

In press conference, Putin talks about Patriots, acknowledges “special operation” is a war.



UK Defence Intelligence update on Russian attacks and troop locations as of yesterday.

During Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s historic visit to Washington Wednesday, President Biden announced that, in addition to providing Ukraine with \$374 million in new humanitarian assistance, the U.S. will provide another \$1.85 billion in security assistance that will include both direct transfers of equipment and contracts for ammunition for artillery, tanks, and rocket launchers. And he reiterated Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s earlier announcement that the U.S. will provide Ukraine a Patriot air defense battery consisting of a truck-mounted launching system that can shoot down cruise missiles, short-range ballistic missiles, and aircraft at a significantly higher ceiling than previously provided air defense systems.

In a lengthy end-of-year press conference Thursday covering a wide range of political and economic issues, Russian President Vladimir Putin was asked several times about the current status of Russia’s “special military operation” in Ukraine – his euphemism for the war he began on Feb. 24 – and, in particular the American decision to provide Ukraine with a Patriot air defense battery. After a lengthy discussion of the events that led up to Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 and to the decision last winter to invade Ukraine, he said, “As for the Patriot, it is a pretty old system. I would say it doesn’t work like our S-300. Nevertheless, those who oppose us assume that these systems are defensive weapons. All right. We will just keep that in mind, and there is always an antidote. So those who are doing this, are doing it in vain: it just prolongs the conflict, and that’s that.”

In response to a follow-up question asking whether he saw any signs of the conflict “becoming drawn out,” he said, “The situation actually started developing – this was less perceptible here, while the West preferred not to speak or notice anything – way back in 2014, after the coup d’etat [Putin’s label for the decision of the Ukrainian parliament to remove President Viktor Yanukovich from office on Feb. 22, 2014] that was instigated by the United States...But our goal is not to whip up the military conflict but to end this war. This is what we want, and this is what we will try to do.... In short, we will do our best to end this, and the sooner, the better, of course.” This was the first time Putin publicly acknowledged the “special military operation” is in fact a war.

Later, coming back to the American decision to give Ukraine a Patriot battery, he said, “It is said that the Patriot systems may be sent to Ukraine. Let them do it; we will weed out the Patriots too. And they will have to send something to replace them with or create new systems. It is a long and complicated process. It is not all that simple. We take this into account and count everything that is being sent there, how many systems there are in the depots, how many more they can manufacture and how fast, and if they can train the necessary personnel.”

In response to a question whether there is a “real chance for a diplomatic solution to the Ukraine situation,” Putin responded, “Every conflict, every armed conflict ends with some kind of negotiations on the diplomatic track, one way or another, and we have never refused to negotiate. It is the Ukrainian leadership that has forbidden itself to negotiate. This attitude is somewhat unusual, even bizarre, I would say. Nevertheless, sooner or later, any parties that are in a state of conflict sit down and negotiate. The sooner this realization comes to those who oppose us, the better. We have never given up on that.”

Although battles continue along the contact line between the Russian and Ukrainian forces in eastern Ukraine, especially in and around Bakhmut and other cities and towns in the Donbas, the location of the line itself has changed very little over the past several weeks. Indeed, yesterday’s update from British Defence Intelligence on Russian attacks and troop locations in Ukraine (above) is virtually unchanged since Ukraine took back the city of Kherson and the region west of the Dnipro River in early November. That has prompted many to suggest the time has come for a truce and ceasefire agreement, to be followed by peace talks. The problem, of course, is that both sides realize the other side won’t agree to its one essential condition for ending the conflict – for Ukraine, that Russia leave all of the territory that belonged to Ukraine prior to its March 2014 annexation of Crimea; for Russia, that Ukraine accept not only Russia’s annexation of Crimea but also its annexation of Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson regions in September. Russia won’t leave Crimea and the four regions it annexed in September and Ukraine won’t accept Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the four regions. And so the war continues.

David R. Cameron
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