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Russia's War Against Ukraine: U.S. Policy and the Role of Congress

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of neighboring Ukraine, which Russia first invaded in 2014 and has partially occupied for more than a decade. Russia's effort to change international borders by force has led to the largest war in Europe since World War II, with more than 1 million estimated killed or wounded and more than 10 million displaced.

The current state of the war and presidential transition in the United States have heightened interest in possible efforts to negotiate a ceasefire or settlement to the war. Members of the 119th Congress may assess the prospects for and consequences of such potential efforts, as well as the implications for U.S. assistance to Ukraine, sanctions on Russia, and U.S. policy toward NATO.

Overview

After a year of relative stalemate, Russian forces made new gains against Ukrainian forces in the latter half of 2024, capturing an estimated 1,200 square kilometers (463 square miles) since August. Russia has also received increased assistance from China, North Korea, and Iran. While Ukraine continues to receive U.S. and European assistance and launched its own incursion into Russian territory in August 2024, Ukraine's armed forces have suffered heavy casualties and been unable to recruit sufficient personnel to replace losses and block Russian advances. At the same time, Russian military operations have led to relatively high Russian casualties. Some observers posit that the ability of each side to sustain recruitment may be an important factor in determining the war's duration and outcome.

The Biden Administration joined leaders of the 32-member North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the 27-member European Union (EU), and other Group of Seven (G7) countries in calling Russia's invasion of Ukraine "illegal, unjustifiable, and unprovoked." The United States, in coordination with the EU, NATO, and others, has provided substantial assistance to Ukraine and imposed expansive sanctions on Russia. To deter further aggression, the United States and NATO have increased their military presence in Central and Eastern Europe.

Ukraine Assistance and Related Funding

Since February 2022, Congress has enacted five supplemental appropriations measures that have provided assistance to Ukraine and other countries affected by the war, as well as related funding. This funding has included support for U.S. European Command's Operation Atlantic Resolve (OAR), under which the United States "provides security assistance to Ukraine and conducts other military activity to strengthen the collective security of European partners," according to the Special Inspector General for OAR (SIGOAR). In September 2024, SIGOAR assessed

that Congress had provided \$183 billion in supplemental and base appropriations for OAR and "other U.S. government activities relating to Ukraine" from FY2022 through FY2024.

As of December 2024, the Biden Administration had announced foreign assistance commitments to Ukraine that totaled more than \$100 billion since 2022. This amount includes almost \$63 billion in security assistance, more than \$30 billion in direct budget support, and almost \$4 billion in humanitarian assistance (including support for Ukrainian refugees in other countries). The Administration has also committed at least \$5 billion in development assistance for Ukraine's energy, agriculture, and governance sectors, among others. About \$9 billion of FY2024 assistance was provided in the form of forgivable loans. The next U.S. Administration may have up to several billion dollars' worth of previously authorized or obligated security assistance available to provide to Ukraine, if it so chooses.

As of December 2024, EU members and institutions and NATO allies had collectively committed at least \$194 billion in assistance to Ukraine since February 2022. The EU and its member states have also provided assistance to support Ukrainian refugees in Europe. Japan, South Korea, Switzerland, Australia, and other countries and international organizations have also provided assistance to Ukraine.

The 119th Congress may consider whether or not to provide further assistance to Ukraine and, if so, in what form (e.g., grants, loans, defense articles). In doing so, Members may assess whether or not new U.S. assistance to Ukraine, and possibly new security arrangements with Ukraine, would help to achieve potential objectives—for example, a stable ceasefire or restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity.

Russia Sanctions

U.S. sanctions on Russia aim to limit and reverse Russian aggression in Ukraine and to deter broader Russian aggression and other malign activities. Since February 2022, the United States has imposed Russia-related sanctions on at least 5,750 individuals and entities, including Russian President Vladimir Putin, other Russian elites, Russia's legislature, defense and technology firms, state-owned companies, and international facilitators of Russian sanctions evasion. U.S. sanctions also restrict Russia's central bank from drawing on its U.S.-dollar-denominated reserves, prohibit most major Russian banks from conducting most transactions in U.S. dollars or with U.S. persons, and bar new U.S. investment in Russia. The United States has expanded export controls intended to limit Russia's access to sensitive or desired U.S.-origin goods and technology; restricted the import into the United States of energy, gold, certain diamonds and metals, and

select other goods from Russia; banned the export of U.S. luxury goods and certain services to Russia; raised tariffs on many imports from Russia; and prohibited Russian use of U.S. airspace and ports.

In addition to executive branch actions, Congress has suspended normal trade relations with Russia (P.L. 117-110), prohibited the import of Russian oil and other energy products into the United States (P.L. 117-109), established sanctions on foreign persons who engage in gold transactions with Russia (P.L. 117-263, §5590), and imposed restrictions on the import of Russian uranium (P.L. 118-62).

The United States, the EU, the United Kingdom, Canada, and other U.S. allies and partners have cooperated closely in imposing sanctions on Russia. Among other coordinated measures, the United States has joined the EU and others in banning nationals from providing maritime transport services for Russian crude oil export transactions above \$60 per barrel.

By some metrics, Russia has weathered sanctions better than anticipated. Russia's economy, the 11th largest in the world, contracted by 1.2% in 2022 before resuming growth in 2023 and 2024 of about 3.6% annually. A number of factors have buoyed Russia's economy: monetary and banking sector policy responses by Russia's central bank; increased oil exports to China, India, and Turkey; imports of sanctioned items through intermediaries; increased military spending and a pivot to war production; and expropriation of foreign assets.

At the same time, sanctions—and Russia's transition to a wartime economy—have created challenges for Russia. Financial sanctions have complicated Russia's cross-border payments, and its central bank cannot access about \$280 billion held abroad. Russia's military has difficulty procuring key materiel components, and hundreds of international companies have exited Russia. The government is running fiscal deficits and, in October 2024, the central bank increased interest rates to stem inflation. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) projects that economic growth in Russia will slow to 1.3% in 2025.

The 119th Congress may consider the future of U.S. sanctions toward Russia, including conditions under which sanctions might be maintained, strengthened, or lifted, potentially in the context of ceasefire negotiations. Members also might consider prospects for and limitations to continued multilateral coordination of sanctions on Russia, as well as U.S. policy toward countries that are not part of the sanctions coalition, including Brazil, China, India, and Turkey.

Seizures and Forfeitures

Since 2022, the United States, the EU, and other key allies have debated whether to use \$280 billion in immobilized Russian central bank assets to support Ukraine. The United States, which holds less than 2% of the immobilized assets, has authorized the President to seize such assets for the purpose of compensating Ukraine (the Rebuilding Economic Prosperity and Opportunity for Ukrainians Act, P.L. 118-50, Division F). Approximately 80% of these assets are held in the EU, and the EU has not agreed to seize and repurpose them, citing economic and legal risks.

In June 2024, the United States, the EU, and other G7 countries pledged to loan \$50 billion to Ukraine, backed by the “extraordinary revenue” (or profits) earned from the immobilized Russian central bank assets. This mechanism is designed to minimize the legal risks (because the assets are not confiscated) while front-loading financing. In December 2024, the United States approved a \$20 billion loan as part of this initiative. Policy debates continue about whether the central bank assets—not just the profits—should be seized to support Ukraine.

Separately, U.S. Department of Justice officials report that as of December 2024, the Department of the Treasury's Task Force KleptoCapture initiative has “brought criminal charges against more than 100 individuals and entities who violated Russia-related sanctions or export controls—and seized, restrained, or obtained forfeiture orders against about \$650 million in assets.”

NATO Response

The Biden Administration joined NATO allies in assessing that Russia's invasion of Ukraine “has shattered peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area and gravely undermined global security.” NATO allies have identified Russia as “the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security” and have reoriented the alliance's strategic focus and defense posture to respond to the heightened security threat.

Since 2014, Congress has passed legislation supporting an enhanced U.S. force presence in Europe and U.S. contributions to NATO defense and deterrence measures. In the 117th Congress, the Senate gave its advice and consent (Treaty Doc. 117-3) to approve Finland's and Sweden's accession to NATO (Finland and Sweden became NATO members in April 2023 and March 2024, respectively).

Following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the United States deployed or extended about 20,000 additional armed forces to Europe. As of December 2024, the U.S. force posture in Europe, including permanently stationed forces, totaled approximately 80,000 military personnel. This includes rotational deployment of up to two Brigade Combat Teams in Central and Eastern Europe and about 10,000 troops to Poland, including 800 soldiers deployed to a U.S.-led NATO battlegroup.

The increased U.S. military presence is part of an enhanced NATO defense and deterrence posture in the eastern part of the alliance. Allied troops deployed to the region for the first time in NATO's history after Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine. According to NATO, about 10,000 allied soldiers serve in multinational battlegroups in eight countries along NATO's eastern flank.

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