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ANALYSIS

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THE LAST POINT IN THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR IN THE LIGHT OF NEW DIPLOMATIC INITIATIVES

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The conflict between Russia and Ukraine has raged for approximately 18 months, with significant repercussions on Eastern Europe and the Black Sea region. Neither side has achieved a conclusive victory on the battlefield, and it remains uncertain whether such an outcome would bring the conflict to an end. This is because this war is the result of many military and political crises from the historical process and continues today, and at the same time, it has evolved into a multidimensional conflict. This study analyses the current state of the war, firstly by examining the recent major military developments in Ukraine, and then by examining how the Russian-Ukrainian War has turned into a global crisis with the effects of other actors on the war.

The process that commenced with Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 has escalated into a declared war between Russia and Ukraine in 2022. It is known that for weeks before the war, Russia had been preparing for an invasion by massing troops and ammunition on the Ukrainian border. Before the outbreak of the war, the problems that a conflict in the east of Europe might cause, especially the energy crisis, were frequently on the agenda. Now, the map of Ukraine consists of the areas controlled by Ukraine, the areas controlled by Russia and the areas where the conflict continues. In order to understand the turning points of the war, it will be useful to consider the changes on the map. Although Russia did not achieve dominance over the whole Ukraine in a short time as Putin expected, it achieved a serious control especially in the east of Ukraine. Moreover, in September 2022, a referendum was held in Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhia regions, which were under the control of Russian forces, and these regions were de facto annexed to Russia. While Western states and Ukraine found the situation against international law and did not recognise the decision, the Turkish Foreign Ministry made statements that the decisions taken quickly would only increase the tension in the region. Today, it appears that there is now a land link between the territories under Russian control and the Crimean Peninsula, which was annexed in 2014.¹

Experiences Leading to the Wagner Revolt

In 2023, Bakhmut city was one of the most intensively fought places. After months of heavy fighting, the Russian army claimed to have taken control of the city in May 2023, while Ukraine insists that the war is not yet over. It should be emphasized that gaining control of the city was also challenging for the Russian army. It is known that since October 2022, the Russian private military company Wagner has been operating in

this region. In the city of Bakhmut, which lasted for months and 100,000 people² were thought to have died, it was observed that Wagner came to the fore as a very important power. Although Russia managed to capture the city of Bakhmut, it triggered one of the gravest crises since the onset of the conflict in the region. As a matter of fact, Wagner leader Prigozhin announced that they had completely taken control of the city and immediately afterwards experienced a tension with the

¹ <https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/7089c65feebb44dd9298f38073158ef5>

² <https://www.ft.com/content/4351d5b0-0888-4b47-9368-6bc4dfbccbf5>

Russian government. With this tension, the Ukrainian War actually led to a crisis in Russia's domestic politics. Wagner leader Prigozhin accused the Russian army of incompetence and announced that he would withdraw his troops in the city of Bakhmut. Prigozhin, who later announced that his troops in Ukraine were bombed by the Russian army, started a march against Moscow with Wagner soldiers. Prigozhin declared that this march, which was perceived as a coup attempt by the whole world, was a protest and stopped the march. This development was interpreted as an agreement between Putin and the Wagner group. It is known that Lukashenko, a firm ally of Russia, hosted the Wagner leader in his own country and even mediated between him and Putin. In the end, an unofficial non-state element used in the war has turned into an internal threat issue of the state using it. This situation not only affected the course of the war, but also led to the questioning of the place of many private military companies, including Wagner, which has become more visible recently.

Ukraine's Pace

Another significant development in the recent period is that Ukraine has initiated its counterattacks. Ukraine has been preparing for this for months and has received considerable military backing from the West, resulting in gains in some areas.³ The US has provided Ukraine with cluster bombs which have a contentious

situation for this counteroffensive.⁴ Furthermore, Ukraine is currently negotiating for F-16 fighter jets and long-range missiles, which it urgently requires. As a consequence of the negotiations, an accord was struck for the transfer of F-16s from Denmark and the Netherlands to Ukraine. Officials from Denmark declared that a group of eleven nations would furnish flight instruction to Ukrainian pilots, with F-16s dispatched to Ukraine once training concludes.⁵ This recent development will expedite Ukraine's acquisition of fighter jets. It is evident that the air defence against potential Russian attacks will be considerably bolstered. Nevertheless, there is criticism that the US is proceeding cautiously, leading Russia to take precautions. The EU member states have yet to achieve a unanimous agreement on providing arms assistance to Ukraine. France has shown support for providing long-range missiles, while Germany has abstained from offering such aid. There has recently been a development regarding military aid provided to Ukraine. A Belgian private military firm has declared the sale of second-hand Leopard tanks, manufactured in Germany, to an undisclosed nation for shipment to Ukraine.⁶ Private military companies typically acquire some ammunition, including outdated Leopard tanks, from governments. This current development indicates that the reselling of supposedly obsolete ammunition is being reassessed. Since Ukraine commenced a policy of counteroffensive, some drones

³ <https://www.ft.com/content/4351d5b0-0888-4b47-9368-6bc4dfbccbf5>

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2023/jul/21/russia-ukraine-war-live-us-cluster-bombs-impact-russian-defences-washington?filterKeyEvents=false&page=with:blog-k-64ba0b468f08ff360bcb1bd4#block-64ba0b468f08ff360bcb1bd4>

⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-approves-sending-f-16s-ukraine-denmark-netherlands-2023-08-17/>

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<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/08/09/deal-struck-get-leopard-tanks-ukraine-private-belgian-broker/>

have launched attacks on Russian territory resulting in damage to buildings, which although neutralized by Russian defense systems, have not been claimed by the Kiev administration. Russia called these attacks as “Ukrainian terrorist attacks”. Nonetheless, the crucial focus should be on the message conveyed through these attacks. These attacks are noteworthy for illustrating that Russia is not secure anymore. Similarly, Zelenski’s remark that the war is returning to Russian land⁷ suggests that military conflicts could spread across a wider area soon. Additionally, the war is now closer to the NATO borders. The recent assaults on Lviv, a city on the Polish border, demonstrate of this state.



This map is retrieved from:
<https://www.ft.com/content/4351d5b0-0888-4b47-9368-6bc4dfbccbf5>

On the other hand, Russia’s withdrawal from the Grain Corridor Agreement caused a significant diplomatic setback in the war. As a result of the closure of the grain corridor, Russia has started to target Ukraine’s grain ports directly. These

attacks have numerous adverse effects on Ukraine, including human casualties, greater financial losses due to damaged stored grain, and compromised infrastructure at the ports that are crucial to trade. Even with the establishment of a new grain corridor, the exportation of grain from Ukraine is rapidly decreasing.

New alternatives are being sought after the agreement securing grain shipments from Ukraine to the world expired. Ukraine recently declared a temporary humanitarian corridor in the region, and the first ship utilizing this corridor has already left Ukraine. However, the corridor remains under threat of attack by Russia. The world’s attention may soon be captured by the possibility of a new military conflict at sea.

Grain Corridor and Mediation Initiatives

Since the start of the conflict, several states have attempted to mediate by utilizing their geopolitical position or diplomatic ties. Turkey was the first to take on this role, given its regional status and positive relationship with both opposing parties. Although Turkey’s decision not to participate in the sanctions imposed on Russia has been subject to criticism, this stance has aided in the establishment of a channel of communication between both nations. Indeed, Turkey was able to act as a mediator and broker of a significant agreement between the two countries, which are among the world’s largest grain producers, resulting in the creation of a grain corridor. This agreement protected Ukraine’s grain exports and helped prevent a global food crisis to a large extent. Despite the ongoing war, global price

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/30/>

[the-war-is-coming-to-russia-zelenskiy-warns-after-latest-drone-attack](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/30/)

indices reveal no significant inflation in grain prices. However, the benefits were lost due to Russia's decision not to renew the agreement after approximately a year. In a short period of time, wheat prices on the stock exchange surged, causing concerns about food access along with food inflation.

With the closure of the vital corridor, an intense diplomatic traffic has started. Turkey's initiatives are closely followed by the world. Although it does not seem possible for a new grain corridor agreement to be realized in the short term, Turkey's importance in this process continues. In this regard, President Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan are in contact with the US and Russia, which is reflected in both Turkish and world press. It would not be surprising if President Erdoğan makes a new move through bilateral contacts. The influence of Erdoğan's closeness with Putin on the first agreement should not be forgotten.

Turkey is not the only country that has been mentioned in these mediation initiatives. The Ukraine Peace Summit held in Jeddah in August brought a new actor to the fore. Saudi Arabia's ability to bring both Western states and Russia's allies together at the same table is seen as a serious diplomatic success. Considering that Russia's allies at the summit included BRICS members and China, the summit gains additional importance. At this point, it should be remembered that BRICS members and China do not support decisions against Russia, especially in the international arena. The fact that the summit emphasized the need to protect Ukraine's territorial integrity and that China, which did not attend the talks in Copenhagen, came to Jeddah can be

interpreted as a sign that these countries also want a ceasefire.

Saudi Arabia's diplomatic success hinges on its improved relations with the West and Russia. Saudi Arabia has close ties to the US, but shares common interests with Russia, particularly regarding oil. For instance, Russia and Saudi Arabia have jointly agreed to reduce daily oil extraction. Furthermore, regional crises can harm the revenues of significant trade centers, such as Saudi Arabia. Nonetheless, the country aims to enhance its influence in the area. After the Jeddah talks, Western media raised the possibility of a new regional balance. Turkey and Saudi Arabia, who have recently improved their bilateral relations, may collaborate to establish a ceasefire and mediate in the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Conversely, the Moscow officials claim that peace can only be achieved if Ukraine ceases its "terrorist attacks" and guarantees non-alignment. NATO is currently not pursuing Ukraine's membership. Nonetheless, a senior NATO official's remarks have recently gained attention. These included harsh criticism by Ukraine of the prospect of ceding land for peace, which has led to a recent escalation of military conflict in the Russia-Ukraine war and broader areas controlled by the fighting factions. These included harsh criticism by Ukraine of the prospect of ceding land for peace.

Conclusion

To conclude, military conflicts in the Russia-Ukraine conflict have resulted in an expanded scale and control by the warring parties. The conflict is affecting a broader area, whilst balances between parties are frequently shifting. The war extends

beyond being only a conflict between two states. It is expected that diplomatic efforts will persist in the coming days to secure a ceasefire in this conflict, which also preoccupies the countries of the region. The extension of the conflict will entail those issues such as the food and energy crisis, which have direct connections to this conflict, will remain present in the states' agendas for a longer duration. A diplomatic compromise has the potential to enhance both the likelihood of peace and the resolution of numerous countries' security, energy, and food-related issues. The importance of the mediating countries' diplomatic clout is paramount, hence the significance of the state providing it will grow in the region. In forthcoming stages, it may be feasible to introduce initiatives to secure temporary truces in additional countries. Following all these developments closely will be important to understand the course of the war.

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