

**Abstract**— This brief explains the state of the war in Ukraine as of April 9th. It tracks the evolution of the conflict, as well as provides an analysis of its current status. From this, the brief provides suggestions for how the U.S. should act to protect its domestic interests, as well as maintain a hard stance on Russian aggression toward Ukraine.

**Keywords**— Russia, Ukraine, Kyiv, Turkey, Neutrality, U.S

## I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite recent negotiations, Russian forces continue to occupy large portions of Ukraine. This brief details the status of the war from its beginning to recent development, with a specific focus on the validity of Russian claims of withdrawal from Ukraine. Finally, with consideration to U.S. interests in mitigating the conflict and ensuring domestic stabilization, the brief also proposes the next steps the U.S. should take to ensure effective economic and military pressure on Russia.

## II. OVERVIEW

In early 2021, Ukrainian forces reported a [buildup of Russian military](#) forces along its eastern border, igniting the already strenuous relationship between the two nations.<sup>31</sup> Tension steadily increased by the end of 2021, as Russian military presence grew to [nearly 100,000 Russian troops](#), inciting international panic as result.<sup>32</sup> Finally, Ukrainian concerns were confirmed when Russian President Vladimir Putin announced a “special military operation” over Ukraine.

### Pointed Summary

- The rapid escalation of military conflict in Ukraine
- Claims of Russian withdrawal from Kyiv

### A. Relevance

Since the beginning of the conflict, military aggression between the two countries has grown exponentially and developments in the war are

occurring rapidly on a day-by-day basis. While, as of April 9th, the conflict has only lasted nearly a month and a half, Russian forces were able to make significant leeway into Ukraine, that is until recently. On March 30th, 2022, Russia stated that it would [reduce its military presence](#) in the Ukrainian capital city of Kyiv.<sup>38</sup> However, the validity of these claims and how long the withdrawal may last are still in question considering Russia’s overall interest in the region

## III. HISTORY

Russia, since Ukrainian independence in 1991, has consistently interfered in Ukrainian politics to establish a pro-Russian stance in the Ukrainian government. However, as a result of pro-Russian influence in the country, Ukraine has experienced long periods of democratic revolutions, most notably the [2004 Orange Revolution](#) and [2014 Euro Revolution](#), both in which the Ukrainian people protested against the election of pro-Moscow Viktor Yanukovich as President.<sup>19</sup> As a result of Russian interference, Ukraine has expressed strong desires to join western alliances such as NATO, which was originally created to counteract the Communist Soviet Union. As such, Putin warned that NATO expansion into Ukraine is a [“red line”](#) that must never be crossed. If crossed, Russia would take immediate action.<sup>39</sup>

### A. Tried Policy

Thus, on February 24th, President Vladimir Putin launched the [full-scale invasion](#) of Ukraine.<sup>1</sup> Along with the barrage of ballistic missiles, Russian forces quickly advanced into [parts of Ukraine](#), with forces from Crimea occupying the north and fleets from Belarus advancing towards Kyiv.<sup>18</sup> While directing the forces, President Putin called for the Ukrainian military to overthrow the national

government. In response, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky declared [martial law](#) throughout the country, allowing military authority to take control over civilian rule.<sup>13</sup> On February 26, contrary to its plan, Russia failed to seize Kyiv using airborne attacks. Shortly after, Russian forces tried engaging with a more [straightforward approach](#) by directly invading Kyiv, as well other regions like Mariupol.<sup>18</sup> Russian forces were also detected invading and later securing the southern regions of the country, where Ukrainian defenses remain the most vulnerable. On February 28, the first round of [Russian-Ukrainian negotiations](#) in Gomel, Belarus commenced.<sup>16</sup> During the meeting, President Putin said that Russia would only yield if Ukraine chose to recognize Russian sovereignty over Crimea and give in to “neutrality,” meaning giving up plans to gain membership in NATO. Not coming to terms with the conditions, no agreement or conclusion was reached between the two nations. Differences only grew after Ukraine applied to join the EU on the same day.

On March 14th, ten humanitarian corridors were [established](#) to foster the evacuation of civilians out of Ukraine.<sup>17</sup> On the 16th, a theater in Mariupol, a coastal Ukrainian town under Russian siege, was bombed. About 900 Ukrainian citizens were hiding in the theater, and tragically approximately 300 [died](#).<sup>5</sup> The humanitarian corridors have led to the establishment of a temporary [ceasefire](#), though there have been instances in which Russian troops have [fired on agreed humanitarian corridors](#).<sup>14,33</sup> As the conflict has progressed, Turkey has become the main negotiator between Russia and Ukraine, but due to civilian killings, on April 6th, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu stated that civilian killings in Ukraine have made peace talks more difficult. However, more negotiations are expected. Further along in the negotiations, Russia agreed to fully withdraw from the capital city of Ukraine, Kyiv, which is a major boost to the Ukrainian cause.<sup>7</sup>

During peace talks, Ukrainian negotiators have proposed adopting a [neutral](#) status.<sup>41</sup> This means that Ukraine will not interfere in international armed conflict on any side, nor will it allow any other state to use its territory for military operations,

or supply military equipment. However, although unable to join NATO, Ukraine is only willing to become neutral if, in accordance with NATO’s Article 5 on collective defense, Western states are able to provide security guarantees. This hypothetical quasi-allyship with the West makes Ukrainian neutrality more complicated to define during negotiations. Furthermore, Ukraine has been unwilling to negotiate the Crimean Peninsula, which was invaded by Russia in 2014 following the removal of Viktor Yanukovich as President.

In exchange for Ukrainian neutrality, Russia [promised](#) that it would “dramatically reduce” military activity near Kyiv and the neighboring city of Chernihiv.<sup>11</sup> According to the Pentagon, as of April 7th, Russia has fully withdrawn from Kyiv and Chernihiv, but [National Security Adviser](#) Jake Sullivan stated: “It’s not like Kyiv is somehow immune from further attack.”<sup>7</sup> As such, there is still a provides a sense of caution towards the negotiations. Crimea has continued to be a sticking point in negotiations. Besides Putin’s ideas about restoring former U.S.S.R territory, the annexation of Crimea also has a strategic purpose. Crimea has served as a jumping-off point into the Black Sea for Russia since Peter the Great, and with the annexation of the peninsula, Russia would be able to move its navy far more south and west.

#### IV. POLICY PROBLEM

##### *A. Nonpartisan Reasoning*

Despite withdrawing from Kyiv, Russian forces still continue to occupy significant parts of Ukraine. Top Moscow defense ministry official Alexander Fomin [claims](#) that Russia will “dramatically” scale back its military activities in Kyiv following talks with Ukraine in Turkey.<sup>23</sup> While Ukraine reports a withdrawal of Russian forces from Kyiv, an [increased Russian presence](#) is seen moving into the Mariupol city center and other parts of Ukraine.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, on April 2nd, Russian missiles [struck](#) the cities of Poltava and Kremenchuk, causing damage to critical [oil](#) infrastructure.<sup>37,1</sup> In recent days, satellite images over Bucha [reveal](#) bodies of dead civilians on the streets.<sup>37</sup> While Russia’s Ministry of Defense has denied involvement in the massacre, video evidence

shows that civilians were killed when Russia's military controlled the town – more than three weeks prior. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg [asserts](#) that Russia is merely regrouping in Ukraine, but not scaling back.<sup>20</sup> Russia's outward commitment to de-escalate, hence, is met with skepticism from the U.S. and NATO, raising questions of whether Russia is negotiating in Turkey in good faith.

#### *B. Risk of Indifference*

The raging conflict threatens the lives of millions of civilians. According to the Red Cross, hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians [lack](#) food, water, heat, and medical assistance due to the destruction of vital infrastructure such as water supplies and heating facilities.<sup>25</sup> Already, more than 1,000 civilians have [died](#) and thousands of others are severely injured.<sup>27</sup> Ukrainian authorities have accused Russia of violating temporary cease-fire agreements by shelling humanitarian corridors. Russian attacks have also forced the closure of the Odessa port — where almost all of Ukraine's imports by water arrive. Furthermore, the United Nations [estimates](#) that 10 million people, including more than half of Ukrainian children, have fled their homes to neighboring countries – primarily Poland.<sup>42</sup> All of these issues are only compounded by the ongoing pandemic. With only 35% of the Ukrainian population [vaccinated](#) prior to the Russian invasion, experts claim that COVID-19 transmission is [bound](#) to increase in Europe amid the refugee crisis.<sup>6, 24</sup>

### V. POLICY OPTIONS

In navigating the conflict, the U.S. and its Western allies must find ways to adapt to present challenges while pushing for a resolution to the violence. The most pressing concerns are three-fold: 1) diversifying Western oil imports, 2) increasing economic pressure without military confrontation, and 3) learning to live in a post-invasion world.

#### **Diversifying Oil**

Having put a total halt on Russian oil, both state-based and private, the West has faced soaring gas prices. At the same time, the move has helped to limit Russian expansion by complicating supply

chain difficulties. For the Biden administration in particular, however, this trend cannot continue, with “[70% of Americans \[disapproving\] of Biden's handling of gas prices.](#)”<sup>36</sup> As prices at the pump continue to soar and the Biden administration prepared to release 1 million barrels per day from the U.S. Strategic Petroleum Reserve, diversification is both an economic and political necessity. The options are limited, as oil-producing powerhouses Venezuela and Iran lead the pack despite their tumultuous diplomatic relationship with the United States.

#### *Venezuela*

As the Biden administration [renewed talks](#) with Venezuela over oil imports, the intrinsic [complications](#) have begun to mount considering the U.S.'s maximum pressure sanction regime against the Venezuelan oil industry and its refusal to recognize the presidency of Nicolas Maduro. These barriers are not easily surmounted, as domestic opposition expresses concerns that a U.S. partnership with Venezuela “[would prop up an autocratic regime that is a close ally of Russia.](#)”<sup>9</sup> The U.S., both logistically and in order to entice Venezuelan participation, would have to tie [increased oil imports to sanction relief.](#)<sup>8</sup>

If the Biden administration can pull the political strings, an oil-for-sanctions deal with Venezuela may incur an unexpected win-win. While sanctions were initially placed on Chavez (and now Maduro) in order to inspire regime change within the country, those efforts have largely failed. Even historically, U.S. sanctions are [less than 5% effective](#) in initiating legitimate regime change.<sup>35</sup> Experts suggest they may have the opposite effect, giving the Maduro administration [a scapegoat](#) on which it can blame the country's dire economic conditions.<sup>44</sup> In the meantime, sanctions have crippled the Venezuelan economy: inflation spirals out of control as the country cannot engage in international debt restructuring, the largest consumer of the oil-rich country's largest industry is absent, and a humanitarian crisis has unfolded leaving [300,000](#) Venezuelans lacking access to medicines.<sup>12</sup>

If passed, the controversial and doubted partnership could kill two birds with one stone –

resolving a crisis in Venezuela and slowing domestic inflation – all while allowing the U.S. to maintain maximum economic pressure on Russia.

### *Iran*

The second of the relationships that the Biden administration now seeks to mend in its [effort to offset Russian oil is Iran](#).<sup>21</sup> The situation with Iran, despite its considerable historical differences, is effectively similar to that of Venezuela – an oil-producing powerhouse having strained relations with the U.S. that has been battling the effects of U.S. sanctions for years.

As the Biden administration looks to intensify talks over reviving the Iran Nuclear Deal, any preemptive sanction relief in order to jumpstart oil importation from Tehran significantly limits U.S. leverage in the deal. This comes as there is [increasing concern](#) that a newly formed Iran deal may lack the enforcement mechanisms needed to make it effective.<sup>40</sup> Add in a newfound Iranian understanding of the leverage its oil holds over the U.S. in a post-invasion world, and the deal may devolve into an agreement too weak to justify strategically.

### **Preferring Economic Solutions to Military Solutions**

Targeted sanction programs, cutting off of Russian oil, and, in particular, the Swiss breaking of neutrality have served to significantly limit Russia's warfighting capabilities – but there is more to be done. President Zelensky continues to demand, on the international stage and on the floor of the Senate, that the Biden administration increase its efforts to help Ukraine both militarily and economically. In focusing on the economy, President Biden can counterbalance Russian efforts and appease the Ukrainian demands without turning towards escalation-risking military measures.

The Treasury has begun to take such additional steps by [“imposing full blocking sanctions on Sberbank, Russia's largest state-owned bank, and Alfa-Bank, Russia's largest private bank.”](#)<sup>43</sup> There are also discussions regarding the U.S. implementing a full trade embargo against Moscow.” Numerous paths forward exist, as all economic moves are preferable to military moves.

Such confrontations, via no-fly zones or otherwise, risk direct escalation or giving Russia the scapegoat and [pretext](#) for further military engagement with the U.S., which would be the beginning of a much broader conflict.<sup>2</sup>

### **Living in a Post-Invasion World**

The successful diversification of oil imports and economic pressure against Russia will certainly hasten the end of the conflict, but we will nevertheless have to learn to live in a post-invasion world.

This means helping Ukraine defend against the next mounting Russian push. As has been throughout the first stage of this conflict, maintaining high levels of arms sales will be key in countering the [“major intensification of Russian military operations”](#) expected to come within the weeks.<sup>29</sup>

### VI. CONCLUSIONS

The incorporation of these policies serves to make a post-invasion world bearable for the West and unjustifiable for Putin. Even then, substantial successes in limiting Putin militarily are not enough to resolve the conflict. The U.S. must offer and encourage a path for a peaceful resolution. This requires a continued effort of military and economic posturing that prevents a full-scale Russian invasion from being successful while also providing realistic and genuine [conditions](#) under which the West can make a deal.<sup>3</sup>

Severely inhibiting Russia's warfighting efforts comes first, but the U.S. and its Western allies must then be prepared for serious work at the negotiating table – these policies don't create agreements, [they only incentivize mutual participation](#) in the peace-building effort.<sup>15</sup>

### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The Institute for Youth in Policy wishes to acknowledge Marielle DeVos, Luke Drago, and other contributors for developing and maintaining the Policy Department within the Institute.

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