

## As Russia’s war to “liberate” the Donbas grinds on, growing fears of disaster at Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant



UK Defence Intelligence update on Russian attacks & troop locations as of August 18.

On Feb. 21, President Vladimir Putin convened Russia’s 30-member Security Council to discuss the situation in eastern Ukraine in light of what Russia regarded as the continued refusal of Ukraine to implement the package of measures agreed by the Russian, Ukrainian, French and German leaders at Minsk in February 2015. Those measures, accompanying a renewed ceasefire between Ukraine and the two “People’s Republics” that pro-Russian separatists created in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions after Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, involved Ukraine amending its constitution to grant a special status and significant degree of autonomy to the two regions. In those regions, the 2001 census reported that almost 40 percent of the population were ethnic Russians, substantially more than in any other region in Ukraine except Crimea, and roughly 70 percent, far more than in any other region aside from Crimea, identified Russian as their native language.

At that meeting, the Security Council agreed, in response to appeals from the leaders of the two “People’s Republics” that Russia should recognize their independence and sovereignty and a resolution of the Russian Duma supporting recognition, to recognize their independence and sovereignty. Putin signed executive orders formally recognizing the independence of the two “People’s Republics” as well as treaties of “friendship, cooperation and mutual assistance” with both, and subsequently ordered the deployment of additional troops to the two entities to reinforce the troops already there. Three days later, he announced a “special military operation” in eastern Ukraine to protect the people who “have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kiev regime.” The “special military operation” was in fact a full-fledged, multi-pronged invasion of Ukraine from Belarus in the north, Crimea in the south and Russian

territory adjacent to eastern and northeastern Ukraine, accompanied by intensive attacks by artillery and missiles on many cities throughout the country. Initially focused not only on eastern Ukraine but also on the Kyiv region, the territory between Kyiv and Kharkiv, and southern Ukraine adjacent to Crimea, in late March, after the attack in the Kyiv region had stalled in the face of strong resistance, Russia shifted the focus of the “special military operation” to eastern Ukraine and proclaimed as its main objective the “liberation” of the Donbas.

After the focus of the “special military operation” shifted to eastern Ukraine, one of the most prominent targets was Severodonetsk, a city of 100,000 (prior to the war) in the Luhansk region. After a prolonged attack on that city, its citizens, and its infrastructure that was reminiscent of its prolonged attack on Mariupol in the southern portion of the Donetsk region, and several weeks of stubborn and courageous defense, in late June the Ukrainian forces withdrew and the Russians quickly moved in. As they did, they turned their attention immediately to Lysychansk, another city of roughly 100,000 (prior to the war) just to the west, on the other side of the Siverskyi Donets River. In early July, after defending the city for more than a week, the Ukrainian forces withdrew, giving Russia control of all of the territory of the Luhansk region. At that point, Russia’s attention turned to several major cities in the Donetsk region west of Severodonetsk and Lysychansk – most notably, Kramatorsk, a city of roughly 160,000 (pre-war) and, ten miles to the north, Slovyansk, a city of roughly 110,000 (pre-war). Almost a month later, Russia still has not taken those cities, although it is slowly edging closer to the latter.

While Russia’s war to “liberate” the Donbas grinds on, fears are increasing in Europe, and indeed throughout the world, that there may be a large-scale nuclear disaster at Ukraine’s Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant. The plant, located in Zaporizhzhia oblast in the small city of Enerhodar on the south side of the Dnipro River a few miles southeast of the city of Nikopol, which has a population of 100,000, and about 45 miles southwest of the city of Zaporizhzhia, which has a population of 700,000, is the largest nuclear plant in Europe and one of the largest in the world. Its six reactors produce half of Ukraine’s nuclear power and 20 percent of the country’s electricity. Taken by Russia in March when it took a large stretch of territory on the south side of the Dnipro, two of the six reactors continue to operate under Russian control and with Ukrainian employees. But with Russia using the territory near the plant as a relatively safe haven from which to launch rockets and artillery, and Ukraine responding and attacking Russians in the area near the plant, there is a looming risk of a full-scale catastrophe in the form of a meltdown if the cooling system for the reactors is damaged or destroyed. And there is increased concern that if Russia disconnects the plant from Ukraine’s power grid, as it has threatened, that could deprive the cooling system of the electricity it needs in order to continue operating. For both reasons, many have urged Russia to allow a team from the International Atomic Energy Authority (IAEA) to inspect the site immediately to ensure that the plant remains connected to the power grid and the cooling system for the reactors continues to operate.

Yesterday, UN Secretary General António Guterres, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy met in Lviv to take stock of the July 22 agreement between Ukraine and Russia, brokered by Erdogan, that allowed the shipment of grain from Ukraine’s port cities on the Black Sea. The meeting was primarily concerned with the fact that only 24 ships have left fully loaded since the deal was struck and Ukraine has thus far

exported only half of what it did in the same period last year. But the leaders also discussed the war – in particular, the danger of a nuclear disaster at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant. Erdogan, for example, warned specifically of “another Chernobyl.” And in comments today in Odesa, Guterres warned that the plant must not be taken off the Ukrainian power grid.

Today, French President Emmanuel Macron and Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke by phone for the first time since May and agreed on the importance of sending an IAEA mission to the Zaporizhzhia plant as soon as possible. According to the Elysée readout, “President Macron once again emphasized his concern over the risks that the situation at the Zaporizhzhia plant poses to nuclear safety and security, and expressed his support for sending a mission of IAEA experts to the site as quickly as possible, under conditions approved by Ukraine and the UN. The Russian President indicated his agreement to the deployment of this mission and the terms that were discussed. The two presidents will speak about this subject again in the next few days following discussions between the technical teams and before the deployment of the mission.”

According to the readout of the call issued by Putin’s office, “The discussion focused on various aspects of the situation around Ukraine. Vladimir Putin, in particular, stressed that the regular strikes on the Zaporozhye Nuclear Power Plant by the Ukrainian military creates the danger of a major nuclear disaster that could lead to radiation contamination of vast territories. Both leaders noted the importance of sending an IAEA mission to the power plant as soon as possible to allow experts to assess the situation on the ground. The Russian side confirmed its readiness to provide the necessary assistance to the agency’s inspectors.... The President of Russia also informed the French leader about the progress of the package deal signed on July 22 in Istanbul to facilitate the export of Ukrainian grain from Black Sea ports and the export of Russian food and fertilisers to world markets. He pointed out the remaining obstacles to the above Russian exports, adding that the situation is doing little to resolve global food security problems. The presidents of Russia and France agreed to maintain contact on the issues raised.”

Hopefully, the IAEA team will arrive at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant soon and, with the full support of both Russia and Ukraine, will ensure its safety before an errant artillery rocket or missile, or a misguided decision to disconnect the plant from the electrical grid, produces, as Erdogan warned, another Chernobyl.

David R. Cameron  
August 19, 2022