

Op-Ed: Don't ignore Russian threat to Ukrainian nuclear power plants

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Zaporizhzhia's nuclear workers are kept at gunpoint by Russians (Flickr). Russian interference with nuclear sites should concern the world just as much as Vladimir Putin's verbal threats to use nuclear weapons.

The weaponization of three of Ukraine's nuclear power plants—some of the world's largest—includes callous disregard of Russian soldiers' own radioactive sickness as a result, likely part of the 25,000 deaths and 80,000 casualties of the war to date. They even made soldiers dig trenches in Chernobyl's Red Forest.

An expansion of the southeastern war front in Ukraine culminated in a Russian missile strike hitting the Pivdennoukrainsk nuclear power plant. This latest assault represents a continued weaponization of Ukrainian nuclear power plants, including the notable Zaporizhzhya facility, with its third electric grid shutdown, and Chernobyl's plant. The weakening of accepted norms regarding civilian nuclear energy led Rafael Grossi, director-general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), to send a support and assistance mission to Zaporizhzhya.



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The delegation of technical experts—tasked with examining physical damage to Zaporizhzhya, testing backup security structures and evaluating staff conditions—signifies the growing concern for a potential radiation leak amid current fighting. So far, the fact-finding mission provided a risk management service without accusatory language towards the perpetrators for fear of obstructing the independent investigation altogether. The question remains of how best to desist tit-for-tat attacks around nuclear power plants and thus minimize the threat of exposure.

Six months into the Russo-Ukrainian War, working conditions at Zaporizhzhya plant remain grim. The facility, consisting of six VVER-1000 reactors, sustained damages from external shelling that struck special buildings housing monitoring systems and stored fuel, along with breakage near the reactors. The Ukrainian state nuclear energy company, Energoatom, documented an insecure off-site power supply. While fires severed most high-voltage transmission lines connecting the facility to the national power grid, the sole operational reactor unit was satisfying electricity demand, until a safety protocol was reached to enact a cold shutdown. The site contains 20 diesel generators for stable operation of reactors and coolant functions in the face of sporadic emergency power outages.

At the onset of the war, Russian forces captured the Ukrainian city of Enerhodar, the site of Europe's largest nuclear power plant. At Zaporizhzhya, UN observers identified the presence of Russian military equipment, personnel and vehicles during the mission. Ukraine claims that Russia has transformed the power plant into a springboard for artillery strikes on towns along the northern stretch of the Dnieper River.

Russia, in turn, blames Ukraine for a recent drone attack targeting administrative and storage facilities within the compound. A plant worker also was killed in a mortar attack outside the power plant. Deteriorating safety conditions have exacerbated reciprocal accusations of military provocation between Ukrainian and Russian counterparts.

The ever-declining security circumstances have led the European Commission to donate more than five million potassium iodide pills to residents living within a 35-mile radius of the plant as a preventative measure against radiation-induced diseases, namely thyroid cancer. President Volodymyr Zelensky urged citizens to take the pills.



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The IAEA maintains a position of neutrality, serving as the loudest advocate for demilitarization and the formulation of a security zone. The European Union and United States echoed the same program policy, with EU Foreign Policy Chief Josep Borrell pushing for a full withdrawal of Russian forces from the plant. Thus far, Russia stands opposed to de-escalatory proposals that insist on returning ownership of the plant, and Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu branded Ukraine guilty of "nuclear terrorism" following a barrage of nearby projectiles.

Most recently, however, Russian forces stepped up assaults on critical infrastructure in and around Kharkiv, causing widespread blackouts and water shortages. Observers find Ukraine's eastward counteroffensive—targeting ammunition depots and supply routes—a probable catalyst for Russia's latest retaliatory campaign.

Failure to contain the dangers of a nuclear fallout, directly or indirectly, marks a turning point in the status quo for secure and reliable civilian nuclear energy. Earlier in the war, footage exposed Russian troops digging trenches in contaminated areas of the Chernobyl exclusion zone, leaving radiation levels elevated after a pullout of Russian troops who themselves also contracted radiation sickness by the recklessly assigned action.

The disregard for radioactive sickness corresponds to the low-level threat perception emanating from a military policy that discriminately targets nuclear power stations. As Ukraine and Russia jointly expressed varying degrees of support for a security zone (though Russia showed no willingness to do anything about it), efforts are underway to form a permanent IAEA monitoring group. The push for Russian demilitarization of Zaporizhzhya appears largely unattainable without further damaging the power plant because they will not leave willingly without a very dangerous fight.

The opportunity for diplomacy is nearing dangerously close to a breakdown, with close-quarter fighting minimizing room for political maneuverability. As multilateral institutions deploy resources and experts to survey and stabilize the Zaporizhzhya power plant, the last avenue for mitigation now consists of a broad-based coalition of international actors naming and shaming instigators of violence. Instead of a no one wins-boxing in, Russia can and must wake up and help prevent a nuclear catastrophe in Ukraine.

Robert Weiner was a spokesman in the Clinton and George W. Bush White Houses, and earlier for the House Government Operations Committee, as well as for Gen. Barry McCaffrey and a number of lawmakers. Joshua Himelfarb is a policy analyst at Robert Weiner Associates and Solutions for Change.