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Ukrainian forces on the ground in another Russian territory



Ukrainian soldiers fire a Pion artillery system at Russian positions near Bakhmut, Donetsk region, Ukraine, Friday, Dec. 16, 2022. [AP Photo/LIBKOS]

Against the backdrop of the prospect of a US-brokered peace deal between the Zelensky and Putin governments, the Ukrainian military has launched another incursion into Russian territory. For weeks, Ukraine's armed forces have been operating in Belgorod oblast, which borders Ukraine to the east and is just south of Kursk, Russia, a region that Kiev invaded in August 2024 with the backing of NATO but from which it has since been forced out.

Russian military bloggers have been reporting on the presence of Ukrainian troops in Belgorod since late March, and on April 8, President Zelensky confirmed these operations, claiming his army had opened up a new front in the war. In a statement to Congress four days prior, US General Christopher Cavoli likewise reported that Kiev's forces had crossed the Russian border.

Speaking to Interfax-Ukraine on April 15, parliamentarian Roman Kostenko said that the main aim of the operation is “to pull enemy reserves away from the Kursk direction, from the Kharkov direction so that they do not concentrate there, do not attack.”

There have been conflicting statements about the scale and success of the incursion, with Ukraine attempting to cast its advance as a valuable gain that is drawing Russian forces away from other fronts. Russian social media commentators have, however, given varying assessments as to whether Ukrainian forces have managed to hold or been pushed out of towns proximate to the major city in the oblast, also named Belogord, which has a population of around 400,000. One Russian military source recently told the newspaper *Argumenty i Fakty* that defense intelligence had detected the movement of substantial Ukrainian reserves to the region.

Both sides report continual aerial bombardment of the region, with dozens of drone attacks happening daily in Belgorod, the surrounding oblasts, and farther afield, resulting in damage to infrastructure, injuries and deaths. Belgorod has been under federal emergency since August 2024.

After the Russian Ministry of Defense initially denied the presence of Ukrainian forces in Belgorod in late March, two weeks later the Kremlin evaded a reporter’s question about the matter during a press conference. When asked on April 8 to comment on Zelensky’s announcement that his military was operating in Belgorod, Kremlin Spokesman Dimitri Peskov stated, “Well, this directly concerns the details of the military operation, so such questions should be addressed to our Ministry of Defense.”

The Kremlin, which is hoping for a US-enforced peace agreement that will recognize its control over Crimea and the Donbass and guarantee that Ukraine will not join NATO, has reasons to understate the situation in Belgorod. It does not want to be baited by Ukraine’s obvious effort to escalate the conflict and undermine a possible American-brokered truce.

At the same time, the failure of the Russian military to prevent yet another incursion into the country’s territory is a humiliation and exposure of the bankruptcy of the Putin government. The Kremlin fears that the Russian working class, whose memory of the horrors of World War II is near and dear, will conclude that the country’s ruling oligarchy is incapable of defending them from imperialism and must be driven out of power. Russia is beleaguered by the war and, despite the government’s ability to thus far hold in check mass discontent, is staring down the prospect of an economic crisis that could undermine the entire socio-economic arrangement upon which the Kremlin’s power rests.

Even as it has tried to skirt the issue of Belgorod, the Putin government has continued to maintain military pressure on Zelensky's regime while simultaneously signaling its readiness, on terms it can accept, to agree to a US-brokered peace deal.

Russia launched a major attack on April 13 on the city of Sumy, resulting in dozens of civilian deaths. Just a week later, however, after the White House indicated it could walk away from trying to arrange a ceasefire, the Kremlin announced a unilateral 30-hour, Easter Sunday truce. Kiev, which greeted the announcement with barely contained disdain, declared that Moscow violated its own commitment to halt hostilities. Moscow likewise reported that the Zelensky government refused its one-day peace offering.

The Ukrainian regime is facing a political and military disaster. The Trump administration, as part of its gathering conflict with the European powers, has made clear that it is prepared to sacrifice Kiev if it suits it to do so.

The White House, according to press reports of the last few days, has now indicated that as part of a peace deal it is prepared to recognize Russian control of Crimea, a territory claimed by Ukraine as inviolably its own. At the same time, Washington is seeking to force Kiev to sign agreements that basically promise American corporations control over the country's mineral resources, and no doubt much more, in perpetuity.

All of this must send Ukraine's far-right, which wields immense influence in the Ukrainian state apparatus and armed forces, into a frenzy of rage. At the same time, however, the majority of the Ukrainian population wants the war to end.

At the same time, Ukraine's military is in crisis. It is running out of resources and, in particular, men. Having failed to bolster its ranks by violently dragging youth off the streets and hunting them down in their homes and communities, in February Kiev turned to recruiting 18 to 24-year-olds, who are currently exempt from conscription, by paying them to enlist. With a population mired in poverty, the Zelensky government is seeking to buy lives. These efforts, however, are failing to produce the desired results and the Ukrainian military continues to be undermanned.

In an effort to improve its geopolitical position by taking advantage of the China-US conflict, Ukraine accused China in early April of being party to the war by claiming that Chinese nationals are fighting on the Russian side. According to the Ukrainian president, 155 Chinese citizens have been recruited via Russian social media and the lure of thousands of dollars to join Moscow's army. A few days after this declaration, the Zelensky government went one step further by insisting that Beijing knows about their involvement.

As part of this, Ukraine's security services released an interrogation video in which two alleged prisoners of war confessed their involvement and provided details of their Chinese heritage. The individuals, whom the press could only describe as looking "Asian," were later paraded before television cameras and made to publicly confess their recruitment by Moscow. As the *Guardian* noted in its news report, they were "handcuffed and flanked by armed Ukrainian guards and it was unclear if they were speaking of their own volition."

Beijing initially responded by stating that it was looking into the claims of Chinese citizens serving in the Russian ranks and insisting, "the Chinese government always asks Chinese nationals to stay away from areas of armed conflict, avoid any form of involvement in armed conflict, and in particular avoid participation in any party's military operations."

When Zelensky implied that China was lying because it knew of its own nationals' participation in the conflict, Beijing issued a categorical denial and declared that Kiev must "avoid irresponsible remarks."

Russia likewise rejected Ukraine's accusation. Kremlin Spokesman Peskov told reporters on April 10, "China has always taken a very balanced position, so Zelensky is wrong."

According to an April 9 article in the British *Independent*, UK intelligence officials have found no link between Chinese fighters in Ukraine and the government in Beijing.

The US' response to Zelensky's bid to bring the China question into the American considerations of Ukraine's fate was tempered. State Department Spokesperson Tammy Bruce said the news of Chinese citizens' involvement in the war as "disturbing" and described Beijing as a "major enabler" of the war. However, it did not, at least for the moment, take the matter further.

It is unclear as to whether or not the Trump administration will negotiate an end to the Ukraine-Russia war. It is equally unclear how long, even if such a deal should emerge, it will hold. In addition to the turmoil and crisis gripping Washington, there is the question of how the European powers will try to manage the question of Russia in the context of the breakdown of the post-war order, the shredding of the trans-Atlantic alliance, and the explosive growth of tensions among themselves. "Deals with the devil," "falling outs among thieves," "easy pickings"—all of these aphorisms will be characteristics of bourgeois geopolitics of the coming period.

The central question everywhere, however, is that of the working class. War against Russia and war against China are not policies with a mass base. The breakdown of the global capitalist order is catapulting hundreds of millions into opposition with the existing order, and at the center of that will be their struggle against war.