

Biden in Kyiv. Day 361 of the war

Andrzej Wilk, Piotr Żochowski

Joe Biden paid an unannounced visit to Kyiv on 20 February, during which he announced that he would present a new \$500 million package of military aid before the end of this week, including artillery munitions for HIMARS systems and howitzer, anti-tank guided missiles and airspace surveillance radars. The US president also announced that new sanctions would be imposed on the Russian elite and companies responsible for the armed aggression in the coming days. Ukraine's president Volodymyr Zelensky said the talks had been fruitful, and the results would be seen on the battlefield. He also stressed that the conditions for ending the conflict include the complete withdrawal of the invading troops from Ukrainian territory and the granting of "firm guarantees of lasting security".

Russian forces have driven the Ukrainian defenders from the last points of resistance on the northern outskirts of Bakhmut, and are continuing their assault on enemy positions northwest of the town after crossing the M03 main road. The Ukrainians prevented Bakhmut from being outflanked on the southwest, where fighting for control over the road to Kostiantynivka is ongoing. On 19 February, Zelensky hinted for the first time at withdrawing from the town, stating that "we will defend ourselves for as long as is reasonable". In doing so, he stressed that the resisting Ukrainian troops were simultaneously preparing for another counteroffensive. In turn, defence minister Oleksiy Reznikov announced that the stubborn defence of Bakhmut is exhausting the Russians' offensive potential.

Intense clashes are continuing in the vicinity of Siversk, where Ukrainian forces are repelling further enemy attacks south and east of the town; and between Kreminna and the line of the Donetsk and Zherebets rivers. The Russians also attacked in the Kharkiv oblast, along the line of the Oskil river at the Dvorichna rise, and in the north-eastern outskirts of Kupiansk. Communiqués from the Ukrainian General Staff suggest that after Friday's fighting, the invaders made no further attempts to attack in the arc west of Donetsk and in Vuhledar on Saturday or Sunday. Instead, according to some sources, they attempted to carry out a strike in the Orikhiv region of Zaporizhzhia oblast.

On 18 February, the invaders launched a missile attack on military facilities in Khmelnytsky. The defenders shot down two of the four Kalibr missiles launched by the Russians. According to the Air Force Command spokesman Colonel Yuri Ihnat, the enemy's missile strike tactics have changed over the past week. Instead of massive attacks, they are now using a small number of missiles, fired from as low a ceiling as possible, which fly over the Dniester and Southern Buh riverbeds; this tactic makes it harder for Ukrainian air defences to detect them.

Rocket attacks are still being launched, mainly on military facilities in the north-western part of the Donetsk oblast, especially in the Kramatorsk area. Russian S-300s have also struck near Krasnopol in Sumy oblast. According to the Ukrainian General Staff, the enemy is using between 10 and 15 S-300 missiles per day. Russian artillery and aviation are renewing their attacks along the entire line of contact and in the border areas, with Kherson, Nikopol and the area around Ochakiv remaining under permanent fire. The defenders' artillery is targeting Russian logistical resources in Donetsk and Horlivka; according to Russian reports, the Ukrainians have been shelling the Kursk oblast since Friday. Acts of sabotage are reportedly being carried out in occupied Bryansk and the Belgorod oblast.

A group of 635 Ukrainian soldiers who were being prepared to make up the first battalion using Bradley infantry fighting vehicles have completed their training, which began in mid-January, at a US training ground in Germany. They have been replaced by another 710 servicemen, who will learn to operate Bradleys and M109 self-propelled howitzers. A third group of 890 soldiers is scheduled to begin training on Stryker wheeled armoured personnel carriers next week.

France has handed over to Kyiv the latest Akeron anti-tank guided missiles (the number of launchers and missiles was not reported). The defence ministry in Paris also said that a batch of AMX-10RC armoured reconnaissance vehicles sent to Ukraine is expected to arrive there by the end of the week.

Minister Reznikov stated that in the first half of 2023 the country will receive missiles from Western partners capable of striking the enemy to a depth of 120–150 km. However, he noted that the missiles may be of a different type than the US ATACMS which Kyiv has been requesting for many months. This information, taken together with the strike range cited, suggests that he may have had in mind the GLSDB sets already promised to Ukraine (the ATACMS has a range of 300 km). He also acknowledged that Western countries have come round to the idea of transferring combat aircraft to Ukraine, which will take between one and two months. Kyiv expects to receive at least 50 aircraft.

On 17 February, President Zelensky said that in his opinion there is little risk of Belarus entering the war, as the soldiers there have very low motivation and do not want to fight Ukraine. On the same day, Alyaksandr Lukashenka and Vladimir Putin held talks near Moscow on security issues and military & economic cooperation. This was their fourteenth meeting since the invasion began. As usual, no details were reported. At a meeting with the press, Lukashenko stated that Minsk is fully complying with the defence and security agreements it has made with Russia. He declared that Belarus is ready – with the appropriate technological support – to begin the production (assembly) of Su-25 assault aircraft. He also announced that an understanding for cooperation had been established between MAZ and KAMAZ, which produce trucks, including for military use.

British military intelligence has explained why Russian forces have been sending balloons over Ukraine. The objects, which have been sighted in the airspaces of both Ukraine and Moldova during the past week, are most likely part of a new tactic calculated to deplete the other side's air defence capabilities. In addition to reconnaissance tasks aimed at revealing elements of the air defence system, their appearance is forcing the Ukrainians to waste their valuable stockpile of surface-to-air missiles and anti-aircraft ammunition.

According to US authorities, the so-called Wagner Group has suffered losses and casualties of over 30,000 dead and wounded. About 90% of those who died in December were said to have been recruited in Russian prisons.

A Google report on cyber-security has been highlighted in the Ukrainian media. Cyber operations are playing an important role in the war, and are being run by five hacking groups linked to the Russian special services: FrozenLake, Coldrive, Summit, FrozenBarentz and FrozenVista. One of their primary strategies is phishing: hackers most often attack Gmail and the email services of Ukrainian government agencies, especially the defence and foreign ministries. The document also mentions the Belarusian group Pushcha, which is engaged in stealing intelligence-sensitive data. The report stresses that the Russian operations are aimed at weakening the Ukrainian government, undermining international support for Kyiv, and sustaining domestic support for continuing the war.

The Security Service of Ukraine reported on 18 February that over 550 cyberattacks have already been neutralised since the beginning of the year. The main targets of this hostile activity are logistics, energy and military infrastructure facilities, as well as state databases. It was emphasised that the very fact that most of Ukraine's IT systems are operating normally proves that their network security specialists are well prepared. It was also admitted that Ukrainian IT specialists are conducting operations to obtain data useful to the armed forces.

Commentary

- Biden's visit to Kyiv is the first official trip by a US president to Ukraine in 15 years. He had visited the country six times as vice president between 2009 and 2017, while his wife visited Kyiv last May. The purpose of the trip was primarily to demonstrate the United States' strong support for Ukraine and its role in deterring Russian aggression. Contrary to the expectations of the Ukrainian side, however, Biden did not take the opportunity to announce any landmark decisions on US military aid, including agreements to transfer F-16 aircraft or long-range ATACMS missiles to Ukraine.
- President Zelensky's suggestion that Ukrainian forces will not defend Bakhmut at all costs confirms that the situation in and around the city is becoming increasingly difficult for them. After directing additional forces to the combat area, last week the defenders succeeded in halting the invaders' advance on Chasiv Yar and pushing it south of the Bakhmut-Kostiantynivka road. However, the reports from the Ukrainian General Staff indicates that this success did not last. The Russians are again attacking Chasiv Yar, through which the defenders' only supply route currently passes. The situation for the Ukrainian garrison has also been significantly worsened by the Russian breakthrough at the defences north of Bakhmut and their consolidation on the section of the M03 road to Slavyansk, from which attacks are currently being launched southwards. Both to the northwest and southwest of Bakhmut, Russian troops have come within about four kilometres of the last remaining Ukrainian-controlled road to the town.
- The latest meeting between Putin and Lukashenko had the character of a political ritual. Lukashenko once again declared his full support for the aggression, but avoided making any statements indicating that the Belarusian army could be preparing to strike Ukraine. He confirmed that the facilities of his country's industrial and armaments complex will

continue working for their Russian counterpart. For his part, Putin while stressing the importance of Minsk's cooperation in the military and security spheres, focused his public statement on issues of economic cooperation. This confirms that Russia is keen to maximise the use of its neighbour's industrial potential to support its own military. Militarily, Belarus is still being treated as a military base used to train Russian soldiers and tie up Ukrainian forces in the border region. There are still no signs that Belarusian troops are preparing to enter Ukraine.