

Ukraine War Is Losing Its Sparkle. Where's the Lady with the Lamp? M.K. Bhadrakumar

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The Russian Defence Ministry announced yesterday that at around 9.20 a.m. Moscow time, Razoni, ship flying the flag of Sierra Leone, left Odessa port in Ukraine as part of the recent grain deal. Razoni is carrying a cargo of maize to Istanbul port.

The MOD said the “control of the humanitarian operation for the departure of the first ship carrying agricultural products was planned with the active participation of Russian officers who are part of the Joint Coordination Centre in Istanbul.”

Meanwhile, **Secretary of State Antony Blinken** [said](#) yesterday, “this is a good and important first step” that the first ship with 26-, 27,000 tons of grain sailed out of Odessa.

Searching for the needle in a haystack is exciting, as there could be sudden surprises. There are growing signs that the diplomatic front on Ukraine conflict is livening up.

On Monday, the US **President Joe Biden** offered talks with Russia. In his statement ahead of the tenth Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) review conference, Biden reiterated the US’ “shared belief” with Russia that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought” and that “my administration has prioritised reducing the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy.”

[Biden continued:](#)

“I’ve worked on arms control from the earliest days of my career, and the health of the NPT has always rested on meaningful, reciprocal arms limits between the United States and Russian Federation. Even at the height of the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union were able to work together to uphold our shared responsibility to ensure strategic stability. Today, my Administration is ready to expeditiously negotiate a new

arms control framework to replace New START when it expires in 2026. But negotiation requires a willing partner operating in good faith. And Russia's brutal and unprovoked aggression in Ukraine has shattered peace in Europe and constitutes an attack on fundamental tenets of international order. In this context, Russia should demonstrate that it is ready to resume work on nuclear arms control with the United States."

Simultaneously, Blinken also alluded to Russia's key role for "making sure that countries with nuclear weapons, including the United States, pursue disarmament; making sure that countries that don't have nuclear weapons do not acquire them by upholding and strengthening nonproliferation; and making sure that countries can engage in the peaceful use of nuclear energy, something that is even more vital as we deal with the challenges posed by climate change."

Blinken has had a makeover lately [pushing back an avalanche of hawkish opinion](#) represented by **House Speaker Nancy Pelosi**, US Senate, Ukraine's president **Volodymyr Zelensky** and the Ukrainian Parliament who demand that Russia be formally designated a state sponsor of terrorism, a label reserved for North Korea, Syria, Cuba and Iran.

Indeed, [Blinken's phone call](#) to Russian **FM Sergey Lavrov** on prisoner exchange was a US-Russia re-engagement since February and therefore a subtle messaging in itself. (Biden's offer of talks has come within the week.)

These fresh tidings need to be seen alongside the trend of the "collective West" lately working to ease the anti-Russian sanctions. The following developments suggest a pattern:

- Canada [announced](#) on July 9 — on Germany's request and Washington's backing — while also ignoring Ukraine's objections, a waiver of sanctions that allowed the return of equipment for Nord Stream 1 pipeline so as to support Europe's access to "reliable and affordable energy";
- European Union [issued a guideline](#) on July 13 (in relation to the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad) "that the transit of sanctioned goods by road with Russian operators is not allowed under the EU measures. No such similar prohibition exists for rail transport" (via Lithuania.)
- On August 1, the UK [eased some restrictions](#) to allow companies to provide insurance and reinsurance to Russian entities, which have implications for shipping and aviation industries.
- The EU also allowed "exemption (for Russia) from the prohibition to engage in transactions with certain state-owned entities as regards transactions for agricultural products and the transport of oil to third countries."
- Bloomberg had [reported on June 13](#) that "US government is quietly encouraging" agricultural and shipping companies to buy and carry more Russia's fertilizer, whose exports are down 24% this year as "many shippers, banks and insurers have been staying away from the trade out of fear they could inadvertently fall afoul of the rules... and (Washington) is in the seemingly paradoxical position of looking for ways to boost them (Russian exports.)"

However, on the war front, Russia's special military operations to grind the Ukrainian forces are continuing, albeit without significant changes on the battlefield. The current frontline in Donbass appears to be along the Bakhmut -Soledar-Seversk line where Ukrainian forces try to slow down the Russian offensive on the cities of Slavyansk and Kramatorsk from the

eastern direction.

Positional battles are also going on along the entire frontline in Eastern and Southern Ukraine. The western media, prompted by the Kiev regime, is hyping up an imminent Ukrainian “counteroffensive” in the southern region of Kherson, but that is a stretch. In fact, in the weekend, Ukraine’s 128th Mountain Assault Brigade in Zaporozhye direction reportedly suffered such heavy losses that demoralised troops began abandoning combat positions and desertion from the frontline.

Although Razoni sailed out yesterday, Russian strikes also destroyed one launcher of US-made anti-ship Harpoon missile system in Odessa Region while high-precision strike also destroyed two advanced US rocket launchers of HIMARS in Kharkov.

Against such a convoluted backdrop, an opinion is building up in the US that the Kiev regime is stringing the West, and needs to be firmly told that all good things must come to an end.

Reflecting this nascent thinking, the National Interest featured a piece last week by two influential American think tankers close to the Democratic Party circles who had served in the White House and State Department under the Obama administration. Read it [here](#).

Conceivably, there is a convergence here with Russia’s grouse that but for Kiev’s intransigence, peace talks are possible. Putin has invited Turkish president **Recep Erdogan** to meet up at Sochi on Friday. ([here](#), [here](#).) Erdogan had said he hoped the recent grain deal would be a turning point for the resumption of political talks between Ukraine and Russia to end the armed conflict. ([here](#))

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