

## Despite agreements in Riyadh, the war continues with no end in sight



British Defence Intelligence map of the battlefield situation in Ukraine as of March 28.

As Friday's British Defence Intelligence map of the battlefield situation in Ukraine indicates, notwithstanding the talks in Riyadh between Russian, Ukrainian, and American officials, the war continued last week, as it has for more than three years, in eastern Ukraine. Russian forces continued to attack, as they have for the past several months, toward Kupiansk in Kharkiv region, toward the area around Chasiv Yar, west of Bakhmut which they took in 2023 after a prolonged siege, and toward Pokrovsk, west of Avdiivka which they took last February. But as the General Staff of the Ukrainian Armed Forces reported in its daily updates last week, the Russian forces also continued to attack as they had in recent weeks toward Kharkiv from territory they hold north of the city, toward Lyman about 30 kilometers southeast of Izyum, toward Kramatorsk about 25 kilometers northwest of Chasiv Yar, toward Toretsk about 20 kilometers south of Chasiv Yar, toward Vremivka about 50 kilometers south of Pokrovsk, in the Orikhiv area southeast of Zaporizhzhia, and in the area in Kherson region in southern Ukraine where the Ukrainian forces hold territory on the east bank of the Dnipro River. And they also continued to attack, with the assistance of North Korean troops, the Ukrainian forces that, since last August, have held a portion of Russia's Kursk region just north of Sumy.

The General Staff of the Ukrainian Armed Forces reported a total of 1,351 Russian attacks at various points along the contact line between the forces in the seven days last week from Sunday, March 23, through Saturday, March 29. In the previous seven days, the Russian forces had conducted 1,017 attacks, and in the week before that they had conducted 1,131 attacks. As in previous weeks, the largest number of Russian attacks in

eastern Ukraine last week were directed at the Ukrainian forces defending Pokrovsk, an important transit hub on the highway that links Donetsk city with Dnipro and that, if taken, would also open a pathway northward for the Russian forces toward Kostyantynivka, Kramatorsk and Sloviansk. Over the seven days last week, the Russian forces conducted a total of 505 attacks against the forces defending Pokrovsk compared with 285 in the previous week, which suggests the urgency the Russian military leadership places on taking Pokrovsk. The intensity of the Russian attacks is suggested by their frequency each day – 61 on Sunday, 53 on Monday, 69 on Tuesday, 88 on Wednesday, 68 on Thursday, 73 on Friday, and 93 on Saturday. But Pokrovsk wasn't the only target of the Russian forces last week; they also conducted 145 attacks against the forces defending Toretsk compared with 151 attacks in the previous week, and 144 attacks against the forces defending Lyman, compared with 112 attacks in the previous week. And assisted by North Korean troops, the Russian forces conducted 152 attacks last week. Compared with 141 attacks the week before, against the Ukrainian forces which, since last August's incursion, have held a portion of Russia's Kursk region.

As the Russian forces continued their attacks throughout eastern Ukraine last week, the attention of the world was focused on the talks between Russian, Ukrainian, and American officials in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. And following those talks, which included a 12-hour meeting between U.S. and Russian officials last Monday, some thought there might soon be some type of ceasefire. The separate pair-wise talks between Ukrainian and American officials and between Russian and American officials produced five identical agreements. Both pairs of officials "agreed to ensure safe navigation, eliminate the use of force, and prevent the use of commercial vessels for military purposes in the Black Sea"; "agreed to develop measures for implementing the Presidents' agreement to ban strikes against energy facilities of Russia and Ukraine"; said they "welcome the good offices of third countries with a view toward supporting the implementation of the energy and maritime agreements;" and said they "will continue working toward achieving a durable and lasting peace." The American and Russian officials also agreed "the U.S. will help restore Russia's access to the world market for agricultural and fertilizer exports, lower maritime insurance costs, and enhance access to ports and payment systems for such transactions." And the American and Ukrainian officials also agreed "the U.S. remains committed to helping achieve the exchange of prisoners of war, the release of civilian detainees, and the return of forcibly transferred Ukrainian children."

But the next day a statement appeared on Putin's presidential site that said the agreed clauses pertaining to the implementation of the Black Sea Initiative and to U.S. assistance in restoring Russia's access to the world market for agricultural and fertilizer exports and enhance access to ports and payment systems for such transactions "will come into force following: the removal of sanctions imposed on Rosselkhozbank (Russian Agricultural Bank) and other financial institutions involved in ensuring international food and fertilizer trade (including fish and fish products) and fertilizers, their reconnection to SWIFT [Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial

Telecommunication], and opening of relevant correspondent accounts; the removal of restrictions imposed on trade finance operations; the removal of sanctions imposed on companies producing and exporting food (including fish and fish products) and fertilizers, as well as restrictions banning insurance companies from working with food cargoes (including fish and fish products) and fertilizers; the removal of restrictions on servicing ships in ports and sanctions against ships flying the flag of Russia, if they are involved in food trade (including fish and fish products) and fertilizers; the removal of restrictions on supplies to the Russian Federation of agricultural machinery and other goods used in the production of food (including fish and fish products) and fertilizers.” Putin’s site also noted that “Russia and the U.S. agreed to develop measures for implementing the agreement between the two countries’ presidents to ban strikes against energy facilities of Russia and Ukraine for 30 days starting on March 18, 2025 with an option to extend the agreement or to withdraw from it in the event of non-compliance by either party.”

The next day, Anitta Hipper, the lead spokesperson for EU Foreign & Security Policy, made it clear the EU will lift its sanctions on Russia, including those on its financial institutions, including the Russian Agricultural Bank, only if and when Russia withdraws all of its troops from Ukraine: “The end of the Russian unprovoked and unjustified aggression in Ukraine and unconditional withdrawal of all Russian military forces from the entire territory of Ukraine would be one of the main preconditions to amend or lift sanctions. Russia must now demonstrate genuine political will to end its illegal and unprovoked war of aggression.”

To further complicate the issue, on Friday Putin, speaking on the sidelines of an Arctic forum, said Russia could discuss with the U.S., Europe, and others “under the auspices of the UN, the possibility of establishing a transitional administration in Ukraine. What for? To organize a democratic presidential election that would result in the coming to power of a competent government that would have the confidence of the people and then begin negotiations with these authorities on a peace agreement and sign legitimate documents.” In the meantime, he said the Russian forces would “finish off” the Ukrainian troops. When asked later about Putin’s comments, presidential press secretary Dmitry Peskov said they were prompted by what Russia regards as the Ukrainian leader’s “total lack of control over the military,” which, he claimed, tries to attack Russian energy sites “on a daily basis.”

And so, after a week that began with talks between American, Ukrainian and Russian officials in Riyadh that suggested there might sometime soon be a ceasefire, the war continues with no end in sight.

David R. Cameron  
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