# TOCHKI NAD U



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## Key processes in April 2023

1. The degree of bloodshed and destructiveness of the Russia–Ukraine war remained unchanged, but the warring sides were in a state of strategic stagnation.
2. The West's massive aid to Kyiv continues, but as it progresses, more criticism arises.
3. Belarus actively holds exercises and emphasizes the factor of the Russian nuclear umbrella, but takes care not to expand its armed forces and the presence of Russian troops.
4. Finland's accession to NATO significantly changes the balance of power amid the ongoing militarization of the region.
5. The peacemaking process around Ukraine has no tangible prospects so far, but increasing numbers of states are coming forward with their peace initiatives.

## Frontline developments

The months-long Bakhmut standoff has resulted in mutual "grinding" of Russian and Ukrainian troops, leaving both sides focused on local objectives, thereby losing their strategic momentum and initiative, as well as ability to undertake any serious mobile operations. This undermined their capacity to engage in large-scale offensives, including the long-announced Ukrainian counteroffensive, all the more so now that Ukraine's armament problem is apparent: although NATO Secretary General declared that 98% of the promised Western materiel and equipment had been delivered to Kyiv, the actual figures are still lower (according to Ukrainian recipients). The condition of the weapons handed over to Kyiv is another matter that raises questions, and, as we wrote previously, so is the actual superiority of Western weapons in the context of this war.

Bloomberg published an analysis of the situation on the front and cited opinions in the European political community that a realistic target for the possible advance of the Ukrainian army is up to 30 kilometers this year, which could set the stage for a major offensive as late as 2024. This article reflects a general change in the Western media narrative on the war, which can be partly attributed to the leaked confidential Pentagon documents and probably the general understanding of the pace of the war. Bloomberg's analysis is close to the expectations of the U.S. military command.

This draws more parallels with the Iran–Iraq war of 1980–1988. Despite the parties' never-ending ostentatious preparations for critical breakthroughs and parallel attempts at negotiation, the war can last for many years and claim hundreds of thousands of lives even without any significant shift of the frontline. In this context, there are growing risks of its geographical expansion, primarily by involving Moldova and Belarus. On 21 April, the French *Le Monde* daily wrote about Kyiv's request to France to provide digital maps (DTED, or digital terrain elevation data) of Belarus, which would have ensured more effective operations in Belarusian territory. Paris refused to provide DTED, though. The newspaper notably included in its article a report from the Belarus–Ukraine border, which emphasized that the border was calm, while describing some "harmless" provocative acts by Ukrainian forces.

Belarusian officials say the escalation of the situation around the country is unprecedented. At the same time, the government is making efforts to prevent Belarus from being dragged into the war. Some groups in Russia must be discontented by this.

Many Western countries (especially Poland and Lithuania) appear to share this disgruntled attitude as they seek to unify their approaches to Russia and Belarus. Their policy *de facto* constitutes the recognition of Belarus as part of the Russian Federation, which naturally narrows Minsk's room for manoeuvre even more.

**Western aid to Ukraine**

According to a new U.S. public opinion poll, the Americans show less enthusiasm for supporting Ukraine. Respondents are highly polarized on this issue depending on their political preferences. For example, half of Republicans said the spending on Ukraine was too much compared to 13% of Democrats (the average is 33%). Further, 62% of Republicans and 31% of Democrats are ready to stay the course in supporting Ukraine for only one or two years, whereas 25% of Republicans and 51% of Democrats agree to stay the course for as long as it takes. The Americans' preparedness to pay the price of aiding Kyiv has decreased since last fall: 51% of the respondents are ready to pay higher energy prices, down from 60%, 46% are prepared to tolerate increased inflation, down from 57%, and 27% agree that help to Ukraine may cause losses of lives of U.S. troops, down from 38%. The Americans' perception of what is happening on the battlefield has also changed: overall, the assessment that Ukraine is succeeding in the war went down from 43% in October 2022 (40% of Republicans and 58% of Democrats) to 26% in April 2023 (21% of Republicans and 35% of Democrats).

The tone of discussions among American elites has also been changing. The article in Foreign Affairs by Richard Haass and Charles Kupchan marked a new milestone. Haass serves as president of the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), which brings together former secretaries of state, CIA directors and other high-ranking figures. The article concludes that Ukraine's goals are coming into conflict with other Western interests, the war's costs are mounting, and Western publics and their governments are growing weary of providing ongoing support. The authors suggest a way out: in the coming months, the West should do more to help Ukraine advance on the battlefield, putting it in the best position possible at the negotiating table. In the meantime, Washington should set a diplomatic course that ensures the security and viability of Ukraine within its *de facto* borders — while working to restore the country's territorial integrity over the long term.

So far, however, these discussions have only started to pick up steam and there has been no impact on the Biden administration's decision-making. On 4 April, Washington provided another package of military aid to Kyiv: it authorized a Presidential Drawdown of security assistance (for the 35th time) valued at USD 500 million and use of USD 2.1 billion in Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative (USAI) funds. The latter means guaranteed deliveries in the future, even if by then the U.S. has decided to substantially reduce its support for Ukraine. On 19 April, a new, 36th, Presidential Drawdown was authorized, valued at USD 325 million, to finance arms deliveries.

In parallel, on 13 April, the EU adopted an assistance measure worth EUR 1 billion under the European Peace Facility (EPF) (it brought the total EU contribution for Ukraine under the EPF to EUR 4.6 billion). The new assistance measure will help make up for the expenses of the EU member states which supplied weapons to Ukraine in the period from February to May 2023. Poland notably stood out. On 5 April, Volodymyr Zelenskyy paid a visit to Warsaw, where he said "if Ukraine and Poland stand shoulder to shoulder, Russia will not be able to defeat Europe." The special relationship between the two countries was further confirmed by the signing of documents, which envisage "permanent military support" and cooperation in the reconstruction of Ukraine's infrastructure.

**Military activities in Belarus**

The Belarusian state media started making more active and unambiguous attempts to promote the narrative about Kyiv's commitment to draw Minsk into the war, including through the organization of acts of sabotage. One example is ONT television channel's investigative documentary "No Contact with Gaspar" about the terrorist attack on the Machulischy airfield.

Against that backdrop, active exercises continued. In April, a tactical special exercise of the 86th Signal Brigade and a command and staff training exercise with a tank battalion of the mechanized brigade with the Northwestern Operational Command (SZOK) were held, and the 557th Engineer Brigade practiced the use of equipment and maintenance of a pontoon crossing over the Nieman River. Events conducted in areas bordering Ukraine were especially notable. On 5-7 April, an air defence exercise (probably one or two battalions were involved) was organized near Brest. It was not unprecedented, although such activities had previously been very infrequent in that area. Furthermore, a first-of-its-kind surprise inspection was carried out in the army, and additional servicemen were delivered to complete the staffing of an entire brigade (6,000 personnel) to wartime strength. Not only the area of the exercise was notable, but also the ability to mobilize larger formations. Apparently, Minsk completed the exercise without Russia's involvement.

However, despite the rapid militarization of the region and deterioration of the border situation, Minsk is trying to avoid the build-up of its armed forces and increase in the presence of Russian troops. It is this policy that has become a framework for a number of military activities undertaken by Belarus — from the deployment of territorial defence and militia to the training in the use of tactical nuclear weapons. In April, a comprehensive inspection of the territorial defence of the Minsk Region was carried out, incorporating a staff exercise with an active phase involving territorial defence troops and the Interior Ministry's personnel. A command and staff exercise of the territorial defence forces of the Hrodna Region was held as well. The official rhetoric on nuclear weapons became somewhat less intense, but the Belarusian Armed Forces trained quite openly in the handling of tactical nuclear munitions. These were referred to as "special munitions" that the Belarusian Air Force and the missile troops were trained to use (on the Su-25 attack aircraft and the Iskander ballistic missile system).

**Growth of regional tensions**

On 24 April, SIPRI published the report "Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2022", which vividly demonstrates the escalation trends in the region. A new record high of global military spending since the beginning of observation was recorded, and Europe accounts for the largest increase of 13% in 2022, currently spending more on defence than it did in 1989. Among individual countries, the most significant increases in military spending were reported for Ukraine (+640%), Finland (+36%), Lithuania (+27%), Sweden (+12%), Poland (+12%) and Russia (+9.2%).

On 4 April, Finland, which showed one of the world's fastest increases in military spending, officially became the 31st member of NATO. This represents a landmark change in the regional balance of power following nearly 80 years of Finland's neutrality/non-alignment. For instance, the deployment of NATO forces in that country will significantly limit the activities of the Russian Baltic Fleet. The line of confrontation between NATO and Russia has also been extended, mostly in the northern regions, which were largely demilitarized by Moscow in the 1990s–2000s. Russia began adapting its own military policy and infrastructure to these modifications last year, and will now enhance the militarization of its northern and northwestern regions.

It should be noted separately that the German concern Rheinmetall began the construction of a maintenance centre for Ukrainian weapons in Satu Mare, Romania. Earlier, Rheinmetall CEO announced plans to build a tank plant in Ukraine with an annual capacity of up to 400 Panther tanks. During his visit to the U.S. in mid-April, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said that Poland aims to become the service centre for U.S.-made Abrams tanks in Europe. Warsaw also wants to host productions of depleted uranium munitions for Abrams.

**Prospects for the peace process**

Unlike previous months, April was filled with events that could be characterized as search for peaceful formats to resolve the Ukraine conflict. First, Emmanuel Macron (together with President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen) visited Beijing. The French President failed to persuade the Chinese leader to change his position on cooperation with Moscow. Xi Jinping noted that the parties to the conflict have reasonable security concerns, but also supported Europe's desire to resolve the conflict. China is ready to cooperate with Paris to bring the sides to the negotiating table and prevent further escalation.

According to Ursula von der Leyen, Xi Jinping agreed to have a telephone conversation with Zelenskyy, but only when "appropriate conditions are in place." It appears that conditions became suitable at the end of the month, and on 26 April, the phone call took place. Judging by the official statements, no meaningful agreements were reached. The heads of state exchanged positions and opinions. Nevertheless, the Chinese leader showed a diplomatic politesse that befits a peace negotiator, the role he had assumed.

Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva also went on an extensive peacemaking mission in April, visiting China and Spain, where he discussed, among other things, his plan to resolve the conflict in Ukraine. The essence of his plan is to establish a coalition (G20 for Peace) of neutral mediator nations. Earlier he had presented his plan in Washington, but found no support there. The Vatican predictably acted as another peacemaker (which could also serve as indirect evidence of the West's growing weariness of the war). On 30 April, Pope Francis informed the public that the Vatican would participate in a peacemaking mission on Ukraine; however, so far details of this work are not publicly available. Kyiv said it was unaware of the initiative.

Therefore, now that the incumbent Turkish leadership is facing persistent problems (the aftermath of the earthquake and the May elections), increasing numbers of international actors are beginning to claim the role of mediators in the conflict around Ukraine.

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