



Russia Studies Program

THIS WEEK'S ABSTRACTS

1. [INVASION OF UKRAINE: PUTIN'S SPEECH](#)

In a February 24 speech, carried in full by *Krasnaya Zvezda*, Russia's president Vladimir Putin gave remarks that sought to provide background and justification to Russian actions in Ukraine. As his past speeches, this one offered an extensive overview of his grievances against the United States and the West and what he perceives as disregard for Russian interests in the post-Cold War order.

2. [INVASION OF UKRAINE: JUSTIFICATIONS](#)

Five articles provide various justifications for Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine. Several identify defending the people of the Donbas region as the primary factor for the invasion, echoing President Putin's justification of protecting people "who have been subjected to abuse [and] genocide by the Kiev regime for eight years." Others argue that the main reason for the invasion is to protect Russia from the military threat posed by Ukraine's increasing ties to NATO. Articles also claim that there are Western information operations concerning the motives of Moscow's military actions.

3. [INVASION OF UKRAINE: RUSSIAN DOMESTIC PERCEPTIONS](#)

The views of the Russian population on the conflict are still undergoing initial polling, and divergences are expected across polling companies. One company, Russian Field, conducted a poll that *Novye Izvestiya*

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reported as being particularly supportive of the conflict. The poll was on the larger side, with 2,000 respondents across Russia.

4. INVASION OF UKRAINE: DISCUSSIONS OF WESTERN STRATEGY

A large number of articles discuss Russian perceptions of Western strategy towards Russia and towards the conflict in Ukraine. Articles published before the invasion focus on the role of the United States in fomenting the conflict, and highlight US weaknesses that made Vladimir Putin decide that now was a good time to push to renegotiate the post-Cold War global order. Articles published in the early days of the invasion argue that the West is in the process of realizing that it underestimated Russian power and resolve and is looking to salvage its position.

5. INVASION OF UKRAINE: NUCLEAR ISSUES

Several articles discuss nuclear issues. An article in *Topwar.ru* argues that the US is potentially considering the infliction of a first disarming strike against Russia. An article in *Nezavisimoe Voennoe Obozrenie (NVO)* discusses the possibility of Belarusian and Ukrainian nuclear weapons. In *Gazeta.ru*, Irina Al'shaeva writes about the "special combat duty regime" requested by Russia's president Vladimir Putin for the Russian strategic forces. A *Novye Izvestiya* article points out that open source researchers have been tracking the movements of the US Boeing E-4B AWACS aircraft on the flight from Lincoln, Nebraska, after the Russian initiation of the Russian war in Ukraine.

6. INVASION OF UKRAINE: THE THREAT FROM NATO

Russian media also focused on the direct threat that NATO poses to Russia and to regional stability in Europe. The articles focused on the destabilizing effect of NATO force deployments near Russia's border, NATO's history of using military campaigns to achieve its geopolitical goals, and the risk of a broader conflict between Russia and NATO.

7. INVASION OF UKRAINE: NATO ENLARGEMENT

The potential further enlargement of NATO is both a cause and consequence of the conflict with Ukraine in the eyes of several Russian writers. Framed as a genuine threat to Russia, articles discuss the possibility of Scandinavian states joining the alliance as well as states in the Balkans such as Kosovo. Other writers reiterate the Russian line that NATO was never supposed to expand in the first place.

8. INVASION OF UKRAINE: RESPONSES TO NATO MILITARY AID

Russian media reflect a variation in attitudes on NATO military aid in Ukraine. Numerous commentators doubt the utility of Western assistance and dismiss it as disinformation; they say that the West is only providing older arms and materials, and criticize the selfish nature of overall Western involvement in the conflict. Other journalists express legitimate concern about the impact that such significant aid could cause in Ukraine. There is an unprecedented coordination of support, and it seems there is some surprise among journalists about the swift nature of such collaboration.

9. INVASION OF UKRAINE: UKRAINIAN EU AND NATO MEMBERSHIP

Ukrainian membership in EU and NATO is still a point of interest in the media, especially amidst an active invasion in Ukraine. Several articles posit that an acceptance of Ukraine, if it occurs at all, is in the very distant future, especially considering the presence of Russian troops. Others highlight Ukraine's application

as a forced response to Russian assistance in Donetsk and Luhansk and caution that Georgia and Moldova may be likely for EU candidate status as well. Overall, there is a shared opinion that Ukrainian membership in EU and NATO is not out of the question but has been made significantly more complex with current Russian activity in Ukraine.

10. INVASION OF UKRAINE: RESPONSES TO WESTERN SANCTIONS

Numerous articles in the Russian press discuss the recent sanctions imposed on Russia and largely dismiss the significance of their long-term impact on Russian society, stating that they are more damaging to the West. Media commentators even welcome the challenge, stating that such independence will fix issues of Russia's import dependence and brain drain. Additionally, the Russian media analyze the challenges that the imposed sanctions will cause for specific Russian industry, such as shipbuilding and aviation capabilities and technology and computer chip development.

11. INVASION OF UKRAINE: RUSSIA'S FUTURE IN THE NEW ORDER

Several articles focus on how Russia and its role in the world will change in the aftermath of the invasion of Ukraine. These articles suggest that sanctions will cause some pain but the sacrifice will be worthwhile to achieve the goal of ending the threat posed by an anti-Russian Ukraine and restoring Russia's greatness and sovereignty. The possibility of increasing internal repression to ensure national unity is also discussed in a positive light.

12. INVASION OF UKRAINE: ROLE OF NEIGHBORING STATES

States in the immediate vicinity of Ukraine are seen as potentially vital interlocutors in both the positive and negative sense for several Russian commentators. Poland and the wider east-central European NATO member-states are viewed as having taken a turn towards a decisive rearmament and preparation for future conflict. Meanwhile, Belarus holds its position as a key Russian ally, underlining its important role for Moscow as a constituent part of the Russian-Belarusian "Union State" and very likely a further consolidation of *de facto* Russian control over more elements of Belarus' statehood and independence.

13. INVASION OF UKRAINE: TURKEY'S POSITION

Russian commentators remain concerned about Turkey's role in the Russo-Ukrainian War and the geopolitical fallout from the conflict. Perspectives vary, from those who note Turkey's unwillingness to go along with the full spectrum of sanctions proposed by European and North American states, to others who reiterate the concern about the longer-term designs of Turkey's leadership in the broader Black Sea, Eastern Mediterranean, and even Central Asian states. Observers are particularly wary of Turkey's naval presence, which for some is described as a genuine threat to Russia's Black Sea Fleet, alongside Turkey's ability to block passage through the straits. The growing role of Turkey's Bayraktar TB2 combat drones also add impetus to commentator concerns.

14. INVASION OF UKRAINE: THE BIOLABS CONSPIRACY

Several articles once again raise the conspiracy theory about the role of US DTRA reference labs in the former Soviet Union states, but this time in Ukraine, referencing recent coverage in the UK newspaper *Expose*. In an article in *Sovetskaya Rossia*, Valentin Kasatonov argues that "US military biolabs in Ukraine" are the reasons for Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine. In *Topwar.ru*, Yevgeniy Fedorov provides more conspiracy theories that the labs are a part of growing NATO infrastructure in Ukraine.

15. [CHINA'S GEOPOLITICAL POSITION](#)

Russian commentators have noted the parallels between Russia's ongoing intervention into Ukraine—and the West's reaction—and China's presumed geopolitical designs for Taiwan. Some argue that while such parallels exist, they do not necessarily mean that China intends to support Russia's goals in Ukraine. Indeed, they argue that it is possible that this could be a major test of the strength of the Russian-Chinese relationship at the highest levels. Others are more sanguine about the relationship and argue that this provides a potential test-case for a future Chinese effort to retake Taiwan.

16. [RUSSIA-NICARAGUA RELATIONS](#)

Although most commentary in Russia remains focused on events in Eurasia and Eastern Europe, some look to other parts of the world as a means of shoring up the global picture of Russia's alliances and international relationships. An article in *NVO* looks to the political regime in Nicaragua. It argues that there is a friendly face in this Central American country, and that Russia can use it as "something [with which] to respond to US pressure in Europe" by further improving relations with this "soft underbelly of the United States."

17. [INFORMATION AND HYBRID WARFARE](#)

Several articles discuss how Russians understand the US/NATO approaches to information warfare and hybrid warfare. An article by Aleksandr Bartosh focuses on what he explains is a hybrid warfare in US and NATO strategies. An article in *Krasnaya Zvezda* focuses on the Western concept of "cognitive warfare." In an article in *Voенно-Промышленный Кур'ер (VPK)*, Sergey Korotkov argues that the "heat of information (hybrid) war [against Russia] has reached a critical point." In another *VPK* article, Leontiy Shevtsov analyzes what he calls "US and NATO information warfare operations."

18. [SHORTCOMINGS OF THE US MILITARY](#)

One article responds to US Navy chief of staff Michael Gilday's recent comments that the Navy needs a fleet of more than 500 ships to meet its commitments in the forthcoming National Defense Strategy, noting that US shipbuilding capacity will be a major obstacle to reaching that goal. A second article examines the evolution of US aircraft carriers, and argues that the capabilities of current air wing configurations to counter an enemy are "significantly lower than they were" in the 1970s and 1980s. A third article examines US missile and air defense capabilities, arguing that capabilities were inefficiently developed due to US overconfidence in its pilots and aircraft.

19. [US AND EUROPEAN MILITARY CAPABILITIES](#)

Three articles discuss developments of specific US and European capabilities and systems. One article discusses the US Navy's public launch of its Snakehead underwater drone, "which apparently is being created in analogue to the Russian Poseidon submarine platform." A second article discusses the US Space Force's Deep space Advanced Radar Capability (DARC) project, which "will allow the delivery of accurate strikes against enemy satellites, and will also complete the formation of a unified system for coordinating the actions of the US armed forces around the planet." A third article discusses the "Eurodrone" project between Germany, France, Italy, and Spain.

1. INVASION OF UKRAINE: PUTIN'S SPEECH

In a February 24 speech, carried in full by *Krasnaya Zvezda*, Russia's president Vladimir Putin gives remarks that seek to provide background and justification to Russian actions in Ukraine.¹ Here are some of the main points he makes in this speech regarding the West:

- **NATO expansion is a significant cause for concern.** It is a "fundamental threat ... that year after year, step by step, [is] rudely and unceremoniously created by irresponsible politicians in the West in relation to our country." "The military machine is moving and, I repeat, is coming close to our borders."
- **Russia's efforts to negotiate were not successful because of Western attitudes.** "It is well known that for 30 years we have persistently and patiently tried to negotiate with the leading NATO countries on the principles of equal and indivisible security in Europe. In response to our proposals, we constantly faced either cynical deceit and lies, or attempts to pressure and blackmail."
- **Russia was perceived as being weak because of the Soviet collapse.** "The Soviet Union in the late 80s of the last century weakened, and then completely collapsed. The whole course of the events that took place then is a good lesson for us today; it convincingly showed that the paralysis of power and will is the first step towards complete degradation and oblivion. As soon as we lost our self-confidence for some time, and that was it—the balance of power in the world was disturbed."
- **Those who thought of themselves as Cold War victors acted without regard for others' interests.** "This applies to the entire system of international relations, and sometimes even to US allies themselves. After the collapse of the USSR, a division of the world actually began, and the norms of international law that had taken shape by that time—and the key, basic ones that were adopted at the end of World War II and largely consolidated its results—began to interfere with those who declared themselves the winner in the Cold War." "A state of euphoria from absolute superiority, a kind of modern kind of absolutism, and even against the background of a low level of general culture and arrogance of those who prepared, adopted and pushed through decisions that were beneficial only for themselves."
- **There are numerous examples of their actions.** Here, Putin discusses Yugoslavia, Iraq, Libya, and Syria. "In general, one gets the impression that almost everywhere, in many regions of the world, where the West comes to establish its own order, as a result, there are bloody, non-healing wounds, ulcers of international terrorism and extremism."
- **The West lied to the Soviet Union about NATO expansion.** Moreover, Putin references "US politicians, political scientists, and journalists" as authors of the notion that the US is an "empire of lies" and accordingly so is the whole "Western bloc."
- **Russia tried to partner with the West, but almost got destroyed in the process.** "After the collapse of the USSR, with all the unprecedented openness of the new modern Russia, the readiness to work honestly with the United States and other Western partners, and in the conditions of virtually unilateral disarmament, they immediately tried to put the squeeze on, finish off and destroy us completely. This is exactly what happened in the nineties, at the beginning of the 2000s, when the so-called collective West most actively supported separatism and mercenary gangs in the south of Russia. What sacrifices, what losses did all this cost us then, what trials did we have to go through before we finally broke the back of international terrorism in the Caucasus. We remember this and will never forget."

- **The West also tried to impose its values on Russia.** “Until recently, attempts to use us in their interests, destroy our traditional values and impose on us their pseudo-values, which would corrode us, our people from the inside, those attitudes that they are already aggressively planting in their countries and which directly lead to degradation and degeneration, since they contradict the very nature of man.”
- **Russia tried to negotiate in December 2021.** But, “everything [was] in vain. The US position does not change. They do not consider it necessary to negotiate with Russia on this key issue for us, pursuing their own goals, they neglect our interests.”
- **If Russia doesn’t act, it will be attacked like it was attacked in 1941 by Germany.** “As a result, the country was not ready to fully meet the invasion of Nazi Germany, which attacked our Motherland on June 22, 1941 without declaring war. The enemy was stopped and then crushed, but at a colossal cost. An attempt to appease the aggressor on the eve of the Great Patriotic War turned out to be a mistake that cost our people dearly. In the very first months of hostilities, we lost huge, strategically important territories and millions of people. We will not allow such a mistake a second time, we have no right.”
- **Those pursuing hegemony have called Russia “their enemy.”** We assess their economic and military threats “without illusions, with relative realism.”
- **Russia will be unable to stop NATO expansion if it doesn’t do so now.** “The problem is that in the territories adjacent to us, I note, in our own historical territories, an “anti-Russia” hostile to us is being created, which has been placed under complete external control, is intensively settled by the armed forces of NATO countries and is pumped up with the most modern weapons.”
- **The US and NATO have “crossed the red line.”** “For the United States and its allies, this is the so-called policy of deterrence (containment) of Russia, obvious geopolitical dividends. And for our country, this is ultimately a matter of life and death, a matter of our historical future as a people. And that’s not an exaggeration—it’s true. This is a real threat not just to our interests, but to the very existence of our state, its sovereignty. This is the very red line that has been talked about many times. They have crossed it.”
- **NATO support is emboldening “nationalists and neo-Nazis” that pose a threat to the Donbass.** Here, Putin offers an extensive discussion of “genocide” of the people in the Donbass and states that Russia has no plans to “occupy Ukrainian territories.” The rest of the speech is an address to the peoples and the soldiers of Ukraine as well as to Russian citizens.

2. INVASION OF UKRAINE: JUSTIFICATIONS

Five articles provide various justifications for Russia’s “special military operation” in Ukraine. Several identify defending the people of the Donbas region as the primary factor for the invasion, echoing President Putin’s justification of protecting people “who have been subjected to abuse [and] genocide by the Kiev regime for eight years.”² One Topwar.ru article, which refers to “Nazis” 11 times, states the following:

Justice is the first word that comes to mind. The last days of the post-Maidan Nazi regime in Kyiv have arrived. Our country began to finally resolve the urgent Ukrainian issue. This is the grandiose and tragic finale of the largest redistribution of spheres of influence in Eastern Europe, which the United States has started...By recognizing the Donbas, Russia has opened the way to peace for 4 million residents of the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s

Republics. The Donbas should not be the subject of bidding or an instrument of pressure for anyone... The Donbas should be able to live without listening to the whistle of shells.³

Several other articles argue that the main reason for the invasion is to protect Russia from the military threat posed by Ukraine's increasing ties to NATO. In a *Krasnaya Zvezda* article, Aleksey Podberyozkin (director of the Center for Military-Political Studies at MGIMO) states:

At the heart of Russian actions in Ukraine is a rational reason—to ensure its own security...It is obvious that since 2008, the United States, which is striving to shape the world order to fit its own needs, and [NATO], which it leads and which it actively uses to further its own interests, purposefully pursued a policy of aggravating the situation in Europe. This is evidenced by the expansion of NATO to the east and the buildup of the military presence of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization near Russian borders, plans to include Ukraine and Georgia in it, the potential expansion of the EU, giving [the EU] an increasingly open anti-Russian character, [and] the threat of nuclear weapons in Kyiv.⁴

Also blaming the West, Alexei Mukhin (Center for Political Information), in an interview with *Krasnaya Zvezda*, states: "Given that Ukraine has completely lost its sovereignty, all responsibility for what happened lies with the UK, Poland and the United States of America in the first place. They are the moderators, organizers, and executors of this war, as well as its main beneficiaries."⁵ A third *Krasnaya Zvezda* article titled "Russia does not start wars. She finishes them," also lists self-defense as the primary motive. The author argues:

Overt hostility towards Russia has been more and more visible in recent years, acquiring various forms. Aggressive attacks on the part of the Ukrainian authorities, offensive rhetoric, and finally, just plain threats—all of this was abundant. Russia did its best to restrain such impulses of its neighbor. However, the pumping of the country with military weapons from abroad, which began at the end of last year, the strengthening of the makeup of its military, as well as the dangerous concentration of Ukrainian troops and nationalist formations near our borders left fewer and fewer chances to resolve the situation peacefully.⁶

One Topwar.ru article adds that because of this, "Ukraine must be turned into a global scarecrow."⁷ The article continues by implying that curbing nuclear proliferation may have been another goal of the invasion. "It got to the point that the Ukrainian leader directly announced his intention to return to the nuclear program, that is, he actually declared Ukraine's readiness to possess nuclear weapons. To whom they could be directed towards, it is not difficult to guess."⁸

Several articles also claim that there are Western information operations concerning the motives of Russia's military actions. For example, one article argues, "There are more accusations of imperial intentions of our country, the desire to subdue Ukraine and all the near abroad, to restore the Soviet Union. Based on [these accusations], the West calls for closer rallying around the United States and continued pressure against Russia, primarily using sanctions in order to weaken our country as much as possible."⁹ Another notes, "In fact, the entire information campaign about 'the accumulation of Russian troops near the border with Ukraine' was needed in order to reinforce the idea among the world community that Russia is the aggressor in the face of the upcoming Western (Ukrainian) provocation. Carefully laying the ground for a provocation, the Americans wanted [to deprive Moscow of] any non-military means for returning Ukraine to Russia's zone of influence."¹⁰

3. INVASION OF UKRAINE: RUSSIAN DOMESTIC PERCEPTIONS

The views of the Russian population on the conflict are still undergoing initial polling, and divergences are expected across polling companies. One company, Russian Field, conducted a poll that *Novye Izvestiya* reported as being particularly supportive of the conflict. The poll was on the larger side, with 2,000 respondents across Russia.

Among several points reported in the poll, *Novye Izvestiya* highlighted the high percentage of the population that watched Vladimir Putin's address to the nation at the beginning of the conflict (77.9%) as well as the fact that a majority supported the "special operation" (55.8%).¹¹ Interestingly, the poll did note that younger Russians were more negative in regard to the conflict, which also correlated with higher levels of education. The poll also reported that a majority of respondents consider the United States to be the initiator of the conflict (59.7%), while a third viewed NATO (30.3%) and Ukraine (28.9%), respectively, as the initiator. Finally, the poll noted that most respondents were very pessimistic about their future financial prospects, with only one-third believing that their financial status would be unchanged by events.

4. INVASION OF UKRAINE: DISCUSSIONS OF WESTERN STRATEGY

Many articles discuss Russia's perceptions of Western strategy towards Russia and towards the conflict in Ukraine. Articles published before the invasion focus on the role of the United States in fomenting the conflict, and highlight US weaknesses that made Vladimir Putin decide that now was a good time to push to renegotiate the post-Cold War global order. Articles published in the early days of the invasion argue that the West is in the process of realizing that it underestimated Russian power and resolve and is looking to salvage its position.

Writing in *Topwar.ru* just before the invasion, Aleksandr Samsonov argues that Washington is looking for a crisis to use to establish a new world order. He put forward the conspiracy theory that the West created the Covid pandemic to accomplish this, and is now seeking to consolidate its gains through a big war. The US needs the war to distract society from internal problems. "War allows you to get out of the credit economy's debt crisis.... The war will clear the way for a breakthrough into a new technological order. While Europe and Asia will deal with the aftermath of a major war, the US again be the world leader." The war will allow Washington and London to unite the West against the Russian threat, which will again be the evil empire. As the war drums beat louder and louder, Samsonov argues that Russia can only win by transforming into USSR 2.0, with its own vision of the future and ideology. This vision would highlight the spiritual over the material, and the truth over the law.¹²

In another article published before the invasion, Yevgeniy Fedorov suggests that Russia's strategy of pushing for negotiations from a position of strength has been effective in pressing Western leaders to engage on questions of European security that they have long ignored. He suggests that Putin felt that Biden was more predictable than Trump, and therefore could be pressured into concessions without worrying about an unexpected response that could lead to nuclear war. And Biden has acted the part, refusing to respond by projecting power as a signal of US resolve. The author believes that the resulting

easing of tensions may lead to some agreements on arms control, but will not result in any guarantees that NATO will stop expanding.¹³

In a *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* article, also published before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Igor Dunaevsky suggests that the United States has provided Ukraine with carte blanche for any actions against the Donbas republics. Washington is sending a clear signal that it will blame Moscow and the “people’s republics” for anything that happens in the region. The author argues that escalating the situation in Ukraine is the highest priority for the Biden administration, which is why it is ignoring Russian efforts to reduce tensions and continue talks on European security. He further argues that the United States is pressuring its European allies to toe the line and agree to Washington’s position that the US and its European allies are fully aligned on this issue.¹⁴

In a final pre-war article, Viktor Krestyaninov suggests that the United States is worried that a war in Ukraine would end quickly with the fall of Kyiv. He argues that Western analysts now believe in the power of the Russian military because of three factors: the rapid and bloodless operation to annex Crimea, the effectiveness of Russian assistance to Syria in helping Bashar Asad to win that war, and the catastrophic US withdrawal from Afghanistan, which has reduced US influence in world affairs. For this reason, the US has given up Ukraine even before the start of the conflict and its experts are already discussing what will happen after Russian victory. Washington fears that a Russian victory will result in a loss of the United States’ leading role in Europe and NATO’s ability to secure peace on the continent.¹⁵

In the early days of the war, Russian authors focus on how the West is looking to stop the “special operation” in Ukraine. Sergey Kostin suggests that Western criticism is the result of fears that the attack on Ukraine will challenge US military dominance in Europe and that the West will lose the money it has invested in turning Ukraine into a NATO outpost. The Western response is an effort to isolate Russia, but this will not work because China and other non-Western states support Russian efforts to break Western dominance.¹⁶

Writing in *Topwar.ru*, Yevgeniy Fedorov suggests that the proposed Western concessions that he had deemed a way out of the conflict in his previous article published a few days earlier, were actually a crafty plan to take the pressure off Ukraine before reneging on their commitments. He says that Joe Biden has been acting like a bull in a china shop, refusing to consider Russia as a partner for discussions and seeking to heal the trauma of Afghanistan by insulting Russia. “The Anglo-Saxon world could to no extent consider the importance and significance of the Russian point of view,” which was not focused on global ambitions but just on regional influence. “Was that asking so much?” he asks rhetorically. He compares the US policy of creating a NATO outpost on Russia’s border to the placement of missiles in Cuba in 1962 and the US reaction to that. “Thirty years of unsuccessful attempts by our country to integrate into the world order on an equal footing ended in nothing.... NATO showed Russia a place in the back rows. Our country was left with a simple choice—capitulation with loss of part of sovereignty or a forceful attempt to undermine the Washington way of thinking and seeing the world [that would] transform the unipolar post-Soviet world into a truly multipolar structure that takes into account the interests of all parties.”¹⁷

Vladimir Yevseyev suggests that the West continues to experience the illusion that the world is unipolar whereas it has actually already become multipolar and the United States can no longer dictate its will to independent states. He argues that it would be naïve to consider NATO a defensive alliance given its attack on Yugoslavia in 1999. He also notes that in 2020, NATO declared Russia the main military threat to its security. The Ukrainian leadership has for many years sought to force the population to accept NATO membership and has suppressed mass protests against NATO. It has also sought to review its non-nuclear

status, a statement which did not bring any objections from the United States. These statements and actions exhausted Russia's patience and led to the "special operation" against Ukraine.¹⁸

An article in *Gazeta.ru* by Nikita Folomov discusses the evolution of Western strategy in the second week of the Russian invasion. He suggests that the US effort to engage Russia in talks on the condition that it first withdraw its troops is an effort to maintain US positions in eastern Europe. He interviews a number of Russian experts on the United States. Dmitry Suslov thinks that the US is trying to prevent a Russian victory in Ukraine and to preserve the anti-Russian Ukrainian leadership that it has developed in recent years. Konstantin Blokhin argues that the West is in "a state of shock from the effectiveness of the Russian military" and the speed with which Russia "has carried out a geopolitical revolution." He also notes that US rhetoric since the invasion has been more moderate than that of European leaders.¹⁹

5. INVASION OF UKRAINE: NUCLEAR ISSUES

Several articles discuss nuclear issues.

A February 23 article in *Topwar.ru* by Andrey Mitrofanov argues that the US is potentially considering the infliction of a first disarming strike against Russia.²⁰ The author notes that Russia's strategic nuclear weapons are the "only thing that prevents the US from 'seizing us by the throat.'" And, "if Russia didn't have nuclear weapons now, along our borders, there would be military conflicts with former Soviet republics armed with American weapons and openly supported by the United States, the Japanese would have already landed on the Kuril Islands, the Kaliningrad region would be divided between Poland and Lithuania, and so on." He further argues that the main danger lies in the US believing that they could get away with a disarming strike on Russia. But, even then, he notes that while Russia's retaliatory capacity may be weakened by a US first strike, China could potentially also pitch in to attack the United States. Ultimately, the author's main points center on his proposal for an echeloned anti-torpedo system on SSBNs.

A February 25 article in *NVO* focuses on the possibility of Belarusian and Ukrainian nuclear weapons.²¹ It first discusses the nuclear dimension of the "Allied resolve-2022" exercise, noting that Russia's defense minister Sergey Shoigu said that the training was conducted to exercise "the command and control of nuclear weapons and weapons of elevated potential danger in a single command contour as part of conducting a strategic forces operation." The author then discusses Belarus' potential possession of remaining Soviet infrastructure for nuclear missile operations as well as Lukashenka's desire to procure the Iskander missiles. The author then focuses on Ukraine's potential capability to acquire nuclear weapons. It states that Ukraine doesn't have "competencies in the area of creating nuclear weapons," but it is still "trying to blackmail the West with its readiness." The author notes the possibility that the US will train Ukrainians to employ the Europe-based B61-12 bombs or will disown Kyiv like Pyongyang, with the second scenario being much more likely, according to the author's thinking.

In a February 28 article in *Gazeta.ru*, Irina Al'shaeva writes about the "special combat duty regime" requested by Russia's president Vladimir Putin for the Russian strategic forces.²² The article quotes Putin as saying, "The highest officials from NATO's leading nations are allowing aggressive sayings against our country, and so I order the minister of defense and the chief of the general staff to transition the Russian army's deterrence forces into a special regime of carrying combat duty," and notes that Putin also highlighted the sanctions against Moscow. It then quotes several Russian experts as speculating what the "special combat duty regime might mean," hinting at NC3 readiness and the possibility of warhead handling. (As of this

writing, open sources suggest that it instead means increased manning.)²³ One of the experts, Aleksey Leonkov, the editor of the magazine *Arsenal of the Fatherland*, is quoted as saying “Thus, Putin has warned the US and NATO about the scariest for them consequences. For example, Great Britain openly says that it wants to destroy the Russian economy—this is a direct threat. And we are saying to them: if you move, a missile will fly, you will be unable to stop it.”

A March 3 *Novye Izvestiya* article points out that open source researchers have been tracking the movements of the US Boeing E-4B AWACS aircraft on the flight from Lincoln, Nebraska, after the Russian initiation of the Russian war in Ukraine.²⁴ It notes that the aircraft is intended to transport the US President and the highest-level officials in case of a crisis or a nuclear threat.

6. INVASION OF UKRAINE: THE THREAT FROM NATO

Russian media also focused on the direct threat that NATO poses to Russia and to regional stability in Europe. The articles focused on the destabilizing effect of NATO force deployments near Russia’s border, NATO’s history of using military campaigns to achieve its geopolitical goals, and the risk of a broader conflict between Russia and NATO.

Just before the invasion, Russia’s ambassador to Poland gave an interview to *Izvestiya*, in which he discussed the threat posed by NATO deployments near Russia’s borders. He particularly focused on the deployment of US missile defense systems near Kaliningrad, which he argued could also launch Tomahawk intermediate-range cruise missiles at Russian targets. He argued that these deployments go against the spirit of the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act and undermine international security.²⁵

Aleksandr Gasyuk suggests that NATO has long practiced the strategy of using bombing operations to “open the door to peace” by forcing other countries to accept NATO terms. He discusses NATO operations in Bosnia in 1995 and Yugoslavia in 1999 as the start of the widespread use of humanitarian intervention, which resulted in widespread civilian casualties and attacks on Serbian media facilities and on the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. While the article does not directly suggest a relationship between these operations and Russia’s attack on Ukraine, it clearly implies that Russia is simply following in the steps pioneered by NATO.²⁶

A short article in *Novye Izvestiya* notes that the government of Transnistria has raised the alert level of its armed forces due to a perceived high risk of attack from NATO forces. The article argues that the deployment of additional forces, including aviation, in nearby NATO countries has increased fears of an imminent attack, potentially as a means of drawing Russia into a conflict in a location where it does not have sufficient forces to act.²⁷

Finally, Vladimir Mukhin discusses the danger that the internationalization of the war in Ukraine could result in fighting between Russia and NATO. He discusses the formation of a foreign legion for territorial defense in Ukraine, as well as the possibility that Ukrainian-operated MiG-29 aircraft donated by Poland, Bulgaria, and Slovakia could operate from Polish airfields. These aircraft would replace the significant losses sustained by the Ukrainian air force in the early days of the fighting, according to Mukhin. He argues that if Ukrainian combat aircraft launch combat missions from Polish airfields, Russia would attack and destroy these airfields. This would result in a direct confrontation between Russia and a NATO member state, potentially leading to a major war between Russia and NATO.²⁸

7. INVASION OF UKRAINE: NATO ENLARGEMENT

The potential further enlargement of NATO is both a cause and consequence of the conflict with Ukraine in the eyes of several Russian writers. Framed as a genuine threat to Russia, articles discuss the possibility of Scandinavian states joining the alliance as well as states in the Balkans such as Kosovo. Other writers reiterate the Russian line that NATO was never supposed to expand in the first place.

NATO's expansion to different parts of formally unaligned Europe is a point of relevance for some Russian writers. Two articles in *Gazeta.ru* make this clear. One, by Ivan Polovinin, points to the prospects of Finland joining NATO. Reports cite expert assessments from Russian researchers, all of which argue that if Finland joins, all non-Russian states in the Baltic Sea will be NATO adversaries.²⁹ The probability of joining, however, is uncertain. Polovinin quotes Timofey Bordachev of the Valdai Club as saying, "This scenario is realistic with a probability equal to statistical sociological studies on the attitude of Finnish society towards this topic—that is, 50/50, according to the latest estimates." Others suggest that the likelihood is even lower, given hesitancy over Finland's broader place in Europe, its economic connections to Russia, and its long-held neutral status.

This is compared to the situation in Kosovo, where, according to an article by Nikita Folomov, the state's intention is clear, but the acceptability of membership is more in question.³⁰ He states that some experts believe NATO "may enter 'on the sly'" but that this would be destabilizing and of dubious help to maintaining alliance unity. Any form of "accelerated accession" would antagonize Serbia, which is also an EU candidate. One expert interviewed in the article was Ekaterina Entina, head of the Black Sea-Mediterranean Studies Department at the Institute of Europe of the Russian Academy of Sciences. She stated that the idea behind Kosovo pushing for membership—and this being reviewed favorably by NATO member-states—is "to create an idea among the Serbs that any new 'painful' problems for Belgrade are provoked by nothing more than Moscow's actions in the international arena."

According to Vladimir Ivanov, writing in *NVO*, new information from declassified minutes of a meeting between the United States, Great Britain, France, and Germany in 1991 confirms that in the early 1990s NATO was never supposed to expand into Central and Eastern Europe.³¹ He reviews a recent article in *Der Spiegel*, which reports that a Boston University professor, Joshua Shiffrin, had discovered and published the document. Ivanov underlines the points in the minutes which "note that during the negotiations between the FRG, the GDR, the USA, the USSR, Great Britain and France, representatives of the West made it clear that NATO would not expand, and the alliance could not offer membership to Poland and other countries of Eastern Europe. to explain to the Soviet Union in the 2 + 4 negotiations, as well as in other negotiations, that we do not intend to benefit from the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Eastern Europe, NATO should not expand to the east either formally or unofficially..."

8. INVASION OF UKRAINE: RESPONSES TO NATO MILITARY AID

Russian media reflect a variety of attitudes on NATO military aid in Ukraine. Numerous commentators doubt the utility of Western assistance and dismiss it as disinformation; they say that the West is only providing older arms and materials, and criticize the selfish nature of overall Western involvement in the conflict. Other journalists express legitimate concern about the impact that such significant aid could cause in Ukraine.

There is an unprecedented coordination of support, and it seems there is some surprise among journalists about the swift nature of such collaboration.

Valeria Masterov expresses concern in her *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* article regarding the extensive European cooperation in providing Ukraine with military and humanitarian aid. She reflects on the efforts of the Polish president to coordinate European allies to consider deployment of forces on the eastern flank of the NATO Alliance. The article even portrays a level of respect for the coordination of actions in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and for Poland's leadership in supporting NATO efforts to bolster eastern defenses and provide military and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine. It is noted that NATO will not supply planes or troops, in order to expressly remain removed from the conflict, despite the massive numbers of arms being shared.³²

Most other Russian media reports share doubts about the European collaboration's level of effectiveness and dismiss the utility and modern state of military aid being provided.

In a February 28 *Novye Izvestiya* article, Alexander Sychev cites Josep Borrell's announcement that they will send combat aircraft, and expresses the complications that will cause, as it moves into the grey zone of tactical support. He also reports rumors regarding the UK's suggestions that they might allow volunteers to fly to Ukraine. The article, among others, shares its doubts and confusion regarding the level of European commitment to Ukrainian defenses.³³

In a February 25 article in *NVO*, Alexander Shirokorad criticizes the long-term support that Ukraine has received from NATO, beginning in 2014 with NATO's supply of mortars, sniper rifles, long-range strike drones, etc. He writes, "It's time to call a cat a cat, and the conflict in Donbass is a local war waged by Ukraine and NATO against the population of the unrecognized republics." In response, he rationalizes that in order to fix the constant issue of Russians dying at the hands of Ukraine and NATO, there are several options—the most practical two of which are to send troops to the whole of Ukraine or acquire a "long arm" for Donbas by acquiring Luhansk and Donetsk. His vision for a "long arm" advocates Russian use of long-range drones in Donbas, so that they lower casualties and dissuade NATO and Kyiv from fighting any longer. He writes that "the West definitely does not want a big war in Europe, and its saber-rattling is just a bluff." Shirokorad projects confidence that the West will lose interest once Russia employs long-range drones and other Russian missiles and rockets. "As they said in the old days, 'a raised whip is worse than a lowered one.' The very fact that the DPR and LPR have a 'long arm' will force Washington to be more accommodating in negotiations with the Russian Federation."³⁴

Vladimir Ivanov writes that NATO continues to disguise its aggression and desire to move eastward but broke its promise to Russia in moving eastward. He states that the US and NATO are hesitant to act and motivated to prevent further conflict and remain publicly united in statements and in action. He criticizes the West for their hypocritical values in "European security and freedom of choice" as NATO's "aggressive" expansion continues eastward.³⁵

In a *Topwar.ru* article on February 20, 2022, Sergey Yuferev writes in detail about US reconnaissance aviation capabilities. The West announced a potential Russian invasion on February 15 or 16, but the only thing that happened was that the American air reconnaissance operation reached its peak. His article showed that both RQ-4 Global Hawk and Boeing RC-135 reconnaissance drones have been very active above Russia and Ukraine and projected curiosity about the limits to US reconnaissance support to Ukraine.³⁶

A March 2 article in the BMPD blog reflects concern regarding the scale and shifted attitude from the West in providing Ukraine with arms. "The scale of even the first deliveries is such that they can seriously affect

the course of hostilities by significantly saturating Ukrainian armed formations with high-quality anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons and weapons of Ukrainian reserves, especially if the Russian side tries to storm Kyiv.” The article also comments on the unprecedented level of funds contributed by the US and EU to go towards military aid. As of February 25, 21 NATO countries have made decisions at the national level to provide military aid to Ukraine.³⁷

Numerous media commentators share concerns over the extent of Western military aid. It appears that there are numerous unreliable narratives regarding NATO air support and pilot preparation.

Kirill Ryabov, in *Topwar.ru* criticizes the effectiveness of Western military aid in Ukraine. He first shares rumors that are being heard in Russia stating that every country that has MiG-29 fighters and SU-25 aircraft in Europe is on the transfer list to Ukraine and that the Ukrainian air force will operate from foreign airfields to allow access to their fleets. Kirill dismisses such reports as having been deemed unreliable, especially because leadership in Bulgaria and Poland deny such claims. Kirill emphasizes the importance of not falling prey to this disinformation and maintaining the assumption that the Ukrainian air force is unambiguous.³⁸

In another article on March 4, Kirill Ryabov holds that despite the massive influx of materials that Ukraine is receiving from the West, it is less useful in practicality. He writes that “It is clear that the main beneficiaries of such deliveries are the donor countries themselves. They have the opportunity to free the warehouses from obsolete weapons, as well as to resolve pressing political issues. In addition, there is a reason to purchase new weapons—modern and at full price.” He dismisses the utility of the military aid, clarifying that it is old and unwanted within NATO, and will only amount to limited growth within the Ukrainian forces and fail to result in an increased competitive edge.³⁹

In a March 4 *Topwar.ru* article, Alexander Staver delves into the legitimacy of “democratic” organizations that are currently providing support in Ukraine. He argues that through organizations such as CSSF, Britain, Poland, and other European countries, prompted by the US, are training and supporting Ukrainians militarily with the guise of human rights motivations. These organizations motivate innocent people to fight and seek violence without the responsibilities attached to government support or intelligence efforts. Staver even calls CSSF and similar organizations “another tool for hybrid warfare.”⁴⁰

9. INVASION OF UKRAINE: UKRAINIAN EU AND NATO MEMBERSHIP STATUS

Ukrainian membership in EU and NATO is still a point of interest in the media, especially amidst an active invasion in Ukraine. Several articles posit that any acceptance of Ukraine, if at all, is in the very distant future, especially considering the presence of Russian troops. Others highlight Ukraine’s application as a forced response to Russian assistance in Donetsk and Luhansk and caution that Georgia and Moldova may be likely for EU Candidate status as well. Overall, there is a shared opinion that Ukrainian membership in EU and NATO is not out of the question but has been made significantly more complex with the current Russian activity in Ukraine.

Several articles project doubt in Ukraine’s future EU membership because of the evidence of other countries’ extensive time spent in as “EU Candidates.” They cite the history of the EU on the European continent and the extensive requirements for membership, foreshadowed by Turkey’s 20 years spent in consideration. While media commentators suggest that there remains limited support for Ukrainian membership in the

EU, it is reassured that any membership will not occur in the near future. Beyond the consideration process and the military situation in Ukraine, Lydia Misnik states that Ukraine's request to join the European Union is "anti-Russian in nature."⁴¹

In *Novye Izvestiya*, the media charted out the history of NATO and Ukraine and cited the complex requirements and intricacies of granting full membership. The author doubts that Ukraine will be brought in, especially given the stipulation that a NATO candidate must first fulfill several conditions including "prevention of territorial disputes with neighboring countries." While highlighting the intricate requirements of membership, they state that "the historical scenario has completely changed," given "President Putin's decree recognizing the DPR and LPR on February 22, and...military special operation against Ukraine on February 24."⁴²

Another article in *Gazeta.ru* follows the chain reaction of interest in EU membership from Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. Commentators dismiss the official request for EU membership from Ukraine and Georgia by again highlighting the complications caused by the Russian "special military operation." Shortly after Ukraine requested expedited membership into the EU, Georgia filed its official request. Moldova plans to do so as well, but the article dismissed Moldova's chances at entry without the inclusion of Ukraine.⁴³ Such actions have caused concern in Russian media, but there consistently remain doubts in the legitimacy of any of their considerations.

10. INVASION OF UKRAINE: RUSSIAN RESPONSE TO WESTERN SANCTIONS

Numerous articles in the Russian press discuss the recent sanctions imposed on Russia and even dismiss their harm on Russian society, stating that they are more damaging to the West in the long term.

In a March 4 *Topwar.ru* article, Evgeny Fedorov argues that the West's plan to isolate Russia is impossible due to Russia's size and importance in the global economy. Western pressure and the decision to sell 80 percent of dollar revenues by exporters will inspire domestic industry. He states that such limits on currency export will slow the rampant brain drain that Russia has been trying to fix. Prior to the March 8, 2022, oil sanctions on Russia, the author stated that Europe and the US could not afford to impose SWIFT sanctions on payments for hydrocarbons because it would lead to an extensive rise in prices. Fedorov states that Europeans are holding out on energy sanctions because the energy repercussions are too great and writes that "Europe is generally afraid to finally embitter Russia with its sanctions" due to the aversion to halting supply of blue fuel and oil.⁴⁴

In a March 1 article, Vladimir Vasiliev focuses on the economic ties between American politicians and private defense industries. He highlights Secretary Austin's past position on the board of directors at Raytheon and draws a connection to Raytheon's growing equity in 2021 and apparent elevated US interest in growing Russian aggression. He specifically writes that American actions against Russia are primarily to benefit commercial defense vendors and that "the most important goal of this campaign is its economic component." Vasiliev blames the United States for the already emerging energy crisis in Europe and states that the "further whipping up of military hysteria, including in line with the confrontation between Russia and NATO, is clearly beneficial to the United States." He also reviews data about economic losses in Russia and Ukraine and their reverberations globally and posits, "These progressive losses speak better than any

words about the fact that the United States has set a course for exhausting and bleeding the Slavic world, for inciting a fratricidal conflict between the peoples of the Russian Federation and [Ukraine].⁴⁵

On a similar thread, a March 5 *Topwar.ru* article by Roman Skomorokhov critiques the EU's sanctions and he writes that their actions are "similar to how not too well-bred children try to stop a train by putting pebbles on the tracks." He argues that European sanctions will hurt each EU country just as much as, if not more than, they will Russia. There are Russian and Chinese alternatives for all European products such as vehicles and beer, and this shifted dependency will only cause overproduction in Europe. The Russian economy is more flexible than that of Europe and will "easily switch from Volkswagen to Kia, in the absence of an iPhone, Samsung will do, and Redmond will do instead of a Phillips coffee maker." He maintains an optimistic tone and welcomes the sanctions as an opportunity for Russia to surpass the EU and West in the global order economically and politically.⁴⁶

Numerous articles analyze the specific challenges that the imposed sanctions will cause for Russian shipbuilding, aviation capabilities, and technology and computer chip development.

In a March 3 BMPD blog interview with Lev Godovannik, he shares that Russia has no capacity to build its own engines and that China will have to replace both German and Finnish production.⁴⁷ Not only will Russia be dependent on China for shipbuilding, but Oleg Pantelev with *AviaPort.ru* shares that Russian pilots and aviation employees will need to train in Russia-friendly countries, or attempt domestically, to learn how to repair and fly Western planes that originally were supported by the Germans. The author critiques the aggressive nature of these sanctions and writes, "The world that we knew before the 20th of February, when the Russian Federation launched an operation to force Ukraine into peace, no longer exists. International agreements, legal constructions, the entire architecture of Russia's relations with the West has rapidly become something optional."⁴⁸ Russian civil aviation is deeply threatened and if they abide by instructions to return planes to European owners, they stand to lose around 50 percent of their fleet. The EU sanctions against Russian civil aviation are significant and effective, and Pantelev concedes that Russia will require major domestic adaptation and outreach to non-Western-aligned countries.

A *Forbes* article analyzes the challenges that Russia will face in response to the Taiwanese sanctions on semiconductor production and import. The media commentators share that it will take significant domestic development and Chinese collaboration to make up for the absence of TSMC semiconductors and high-tech chips. They express additional concern for the matter, if the US requests that the Chinese company, SMIC, withholds parts from Russia. However, this concern and anticipated delay in Russian tech development was paired with an optimism among the authors regarding Russia's future domestic potential and independence.⁴⁹

In another *Topwar.ru* article, Alexander Staver criticizes the weakness of the EU and US in initiating these sanctions. He assures readers that the Western response to Putin's actions in Ukraine will backfire and that American action indicates a false air of bravado. Staver writes that the Americans' role in this conflict is "like a drunkard sitting on a barrel of diesel fuel with a cigarette. They make sure it's safe."⁵⁰ He states that the actions of the West have ensured that the "dominance of the United States and Europe in the world will be lost."

An article in *Topwar.ru* critiques the overall impact of Western sanctions on Russia and assures that Russia will succeed and come out of this war and these sanctions stronger than the West. The commentators argue that Russia has higher ambitions and more motivation to succeed in the wake of the sanctions from the West and that the blatant unpreparedness of the West is embarrassing. Americans do not understand the

consequences they are going to face, initiated by their own leaders, such as Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen. The author concludes that “the meaning of sanctions, as well as trade wars, comes down, in fact, to the struggle of ambitions.”⁵¹

11. INVASION OF UKRAINE: RUSSIA’S FUTURE IN THE NEW ORDER

Several articles focus on how Russia and its role in the world will change in the aftermath of the invasion of Ukraine. These articles suggest that sanctions will cause some pain but the sacrifice will be worthwhile to achieve the goal of ending the threat posed by an anti-Russian Ukraine and restoring Russia’s greatness and sovereignty. The possibility of increasing internal repression to ensure national unity is also discussed in a positive light.

Writing on the first day of the invasion, Roman Skomorokhov suggests that Russia has little to fear from confrontation with the West. Additional sanctions no longer frighten Russians, since they are used to the existing ones. If Russia is cast out of the SWIFT payment system, Europe will still have to pay for its gas and oil somehow. Travel restrictions will just mean that Russians will travel to Asia or South America instead of Europe. Russians have lived through so many crises that they cannot be frightened by the West. All of the problems that will come will be worthwhile to prevent the emergence of a nuclear-armed anti-Russian Ukraine.⁵²

Konstantin Strigunov believes that the “de-Nazification and demilitarization of Ukraine” signifies the beginning of the end of Western world domination. He has no doubt that Russia will succeed in “freeing Ukraine and liquidating the Kiev regime’s military machine,” after which it will need to stop activity by neo-Nazi paramilitary groups that will seek to terrorize the country. He is not sure whether Ukraine will remain a single state, minus Crimea and the Donbas republics, or will fragment further into several parts. Russia would also control gas transit through Ukraine, so it would no longer need Nordstream-2. And it could solve the Transnistrian question once and for all. Sanctions will hurt in the near term, but will make Russia more independent from Western control in the longer term. In the future, the West will have fewer levers to prevent Russia from defending its national interests. Russia is in the process of restoring its influence in the post-Soviet space, first in Belarus, then in Kazakhstan, now in Ukraine.⁵³

Konstantin Sivkov believes that the “special operation” in Ukraine is just the start of a difficult path for Russia. Western leaders will seek to increase pressure on Russia, with the ultimate goal still being to bring Russia under control through the replacement of Putin with a more pliable leader. Putin is important because he is the leader of the alternative to the West’s post-modernist new world order. Because this alternative is attractive to most countries and elites around the world, it needs to be eliminated. The West will seek to involve Russia in further conflicts, in Moldova or in Central Asia, in order to weaken it further. At the same time, sanctions could be destructive for the Russian economy and for Russia’s defense industry, which depends on electronic and high-tech components from abroad. Russia’s civilian aircraft and car industries are also highly dependent on such components. To survive, Russia will need to become more self-sufficient quickly, within five to seven years. It will have to liquidate the pro-Western fifth column within Russia. As long as such groups retain any influence on political life in Russia, they will prevent the consolidation that will be necessary for Russia’s long-term survival. Putin will have to follow the path of

Peter the Great, Alexander III, and Stalin, destroy this fifth column in the political elite, and become a leader of a great country, or he will follow the path of Nicholas II.⁵⁴

12. INVASION OF UKRAINE: ROLE OF NEIGHBORING STATES

States in the immediate vicinity of Ukraine are seen as potentially vital interlocutors in both the positive and negative sense for several Russian commentators. Poland and the wider east-central European NATO member-states are viewed as having taken a turn towards a decisive rearmament and preparation for future conflict. Meanwhile, Belarus holds its position as a key Russian ally, underlining its important role for Moscow as a constituent part of the Russian-Belarusian “Union State” and very likely a further consolidation of *de facto* Russian control over more elements of Belarus’ statehood and independence.

As the first days of conflict were opening, some Russian writers focused on the potential for new military buildups in Eastern and Central Europe. Central to one article in *Topwar.ru*, by Kirill Ryabov, is the expected passage and quick implementation of Poland’s new Defense Law, which the magazine has written about before in worried terms.⁵⁵ The new policy constitutes a major “qualitative and quantitative” increase in the Polish armed forces. Ryabov reviews its various reforms and emphases, including greater defense spending, increases in the number of personnel, and reforms to systems of staffing, rank-conferral, and pay.

In *Gazeta.ru*, Valery Masterov writes about an emergency meeting of the “Bucharest Nine,” which brings together various Central and Eastern European states on issues of defense and security.⁵⁶ Called in the wake of the Russian intervention into Ukraine, the collection of Bulgaria, Hungary, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic was formed after the annexation of Crimea. Masterov describes it as a diplomatic format with an explicitly counter-Russian agenda and premise, and says that the new meeting is the preface to a period of increased combat readiness for the countries. He also notes that it is likely to be used as a means to coordinate refugee issues.

While east European members of NATO may be a subject of concern, the Russian alliance with Belarus is a positive point in the wider region for Russian writers. Anton Khodasevich reports in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* about Minsk’s support for Russia’s position, as well as its own call for NATO to withdraw its troops from the Belarusian border.⁵⁷ He points out that Belarus intends for Russian troops to remain in the country for the time being, given the heightened state of alert throughout the region. Khodasevich argues that this was perhaps a choiceless matter for Belarus. He quotes a Russian political scientist, Valery Karbalevich, suggesting that this was another step in the further loss of Belarus’ independence.

“This is a renunciation of sovereignty in exchange for political support or some other, perhaps financial... this is the price that Lukashenka pays for his power... Russian troops on the territory of Belarus, like these exercises themselves, are part of some strategy, some scenario, which is developed in the Kremlin. Belarus in this case is not independent, it acts as a tool for solving Russian interests,” Khodasevich suggests that in Karbalevich’s opinion, “this indicates that Belarus is gradually losing sovereignty in the field of defense and partly in foreign policy.” He quotes Karbalevich as further saying, “Pay attention to how Makei (Vladimir Makei, minister of foreign affairs – NG) ‘screwed up,’ who assured at a press conference that not a single Russian soldier, not a single piece of equipment would be left after the exercises. The key point, that Lukashenka is unable to say when Russian troops will actually leave Belarus’ borders, suggests strongly that this is ultimately the path to the ‘loss of military sovereignty’ for Belarus.”

13. INVASION OF UKRAINE: TURKEY'S POSITION

Russian commentators remain concerned about Turkey's role in the Russo-Ukrainian war and the geopolitical fallout from the conflict. Perspectives vary, from those who note Turkey's unwillingness to go along with the full spectrum of sanctions proposed by European and North American states, to others who reiterate the concern about the longer-term designs of Turkey's leadership in the broader Black Sea, Eastern Mediterranean, and even Central Asian states. Observers are particularly wary of Turkey's naval presence, which for some is described as a genuine threat to Russia's Black Sea Fleet, alongside Turkey's ability to block passage through the straits. The growing role of Turkey's Bayraktar TB2 combat drones also add worried impetus to commentator concerns.

An article in *Gazeta.ru* delineated the nuances of Turkey's position vis-à-vis the conflict: not joining in on sanctions against Russia while continuing to support Ukraine in general terms and through military aid.⁵⁸ It also highlighted the personal nature of Russian-Turkish diplomacy, quoting Viktor Nadein-Raevsky, an academic researcher at IMEMO RAS, stating, "Relations today are largely determined by the factor of personal relations between Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. According to him, the Russian leader trusts the latter, and Erdogan in general always keeps his word. And all this despite the fact that we have completely different positions on Syria, Nagorno-Karabakh, Ukraine and Crimea."

In *VPK*, Captain Vladimir Yerosyan painted a different picture of Turkey's role. In a short article, he describes "the Eastern Ploy" of Turkey's two-faced approach to Russia—where it assures the Kremlin of its good intentions while providing drones to Ukraine and preparing mine-laying vessels for deployment in the Black Sea.⁵⁹ The deployment of drones—and the denial of their hostile intent against Russia—is also echoed in other publications as well.⁶⁰ Yet Yerosyan concludes that Turkey will not do anything rash, not least because the redeployment of Russian naval forces to the Black Sea has reminded Ankara of the potential sea-based power of Russia.

14. INVAION OF UKRAINE: THE BIOLABS CONSPIRACY

Several articles once again raise the conspiracy theory about the role of US DTRA labs in the former Soviet Union states, but this time in Ukraine, referencing recent coverage in the UK newspaper *Expose*. In a March 1 article in *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, Valentin Kasatonov argues that "US military biolabs in Ukraine" are the reasons for Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine.⁶¹ He argues that the labs are surrounding Russia, that the ones in Ukraine are really close to Russia's borders, and that they are unaccountable and not transparent to anyone. He then proposes that Russia utilize special care in disarming these facilities. In another March 1 article, this time by Evgeniy Fedorov in *Topwar.ru*, there are more conspiracy theories that the labs are part of growing NATO infrastructure in Ukraine.⁶² He further argues, as discussed in this newsletter's previous coverage of this conspiracy theory, that because US standards of biosecurity are very high, it has instead started to shift some of this work outside of its territory, including close to Russian borders. He wonders whether it is a "coincidence or a pattern" that the initiation of the Russian "special operation" coincided with the opening of the reference labs in the vicinity of Odessa and Kyiv, and notes that it is unclear whether the US was able to destroy these facilities before the Russian invasion began.

15. CHINA'S GEOPOLITICAL POSITION

Russian commentators have noted the parallels between Russia's ongoing intervention into Ukraine—and the West's reaction—and China's presumed geopolitical designs for Taiwan. Some argue that while such parallels exist, they do not necessarily mean that China intends on supporting Russia's goals in Ukraine. Indeed, they argue that it is possible that this could be a major test of the strength of the Russian-Chinese relationship at the highest levels. Others are more sanguine about the relationship and argue that this provides a potential test-case for a future Chinese effort to retake Taiwan.

As Russia began its final preparations for the invasion of Ukraine, some Russian commentators pointed out the potential stress that these military activities would have on the Russian-Chinese relationship.⁶³ Writing in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, Vladimir Skosyrev noted that this would constitute a major “test of the strength of the Russian-Chinese relationship” even while China rhetorically supported Russia by accusing the United States of “spreading false information” and agreeing that Russia's demands for security guarantees were valid. Yet this had hard limits. Among other signs that Beijing sought to diffuse tensions and play a balancing act, Skosyrev also noted that “still, principles are one thing, but economic interests are much more important. China has invested billions of dollars in construction and telecommunications projects in Ukraine. It also purchased equipment for armaments in this country. And so it will try to defuse tension.” He also quoted the head of the Department of International Relations at Russia's Higher School of Economics, Aleksandr Lukin, as noting, “If events suddenly go according to the worst scenario, China will express moral support to Russia in words. But this will be limited. As far as economic sanctions are concerned, China will support Russia with all the means it can, but in a way that does not harm itself.”

As the war has progressed, Russian writers have noted that China's language towards Taiwan has been more strident. One article in *Novye Izvestiya* pointed to recent comments from China's Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin, who asked that the United States sever its contacts with Taiwan and abide by the “One China” policy.⁶⁴ This was in light of a new visit to the island by US officials, which China views as a provocation.

A longer article, by Evgeny Fedorov in *Topwar.ru*, also highlights Beijing's sharp position, speculating that the “Ukrainian precedent” will embolden China to finally move forward with its plans to return Taiwan to mainland control.⁶⁵ The author dismisses Taiwanese concerns that an invasion is imminent, although he notes that “Beijing's rhetoric regarding the unrecognized Republic of China has seriously hardened,” and points to the reaction to the recent delegation from the United States to Taiwan. Fedorov reviews the American security guarantees to Taiwan, the difficulty to capture the island given its terrain and extensive Taiwanese preparations, and other complicating factors, closing with a speculation that “China is also watching the strategic outcome of Russia's operation in Ukraine. Our armed forces are now consistently and methodically grinding Ukrainian armed formations. Of course, it is slower than in the earliest days, but without unnecessary losses and with great quality. According to the Americans, the victory of Russia will be perceived by Xi Jinping as a guide to action. Still, given the reformatting of the global security structure, which our country is now pursuing and [on which it is] taking on a dominant position, this will invariably affect the rules of the game throughout the world. Moreover, with each subsequent conflict, the stakes and risks to peace will rise to a new level.”

16. RUSSIA-NICARAGUA RELATIONS

Although most commentary in Russia remains focused on events in Eurasia and Eastern Europe, some look to other parts of the world as a means of shoring up the global picture of Russia's alliances and international relationships. An article in *NVO* by Aleksandr Stepanov looks to the political regime in Nicaragua. He argues that there is a friendly face in this Central American country, and that Russia can use it as "something [with which] to respond to US pressure in Europe" by further improving relations with this "soft underbelly of the United States."

Stepanov provides an extensive survey of the current state of Russian-Nicaraguan relations, emphasizing regular military exchanges, professional education, capital and finance connections, and humanitarian ties.⁶⁶ Throughout, the author frames the relationship as part of a broader game between a hegemonic United States, the local subordinate states in Central America, and their efforts to play off the US with other potential interlocutors such as China and Russia. Stepanov believes that long-term cooperation between Russia and Nicaragua lend credence to the case that the relationship is genuine and mutually beneficial, even while noting that many of the more extravagant goals in the past—such as the Chinese-oriented Great Nicaraguan Transoceanic Canal—have not yet come to be. Meanwhile, he notes that the Ortega administration remains aligned with Russia and seeks to distance itself from the United States wherever possible, thus further undergirding future prospects for cooperation.

17. INFORMATION AND HYBRID WARFARE

Several articles discuss how the Russians understand the US/NATO approaches to information warfare and hybrid warfare.

A February 21 article by Aleksandr Bartosh in *NVO* focuses on what the author explains is a hybrid warfare in US and NATO strategies.⁶⁷ He argues that the US and its allies view worldwide grey zone activity as an essential component of strategic competition. The elements of their approaches include: (1) "maintaining the potential for forceful pressure and military intervention in countries and regions of interest to Washington"; (2) "Washington's policy of creating ad hoc coalitions in various parts of the globe"; and (3) "in parallel, the concept of a world hybrid war is being formed, providing for global coverage." The author then transitions to a discussion of US special operations as a tool of grey zone activities and notes the establishment of a new US special operations HQ in the Balkans. He notes the documents *U.S. Army in Multi-Domain Operations 2028* and *Joint Operating Environment 2035* and discusses "the point of view, rooted in the documents of the US Army, on hybrid warfare as a means that allows the use of armed violence below a certain threshold, above which there is already a limited (local) 'conventional' war." He concludes by arguing that Russia needs to assure its security by adapting its military doctrine to these concepts and ideas.

A February 21 article in *Krasnaya Zvezda* focuses on the Western concept of "cognitive warfare."⁶⁸ The article first discusses US and European projects to study the human mind, such as the BRAIN Initiative and the Human Brain Project, and argues that these projects have a potential military dimension. It then focuses on the Western concept of "cognitive warfare," developed by François du Cluzel, who is noted as saying that "the cognitive field will be one of the battlefields of tomorrow." The article then discusses efforts by the US private sector to gather data on individuals and potentially develop systems that predict human behavior.

In a March 1 article in *VPK*, Sergey Korotkov argues that the “heat of information (hybrid) war [against Russia] has reached a critical point.”⁶⁹ And, he continues, “According to experts, the level of threat to our country from the actions of forces and means in the information and communication space is approaching to the so-called period of increasing military threat to national security of the state.” He notes the possibility of the US inflicting damage on Russian critical objects of information infrastructure. He then discusses the “fake news” about Russia invading Ukraine as a “justification for NATO’s advance to the borders of the Russian Federation, the growth of military spending in the block, and diverting the attention of the population from worsening socio-economic status in their own countries.” He then describes US and NATO cyber forces and posits that only measures at the UN level or the development of norms of responsible behavior in the ICT sphere can remedy “the destructive harmful and mal-intended US global multilayer system of information warfare, created by the US.”

In another March 1 article, also in *VPK*, Leontiy Shevtsov analyzes what he calls “US and NATO information warfare operations.”⁷⁰ The article first discusses the changing international world order and the role of the US as a declining hegemon struggling to maintain its influence, then argues that the UK has a historical role as a Russian adversary, always provoking wars against Russia. The author posits that the US is currently “conducting the largest information warfare special operation in the post-Soviet period against Russia” because it cannot use traditional methods due to Russia’s nuclear weapons status. In case of a war between two nuclear-armed states, a third country will win out. He then continues to argue that this special operation uses lies, fakes, and disinformation against Russia. The return of Crimea to Russia was legal and allowed, and it upset the US greatly because it saw Crimea as a “comfortable base for its fleet.” He then posits that one example of a special operation was in the Czech Republic and efforts to blame the GRU for illegal activities outside of Russia’s borders. The reason behind the information operation around Ukraine, he argues, is that “there is a confrontation between the United States and Russia with China for maintaining its leading position in the world. In this operation, all the forces of the West are thrown into strategic deterrence, initially, the destruction of Russia in economic terms. China is planned as the next country victim.” The article concludes with the author calling on the UN to “wake up from a lethargic dream and a pro-American hypnosis and give a legal assessment of special operations of information war, calling for military conflicts and even wars that threaten the lives of millions of people, under the cover of beneficial foreign policy activities.”

18. SHORTCOMINGS OF THE US MILITARY

Three articles in this reporting period make claims about various perceived weaknesses of the US military. One *Novye Izvestiya* article responds to US Navy chief of staff Michael Gilday’s recent comments at the West 2022 conference that the Navy needs a fleet of more than 500 ships to meet its commitments in the forthcoming National Defense Strategy.⁷¹ The article states that such changes are necessary as “potential adversaries have grown stronger, casting doubt on US maritime dominance.” The author continues, “Indeed, China has greatly strengthened and modernized its navy in recent years. Moreover, last year, in terms of the number of ships, but not in terms of total displacement, it became the owner of the largest combat fleet. At the moment, it has 350 ships, the US Navy—293. At the same time, last year the Chinese Navy received another 32 warships of various types.” The author concludes that while this would require substantial increases in funding to the Navy, “A much more serious problem is that the current capacity of American shipyards will not be enough to quickly increase the pace of shipbuilding. You don’t have to look far for an example. When the decision was made to increase the pace of construction of submarines from one per

year to two, the shipyards of Northrop Grumman and Electric Boat literally became overwhelmed, which led to a noticeable decrease in the quality of work.”

A second article, published in *VPK*, examines the evolution of US aircraft carriers, and argues that while the advent of the Gerald Ford class of ships sees a number of qualitative improvements, the capabilities of current air wing configurations to counter an enemy are “significantly lower than they were before” in the 70s and 80s.⁷² Specifically, the article analyzes the tradeoffs between maneuverability and combat ranges of F-14 Tomcat and F-18 Super Hornet squadrons based on presumed US needs in a variety of potential conflict scenarios. The article continues, “The analysis shows that since the mid-1980s, paradoxically as it may seem, the combat capability of US carrier-based aviation has been declining, and quite significantly.” The article continues, “This is apparently due to two reasons. The first is the desire to unify the composition of the air wing and thereby reduce its cost both in terms of procurement and operation of aircraft. The second is the disappearance of a serious adversary for the American fleet, which was the Soviet Navy.” The article concludes, “Today, the situation has changed: the American fleet has two rivals—the Chinese Navy and the resurgent Russian Navy. At present, the US carrier forces are much less operationally compliant than at the end of the 20th century.”

A third article, also published in *VPK*, traces the evolution of the development of US missile and air defense systems since the 1950s.⁷³ The article argues that since World War II, the US has been overconfident “that its fighters (both aircraft and pilots) are obviously the best in the world” and “because of this, ground-based air defense developed in a peculiar way.” The article argues that many air defense systems were never used in combat at all, or were associated with suboptimal combat performance—particularly highlighting failures from Patriot systems in both Iraq wars. Also commenting on the ground-based interceptor (GBI) antiballistic missile system, the article states, “GBIs are designed to intercept ICBMs, but it is still unclear to what extent they are capable of achieving this task. In addition, their number is too small to repel a massive missile attack on US territory.” The article continues, arguing: “The American ‘global missile defense system’ has for many years been a kind of symbol of Washington’s aggressive aspirations, although the defensive system is generally not suitable for aggression. True, this very ‘global missile defense’ is almost non-existent. And the entire American ground-based air defense is a kind of pariah in its own army, almost never fought with and very strangely organized.”

19. US AND EUROPEAN MILITARY CAPABILITIES

Three *Novye Izvestiya* articles discuss developments of specific US and European capabilities and systems. The first, published on February 21, reports on the US Navy’s public launch of its new Snakehead underwater drone, “which apparently is being created in analogue to the Russian Poseidon submarine platform.”⁷⁴ The author notes that while performance metrics were not disclosed, experts were able to make some assumptions. For example, according to pictures released, “the diameter of the submarine reaches about one and a half meters.” The author adds that while representatives focus on the drone’s value as a reconnaissance platform during official speeches, “there are no ‘cloaked knights’ without daggers.” The author continues, “In 2018, during press briefings, the US Navy command casually mentioned anti-ship and anti-submarine ammunition among the future payloads of the submarine. Two years later, it was announced that the Snakehead could carry almost any warhead—from a large payload of conventional explosives to, apparently, a nuclear one.”

A second article, published on February 25, discusses the US Space Force's decision to award Northrop Grumman \$341 million for its Deep space Advanced Radar Capability (DARC) project.⁷⁵ The article notes that even though the US already has two similar radar systems, "[their] capabilities, according to Washington, will soon be insufficient." The article says that the US government believes that "The pace of development of near-Earth orbits is too high. Last year alone, more than a thousand satellites were launched into space. To emphasize the 'weakness' of America's position in space, some media outlets mentioned that among this thousand there were only ten American military satellites, leaving out hundreds of commercial vehicles that are also used by the Pentagon." The article argues that the US further exaggerates its vulnerability in space by claiming that "Russia and China are allegedly placing weapons in orbit capable of destroying American satellites. As usual, no evidence is given, pretending that they sincerely believe their own fiction." The article argues that, meanwhile, the US is planning to deploy its own strike systems in space. The radar complex will work in concert with the existing architecture of ground-based and orbital radars and sensors which "will allow the delivery of accurate strikes against enemy satellites, and will also complete the formation of a unified system for coordinating the actions of the US armed forces around the planet."

A final article discusses the signing of the five-year, \$7.1 billion "Eurodrone" contract between Germany, France, Italy, and Spain.⁷⁶ According to the article, the project was "supposed to reduce Europe's complete dependence on the United States' supply of drones." However, the negotiations for the project, which began in 2015, dragged on for a considerable length of time. "The failures, judging by the leaks concerning another project, were due, oddly enough, to a lack of trust. With all the external manifestations of unshakable solidarity, Europe has not overcome suspicion towards each other." The article also notes that design for this large military drone is "clearly borrowed" from the American MQ-9 Reaper, but features two engines instead of one.

LIST OF SOURCES

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- *BMPD*, the official blog of the Moscow-based Centre for the Analysis of Strategies and Technologies (CAST), an independent for-profit think tank focused on analysis of Russian defense issues.
- *Gazeta.ru*, a pro-government publication currently owned by the Rambler Media Group.
- Interfax, an independent Russian news agency. It was founded in 1989 as the first nongovernment-owned and -operated source of news in the Soviet Union and has remained independently owned since that time.
- *Izvestiya*, one of Russia's oldest and most respected newspapers, noted for its quality military coverage.
- *Krasnaya Zvezda*, official publication of the Russian Ministry of Defense.
- *Lenta.ru*, an online newspaper currently owned by the Rambler Media Group.
- *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, a privately owned political and business daily known for quality reporting.
- *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, a weekly military affairs supplement to *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, a privately owned political and business daily known for quality reporting.
- *Novye Izvestiya*, an online-only publication that until 2016 was oppositional toward the Russian government but is now classified as patriotic in orientation.
- *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, official daily of the government of Russia, the only one to publish texts of new laws, etc.
- TASS, the largest Russian news agency and one of the largest news agencies worldwide. It is operated by the Russian government.
- Topwar.ru, a website focused on providing quality coverage for military developments in Russia and worldwide.
- *Voенно-Promышlennyi Kur'er*, a publication informing on developments in the military-industrial complex (funded by the defense industry).

ENDNOTES

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