

# TOCHKI NAD

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## Key processes in March 2023

1. Conflict in Eastern Europe has evolved to have a nuclear dimension.
2. Belarus deploys permanent military forces in the south of the country for the first time.
3. Neither Kyiv nor Moscow is certain to possess sufficient resources for successful offensives.
4. Western aid to Ukraine continues to grow, although the rift between its supporters and critics is becoming increasingly conspicuous.
5. Decay of the international system of military transparency is close to completion.
6. Minsk once again tries to position itself as a peacekeeping state, while initiating the deployment of Russian nuclear weapons.
7. The parties to the confrontation are unhappy about the stagnation on the front, but both have enough resources to continue the war.

## Nuclear weapons in Belarus

On 25 March, Russian President Vladimir Putin [announced](#) plans to deploy tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs) in Belarus. Formally, the decision came on the back of reports about the UK's intentions to supply depleted uranium shells to Ukraine. If such supplies were to start, they would undoubtedly become a remarkable development, as even depleted uranium contaminates the area where munitions are used. However, the connection between the [possible](#) transfer of TNWs to Belarus and British uranium munitions looks far-fetched, since the former can hardly neutralize the latter. The version that the TNWs-related statement was triggered by the change in the military balance in the region as a result of NATO enlargement (once Finland joined it) and strengthening of its military presence in Eastern Europe [following](#) the Madrid summit of 2022, as well as [large-scale armament](#) of Poland, looks a lot more convincing. Warsaw's desire to deploy U.S.' TNWs in Poland may also have produced an additional impact. In his annual address to the Belarusian nation and the National Assembly, Aliaksandr Lukashenka [emphasised](#) that the nuclear rhetoric was linked to the growing threats on the western borders of Belarus. Specifically, he cited intelligence data, which suggested that NATO countries were considering opening a second front in Belarus.

If nuclear warheads should eventually be delivered to Belarus, such a transfer would apparently be designed to send a signal to the political and military elites, as well as societies in the NATO countries, indicating Moscow's and Minsk's determination to defend their security interests. Furthermore, underpinning this move may also be the Kremlin's far-reaching ambition to barter with the West in the future: nuclear weapons will be withdrawn from Belarus (and possibly from Kaliningrad) subject to the simultaneous withdrawal of equivalent U.S. weapons from Europe. At the beginning of April, this version was [confirmed](#) by Russian Ambassador to Belarus Boris Gryzlov.

It is also important that Minsk, which publicly [initiated](#) the transfer of TNWs, believes that the challenge lies in not only the growth of the NATO combat infrastructure and troops near the Belarusian borders, but also the lack of its own capabilities to promptly restore the balance of forces in the region using conventional means alone. As is known, Minsk has refrained from seriously increasing its defence budget for 2023 and will hardly be able to do so in 2024. The authorised strength of the Belarusian army, which has traditionally been focused on covering the Polish and Baltic sections of the border, has



also remained unchanged so far. Each section is protected by two motorised rifle brigades. It appears that to effectively protect the Ukrainian border — 1,084 kilometres long, which is comparable to the combined lengths of the borders with Poland (400 km) and the Baltic States (852 km), — at least four motorised rifle brigades alone are called for. But there is neither money nor people to form them, not even as part of the joint grouping of troops with the Russian Federation. Therefore, TNWs in Belarus should additionally [reinforce](#) the deterrent effect of the Russian “nuclear umbrella”.

### **Reinforcement of the Belarusian border with Ukraine**

On 23 March, plans to form a new anti-aircraft missile regiment in Brest Region’s Luninets were [reported](#). Belarus will therefore permanently deploy military units in the south of the country — which has been de-facto demilitarised since the early 2010s (except for the Brest district) — for the first time since it gained independence. According to Defence Minister Viktor Khrenin, *“Active militarisation of the West is underway, and military potential is growing near our borders. Ukraine is being fattened up with weapons; the Ukrainian leadership’s conduct has proved unpredictable. We are forced to act proportionately to the challenges and threats to the security of our country that may arise. Therefore we have resolved to form a new anti-aircraft missile regiment on the basis of the existing military unit in Luninets.”* Earlier, a military airfield was reactivated in Luninets. According to [official sources](#), the new regiment will be located only 50 kilometres from the Ukrainian border; the barracks for enlisted personnel are ready, and the first residential building for command staff was commissioned in March.

Redeployment and infrastructure development aimed to meet military challenges along the borders will continue. According to official [reports](#), it is planned to build more than 3,900 flats for servicemen in 24 cities this year, which compares to 540 flats in 12 cities completed last year. The [plans](#) to build more than 1,100 flats for employees of the power-wielding organisations that were made public in the Brest Region in March served as an indirect indication that the border with Ukraine is being reinforced (the involvement of the internal troops is expected to be quite considerable). These preparations should be considered together with the announced concept to deploy TNWs in Belarus.

### **Dynamics on the frontlines: not enough forces for a successful offensive?**

Against the backdrop of the ongoing bloody confrontation within a small area near Bakhmut, neither Russia nor Ukraine has attempted a large-scale offensive so far. Overall, neither side appears to possess sufficient resources for a successful offensive. By all appearances, both have suffered very sensitive losses near Bakhmut. On 31 March, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the U.S. Army Mark Milley once again [called in question](#) Ukraine’s ability to expel Russian forces from its territory this year. The lack of any, even minor, attempts at offensive action in March is indicative, despite weather conditions that month being favourable for launching an offensive, with the muddy season and flooding expected in April (important given the standoff near the Dnieper).

### **Western assistance to Ukraine**

The 10th meeting of the Ukraine Defence Contact Group (the Ramstein format) was [held](#) on 15 March. It was [announced](#) that the “tank coalition” (the countries that pledged ready to supply Leopard tanks to Ukraine) would be expanded to nine states. Norway [confirmed](#) plans to deliver National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile Systems (NASAMS) to Kyiv. However, the participants in the meeting never considered providing F-16 fighter jets for Ukraine, which had been previously requested by Kyiv. In mid-March, [Poland](#) and

[Slovakia](#) announced that they would deliver their available MiG-29 fighters to Ukraine. The latter will [receive](#) 12 new helicopters from the U.S. subject to a discount of USD 660 million as compensation. On 20 March, the U.S. [announced](#) the authorisation of a Presidential Drawdown of security assistance to Ukraine (the 34th so far) valued at up to USD 350 million.

Increasingly critical attitude towards military assistance to Kyiv — the trend we [outlined](#) previously — has become even more visible. For example, U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defence for International Security Affairs Celeste Wallander [told](#) a congressional hearing: “*The United States administration believes it is time for Ukraine to independently pay for the arms supplied to it. It should start purchasing some military equipment.*” Her statement came as a response to Congressman Mike Garcia’s speech stressing that it was important for U.S. taxpayers that Ukraine should start buying weapons itself rather than getting them for free. However, the most active supporters of supplying arms to Ukraine never diverted from their line. For example, the Polish premier [slammed](#) Berlin for not being “as generous as it should” towards Kyiv.

### **Aggravation of regional tensions and end of the era of international law**

The confrontation between Russia and the West reached a level unprecedented since the end of the Cold War. On 30 March, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán [said](#) the EU leadership was beginning to cautiously explore the possibility of sending “some kind of peacekeeping” troops to Ukraine. Orbán compared this to how the issue of arms deliveries had been cautiously explored a year before that. These suggestive admissions by the Hungarian leader tend to outline possible future contours of the proxy war in Ukraine.

The [incident](#) involving a U.S. drone that was shot down by a Russian plane over the Black Sea also served as a reflection of the growing tensions and associated military risks. However, the situation was quickly de-escalated, including through the telephone [conversation](#) between the defence ministers of the U.S. and Russia, the first one since October 2022.

In early March, it [became clear](#) that Russia had reneged on its commitment under the Vienna Document of 2011 on confidence- and security-building measures, namely to share information on its armed forces for the year 2023 with other countries. Moscow accounted for this by citing the Czech Republic’s refusal to fulfil its commitments under the document and Ukraine’s selective approach to its implementation. On 23 March, the Polish government [announced](#) that it would no longer transfer any data on its military activities to Belarus, contrary to the requirements of the CFE Treaty, because Minsk was involved in the Russia–Ukraine war on Moscow’s side. This precedent is likely to encourage other countries to stop exchanging information as well, which suggests that the collapse of the CFE Treaty can be expected in the near future. Russia suspended its participation in the CFE Treaty in 2007, Ukraine de facto suspended its membership after the war broke out, and the Baltic countries were never signatories to the treaty. Minsk sought to keep the treaty alive and in the middle of 2022 [suggested](#) resuming verification activities originally suspended due to the pandemic, but failed to do so.

The termination of the Vienna Document and the disintegration of the remnants of the CFE Treaty system, along with the earlier collapse of the Treaty on Open Skies, complete the breakdown of the international system of military transparency the way it was established at the end of the Cold War.

## Prospects for the peace process

In his address to the nation and the parliament, Aliaksandr Lukashenka once again [put forward](#) a peace initiative — this time he proposed that the countries at war call a truce while imposing a ban on the movement of military equipment and redeployment of troops. According to him, if the truce should be used by Ukraine and the West to prepare for an offensive, Russia should respond with all available means, including nuclear weapons. On the same day, the Kremlin [reacted](#) to Lukashenka's words by saying that the presidents of Russia and Belarus would be able to discuss the proposal in early April. Lukashenka's initiative came at a very convenient time and is designed to reassert Belarus as a peacekeeping state. Turkey, which used to fill this niche, is not very active on the Ukraine issue now, since President Erdogan is weakened by the aftermath of the earthquake and is busy with his campaign. There is a possibility, though, that even if Erdogan wins the election, it may not be easy for Ankara to resume its mediation efforts at the same level.

The Western establishment shows no desire to embark on serious peace talks. On 17 March, the International Criminal Court in The Hague [issued](#) an arrest warrant against Vladimir Putin, which can be seen as a representation of the West's stance on the possibility of negotiating with Russia. On 31 March, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez [said](#) during his visit to Beijing that the only peace plan the West is now prepared to discuss is the "Zelenskyy plan". The latter, as is well known, involves Russia's unconditional withdrawal from the entire territory of Ukraine to the 1991 borders, followed by the payment of reparations. Following Sánchez, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell [announced](#) that Chinese mediation to encourage peace talks between Kyiv and Moscow was unacceptable, as Beijing could only play a role in forcing Russia to accept the "Zelenskyy plan".

Therefore, as of early April, both parties to the conflict are dissatisfied with the stalemate on the frontlines, but both have resources in place to continue the war. At the same time, due to the murderous nature of the war and scope of destruction, the cost of continuing the conflict will keep growing, which will probably still begin to translate into a gradually broadening public demand for the start of negotiations to ultimately end the war. The cost of Western support for Kyiv will snowball as Ukraine's destruction continues. The cost Russia will be paying to continue the war will increase as well.

In the meantime, until the moment the cost of continuing the conflict becomes unacceptably high for the main actors, a number of players in the region itself may have motives for expanding the scale of the conflict into Belarus, Transnistria, the Kaliningrad region of Russia and the Baltic Sea area. The year 2023 will be decisive for the fate of these countries and regions, after which the risk of escalation should begin to subside.



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