

# TOCHKI NAD

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# Tochki nad U

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## Key Processes in October 2022

1. The progression of hostilities in Ukraine arguably illustrates the trend toward the gradual freezing of the frontline.
2. The theme of nuclear war appears to be taking roots in the public discourse.
3. The deployment of the joint regional grouping of Belarusian and Russian troops shows no indication of offensive planning; however, it expectedly provoked contrary interpretations in the West.
4. The West's large-scale military and financial support for Ukraine continues, although sceptics are becoming increasingly loud.

## Frontline developments

In October, the Ukrainian army made no serious advance in the southern direction and did not manage to recapture Kherson, let alone cut off the land corridor to Crimea. During the weeks-long offensive, the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) were able to liberate a number of smaller settlements in the region and threaten Kherson itself, but that achievement cost them an enormous effort with serious support from the West. Russia had not yet put its mobilized units into action and was gradually retreating to the south. At the same time, despite conflicting reports, it is possible to ascertain a very slow advance of Russian units in the east near Bakhmut and the construction of defensive lines there.

We are making a cautious conclusion that the pace of combat operations in the Kherson and Bakhmut directions illustrates the general trend toward a gradual freezing of the frontline. This tendency is acceptable to neither side; therefore, both attempted separate operations to break it. For example, Ukraine attacked the Crimea bridge, while the Russian Federation carried out massive attacks on critical infrastructure facilities in Ukraine using missiles and drones. Such facilities seem to have turned into permanent targets of the Russian Aerospace Forces.

As winter cold sets in, Moscow will increase pressure on the Ukrainian population by creating unbearable living conditions in most of the country. The Kremlin does not aim to win over the local population and avoids taking action in larger population centres or assuming responsibility for governing significant numbers of Ukrainians. This is due to the awareness of potential mass disloyalty, as well as, possibly, the desire to redouble refugee flows, which would put additional pressure not only on the Ukrainian government, but also on the EU.

Against this backdrop, the Russian defence minister [announced](#) the completion of the partial mobilization. According to him, 300,000 citizens were drafted, of which 82,000 have already completed their training and left for the combat zone. However, it is too early to analyze the results of the mobilization campaign and the future balance of forces at the frontlines because it is not clear to what extent Moscow intends to use these forces in the fighting area. Several scenarios are possible in the short to medium term:

1. The most probable is a slump in activities at the front, which, however, will not imply a reduction in human losses and destruction. This is due to the achievement of a certain balance in the means and resources available to both countries. Presumably, Moscow will send most of its recruits to reinforce defensive lines, including those within Russia's

internationally recognized borders. The sides will likely shackle each other's forces for long, their minor successes alternating.

2. A less likely scenario appears to be a major Russian offensive and a breakdown of the Ukrainian defence system as a result of the large-scale involvement of Russian mobilized units into combat. Such a scenario would elevate the risks of escalation and could even breathe new life into the discussion by NATO member states of a no-fly zone in western Ukraine.

3. An even less likely scenario is the depletion of Russian military resources amidst the expansion of the AFU's success in regaining control over the occupied areas.

We should also highlight the factor of Western arms, with large-scale shipments arriving in Ukraine. These shipments are undoubtedly critical for Ukraine's defence, but the media euphoria over their effectiveness is somewhat overrated and creates a distorted impression of the possible future of the war. It is indicative, for example, that Western air defence systems were unable to effectively deal with Russia's massive use of high-precision missiles and barraging munitions, including Iranian drones. Incidentally, the latter had been successfully tested not only in Syria (where operators receive minimum training), but also in Yemen and Saudi Arabia, where they effectively countered the latest Western weapons.

### **Nuclear factor**

The nuclear war theme is being embedded in the global media and political discourse. Public opinion is de facto being prepared for the possibility of a nuclear escalation, even if in reality the opposing sides have no such intentions. A new step toward nuclear aggravation is the story of Kyiv's creating a "dirty bomb." On 24 October, the Russian Defence Ministry [said](#) that it had information about Kyiv's plans to use a "dirty bomb" and blame it on Moscow in order to trigger a powerful anti-Russian campaign around the world. Later, Vladimir Putin [elaborated](#) on this.

This served as a backdrop for Russia's planned [exercise](#) to deliver a massive nuclear strike in response to a nuclear attack on its territory. A *Yars* intercontinental ballistic missile was launched from the Plesetsk Cosmodrome; a *Sineva* ballistic missile was launched from a submarine in the Barents Sea; Tu-95MS strategic bombers fired air-launched cruise missiles. At the same time, the U.S. [resolved](#) to speed up the deployment of the new B61-12 tactical air-dropped nuclear bomb in Europe. It will be ready for use in December instead of spring 2023, as originally planned.

### **Deployment of the joint regional grouping of Belarus and Russia**

On 10 October, the Belarusian president [made public](#) the arrangements with Moscow to deploy the Regional Grouping of Troops (Forces) in Belarus. According to Lukashenka, the reason was the aggravation of the situation on the western borders of the Union State. The news was perceived in the West as the first step to form a strike group of Russian-Belarusian troops for a subsequent attack on Ukraine from the north. Alarming expectations were fuelled by contradictory [reports](#) about the [imposition](#) of a counterterrorism operation regime in Belarus and [mobilization](#).

The Ministry of Defence held a [briefing](#) for foreign military attachés as late as 17 October. It presented reasons for and some details of the deployment of the joint group. Specifically, the strength of the incoming Russian forces and facilities was announced: up to 9,000 servicemen, about 170 tanks, up to 200 armoured combat vehicles and up to 100 guns and large calibre (over 100 mm) mortars. It is emphasized that the military units

will be stationed at four training ranges in eastern and central Belarus, after which they will begin combat training activities.

It should also be recalled that the Regional Grouping of Troops (Forces) of the Union State is not a new formation created in the context of the Russia–Ukraine war, but a result of the lengthy process of integration of the two countries in the military sphere. Its foundations stem from 1997 after the adoption of the common principles for military posture and the use of elements of the military infrastructure of the two states. The development and improvement of the organizational and staff structure and composition of the grouping have been treated as one of the main dimensions of military integration. Subsequently, the creation of command bodies and deployment of the regional grouping were repeatedly practiced in the course of joint exercises.

The core of the grouping is the Belarusian army, but it also includes units and formations of the Western Military District of the Russian Federation and the Baltic Fleet, which implies its original orientation to act primarily in the northern and western directions (in the Baltic region), rather than in the southern one (Ukrainian). The actual application plan for the grouping was approved in December 2020 (the document is classified). The [Military Doctrine](#) of the Union State adopted in November 2021 makes the grouping one of its focus areas. In particular, the document states that it is to be deployed during the period of increasing military threat (the period of immediate threat of aggression).

Despite the declared defensive nature of the grouping, on 20 October, the AFU General Staff [claimed](#) that there was a growing threat of a new offensive on the northern front with a possible shift of its target area to the west in order to cut the arms supply routes to Ukraine. However, as early as 24 October, Kirill Budanov, head of the Main Intelligence Directorate of the AFU, [said](#) that his agency did not observe any indications of a new offensive from the Belarusian territory in the coming months. According to him, it would take Russia about two weeks to redeploy troops to attack Kyiv from the north, and at the time of the report, there were only 3,200 Russian personnel in Belarus.

The lack of deployed forces is not the only factor: the Belarusian military infrastructure along the border with Ukraine is marginal (and in some areas non-existent). This differs markedly from the situation on the Russia–Ukraine border, where Russia has been actively building and upgrading military infrastructure in recent years — from roads to hospitals and barracks. No relevant infrastructure is being prepared or built on the Belarusian side, judging by the available information. While trying not to provoke Kyiv, Minsk had even put off its formal decision to create the Southern Operational Command for a long time, and since it was [adopted](#), it has been in no hurry to redeploy its units. Truth be told, Belarus does not have any extra units for this purpose.

In view of the above, preventing uncontrolled escalation becomes an even more important challenge for those interested in preserving stability on the Belarus–Ukraine border. Nevertheless, preconditions for escalation are growing. These include the progressive media confrontation, intensified [intelligence activities](#), and Kyiv’s reliance on the AFU units comprising Belarusian citizens, who publicly announce plans of a coercive regime change in Belarus.

## **Support for Ukraine by Western countries**

Still symptomatic for understanding the prospects of the West’s support for Ukraine is the discussion of the role of Germany, the economic “locomotive” of the EU, in this support.

A few days after the outbreak of the war, the German chancellor [announced](#) a change of the era (Zeitenwende) in German security policy. On the one hand, Germany continues to [dismantle](#) many previous military taboos, including the supply of heavy weapons to belligerent states and the large-scale development of its own armed forces. On the other hand, Berlin maintains a cautious line in its support for Ukraine, [stating](#) that it is ready to go only as far as all other NATO and EU allies are prepared to go. In many ways, the restrained stance of Olaf Scholz's government is a reflection of Germany's [public opinion](#). Back in March, 67% of Germans spoke out in favour of their country's active involvement in international crises, but by August the figure had dropped to 41%. Moreover, only 14% of Germans want a more active military involvement and only 13% are in favour of a more profound financial involvement of Germany. The majority (65%) of those who advocate a larger role for the country in international conflicts want to see it in the diplomatic realm. Overall, Berlin's approach can be characterized as follows: it will do everything in moderation to simultaneously prevent Russia from having substantial gains in Ukraine while avoiding any excessive escalation of tensions that could get out of hand.

Meanwhile, there remains a bipartisan consensus in the U.S. on the need to maintain military and financial support for Ukraine, but sceptics appear more visible in the public space. Elon Musk [tweeted](#) that the conflict in Ukraine would end with Crimea remaining part of Russia, whereas elections in the Russia-annexed regions must be redone under UN supervision, which drew a barrage of criticism. For his part, Barack Obama [called for](#) defining the framework for Washington's support for Kyiv so as not to confront Russia openly: "We must honestly tell Ukraine what we can do and what we can't. The U.S., NATO and others need to independently determine the lines of support, proceeding from the calculation that the conflict between Russia and Ukraine could escalate into an escalation between Russia, the United States and NATO."

On 24 October, in a [letter](#) addressed to the White House, 30 U.S. Democratic congressmen urged it to "pursue every diplomatic avenue" to end the conflict "while preserving a free and independent Ukraine" in a way that is acceptable to the people of Ukraine. "Such a framework would presumably include incentives to end hostilities, including some form of sanctions relief," the letter reads. The alternative to diplomacy is protracted war, the authors said. Kyiv [interpreted](#) it as a reassuring signal to Putin, especially in the run-up to the midterm elections. The letter was later [withdrawn](#), but it suggests future difficulties with maintaining the unity of the U.S. establishment on this matter.

Overall, future support provided by the West is likely to meet none of the extreme expectations. An unlikely scenario is that prevailing public demand in Western countries for a cessation of hostilities causing a dramatic reduction in military support for Ukraine (especially given the strength of the military-industrial lobby) will emerge any time soon. Anyway, interest in finding a diplomatic solution will also be growing.

### **Negotiations and peacemaking**

As before, there is no ground for peace talks yet, and escalation continues. This is true for the hypothetical talks on both ceasefires and the longer-term development of the European security system. There are fundamental differences even in the perception of the format for possible negotiations. Moscow emphasizes that it is ready for negotiations "on Ukraine", and it wishes to negotiate with the U.S. On 30 October, [spokesman for the Russian president] Dmitry Peskov [said](#) that the Kremlin was open to talks "between Putin and Biden" if the U.S. was ready to address Russia's security concerns and "returned to the December–January status quo." However, the West is not yet ready for talks with Russia. The [statement](#) by the German Foreign Minister is a clear indication: "What

matters to Europe is not security with Russia, but from Russia.” Such positions are further reinforced by the ideological framework of the conflict as a strategic confrontation between democracies and autocracies.

Nevertheless, communication between Russia and NATO [continues](#) via diplomatic and military channels. This fact should not be underestimated amid the escalating conflict. The “grain deal” story is symbolic in this respect. On 29 October, Moscow [suspended](#) its participation in the deal citing drone attacks in the safe zone within the grain corridor in the Black Sea. However, on 2 November, Russia [agreed](#) to return to the deal format.



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