gas pumping and the suspension of supplies to a number of European economies, Gazprom completely halted gas deliveries through Nord Stream at the end of August. Moscow said the stoppage was temporary and cited sanctions-related technical reasons; however, the situation could as well be treated as a rehearsal for a complete shutdown of natural gas supplies to the EU during the heating season.

On 3 August, Lithuania's transport minister said that specific banks would decide individually whether to charge transit fees for Russian cargoes bound to Kaliningrad. On 15 August, Šiaulių bankas, which had been processing transit fees, announced that it would stop accepting payments in Russian roubles and, starting 1 September, any payments from Russian customers. On 30 August, the governor of the Kaliningrad Region said that the issue of payments for rail transit had been resolved. This can be viewed as a step towards mutual de-escalation, but the situation still has potential to turn into a crisis.

In a pointedly escalatory move, the Baltic States and Poland insisted on imposing a massive EU entry ban for Russian citizens, including the cancellation of previously issued Schengen visas. That radical move was not supported across the EU, and the member states only agreed to suspend the visa facilitation agreement with Russia.

The discourse of the Belarusian opposition in exile is becoming increasingly radicalised. So far, the nature of the resolutions adopted at the Vilnius conference (8-9 August) have been declarative and can therefore be categorised as non-military escalatory actions. However, what causes concern is the potential compatibility of the radicalising approach with Ukraine's new asymmetric tactics involving subversive activities, which could be extended over Belarus. In such a case, the actions undertaken by the Belarusian opposition would lead to an extension of military threats over all countries of the region.

Attempts to resume ceasefire talks

On 18 August, the presidents of Turkey and Ukraine met with the UN secretary general in Lviv. The Zaporizhzhia NPP topped the agenda, but Recep Erdoğan once again suggested that Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Vladimir Putin negotiate a ceasefire directly. Despite the success of Erdogan's mediation efforts on Ukrainian grain exports, no breakthrough should be expected soon, as the parties have sufficient resources to continue the war. Russia has contrived to wage it without general mobilisation and economic collapse, while Ukraine can fall back on resources supplied by the West. There have been no serious indications of a split in the Western establishment over support for Ukraine so far, despite signs of growing public discontent with the socioeconomic consequences of the war. The war can therefore drag on for years.

Minsk's attempts to use soft power and de-escalation tools

In the absence of comprehensive communication with the West and growing regional tensions, Belarus is trying to make use of soft power and de-escalation tools to reduce risks and emphasise its special position in the conflict (although these signals are often misinterpreted due to typical ambivalence in Minsk's conduct). Examples include:

- Exploration of the possibility for citizens of the Baltic States and Poland with Belarusian roots to receive residence permits following a simplified procedure.
- Visa-free regime with the neighbouring EU and NATO countries (over 200,000 people from Lithuania, Latvia and Poland have entered Belarus since April).
- Official congratulations to the people of Ukraine on Independence Day.
- Lukashenka's statement about the discreet conduct of Polish army.
- Demonstrative involvement of military personnel in harvesting operations.
- Calls by the Belarusian defence minister and state secretary of the Security Council at the 10th Moscow Security Conference "not to rattle the sabre", embark on multilateral dialogue, and restore an effective regional security architecture.

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