

Summary

Early on 24 February, Russian forces launched a major military assault on Ukraine, with reports indicating missile strikes and explosions in major cities. In a television address at 05:55 Moscow time (02:55 GMT), President Vladimir Putin announced a “military operation” in Ukraine’s eastern Donbass region. He disclosed that Russia was acting in self-defence and would demilitarise and “de-Nazify” Ukraine, as he urged Ukrainian soldiers to lay down their weapons. He further warned that any intervention by outside powers against Russia would get an “instant” response. Ukraine has reported that Russia has targeted Ukrainian infrastructure with missiles, adding that it shot down Russian aircraft, which Moscow has denied.



During the early morning hours on Thursday, convoys of troops and tanks entered Ukraine from all directions - one convoy crossing over from neighbouring Belarus at a point to the north of the Ukrainian capital Kyiv, another entering from Crimea in the south, which Russia annexed from Ukraine in 2014. Ukrainian media reported that military command centres in Kyiv and the city of Kharkiv in the northeast had been struck by missiles, while Russian troops had landed in the southern port cities of Odessa and Mariupol. In Kyiv, long traffic jams have been reported as residents attempt to flee the capital. So far, at least seven people have been killed, according to police, with another 19 missing. During the mid-day, Reuters news agency reported that black smoke has been seen rising over the Ukrainian defence intelligence headquarters in central Kyiv. As of 02:45 Kyiv time (00:45 GMT), Ukraine has suspended all flights and state air traffic services has closed the country’s airspace.

Tensions significantly rose on earlier this week after President Putin signed a presidential decree recognising the independence of the separatist regions of Donetsk and Luhansk in eastern Ukraine. The move effectively enables Russia to openly send troops and weapons to the long-running conflict that has pitted Ukrainian forces against Moscow-backed rebels. On 23 February, Ukraine’s parliament voted to impose a state of emergency for a period of thirty days starting Thursday, with the government also advising its citizens in Russia to leave immediately. Hours after the invasion on Thursday, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy announced during a press briefing that Ukraine has officially severed diplomatic ties with Russia following its invasion of Ukrainian territory, adding that the government will issue weapons to everyone who wants them. This comes as Ukrainian civilians have been undergoing basic military training in recent weeks as tensions ramped up with Russia. On 24 February, hours after the invasion, President Zelenskyy imposed martial law and urged his people to stay home.

International markets have been affected by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, with oil prices jumping to more than US \$100 a barrel for the first time in seven years. The Russian currency, the rouble, has plunged to an all-time low against the US dollar and euro while UK markets have also plunged. Global leaders have condemned the move by Russia, with a number of countries already imposing sanctions. There have also been calls, notably from Lithuania,

to impose sanctions on Belarus over its alleged role in the invasion. In recent weeks, Russia amassed a significant number of troops, vehicles and tanks in Belarus, near the border with Ukraine. During that time, the two countries held joint military exercises across the countries, and near the Belarus-Ukrainian border. While so far, Belarusian troops are not taking part in the Russian invasion, Belarus leader Alexander Lukashenko has said that they could if needed, in remarks reported by the state new agency Belta.

The invasion of Ukraine comes shortly after Russia carried out naval exercises in the Black Sea, in a move that raised fears that a maritime assault could be part of a possible invasion of Ukraine. The drills disrupted vital shipping lanes, which are crucial to Ukraine's exports. Ukraine, which is one of the world's leading exporters of steel, grain, and sunflower oil, carries exports through ports on the Black and Azov Seas - Odessa, Pivdeny, Chornomorsk, Kherson, Mariupol and Berdyansk. Any future blockade of the country's maritime routes could have significant implications on Ukraine's economy.

Advisory

The security situation across Ukraine remains fluid and could rapidly deteriorate in the coming days. In recent weeks, regional tensions have significantly risen as Russia has continued to amass troops near its borders with Ukraine. Naval activity in the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov in mid-February also raised fears of a potential risk to commercial shipping transiting this region.

While as of 24 February, Russia has invaded Ukraine through the northern border with Belarus, its western border with Ukraine and through the south, from Crimea, any maritime assaults on Ukraine cannot be ruled out. Access to Ukrainian ports could be closed off by Russian warships in the region in the coming days and weeks. There have been reports that the ports in Odessa and Mariupol were targeted on 24 February, however these have been unconfirmed.

As of 24 February, MS Risk advises all merchant vessel masters to remain alert to heavily armed military vessels in the region and to heed to any warnings and advisories. All vessels should remain vigilant to naval operations and how they may affect intended transits. As the situation continues to develop in Ukraine, the freedom of navigation throughout the wider Black Sea and Sea of Azov currently remains unclear. Any vessels choosing to navigate through this region at this time are strongly advised to keep abreast of the situation and should exercise heightened caution if transiting this region. A risk assessment should be carried out prior to transiting the above mentioned regions and should incorporate appropriate protective measures into vessel security plans. Vessels are further advised to ensure that AIS is transmitting at all times and should monitor VHF Channel 16. In the event of any incident or suspicious activity, vessels are advised to notify the NATO Shipping Centre. It is possible that vessels operating in this area may encounter GPS interference, AIS spoofing, and/or other communications jamming.

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