



ARGUMENT

An expert's point of view on a current event.

Ukraine's Counteroffensive Has a Nuclear Complication

Ukrainian troops are targeting an area where Russians are still holed up in a nuclear power plant.

By [Anchal Vohra](#), a columnist at *Foreign Policy*.



Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, Europe's largest nuclear power station and currently held by Russian occupying forces, is pictured on October 29, 2022 from Prydniprovsk in Dnipropetrovsk oblast, Ukraine. CARL COURT/GETTY IMAGES

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Zaporizhzhia, one of the four regions Russia has annexed and claimed as a part of the Russian Federation, is at the heart of Ukraine's strategy for its much-touted spring counteroffensive. The rationale for focusing on Zaporizhzhia is clear enough: It lies on the land corridor along the Sea of Azov

that connects Russian troops with their supply lines in eastern Ukraine all the way from the Donbas region to Crimea.

It also poses a distinct military challenge, however. Russians are still holed up in the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant in Enerhodar, implicitly threatening a nuclear catastrophe were Ukrainian forces parked on the other side of the Dnipro River to try to reclaim the region.

Zaporizhzhia, the largest nuclear power plant in Europe, which fulfilled 20 percent of Ukraine's electricity needs in peacetime, is on the front line of the war. A small action, deliberate or accidental, could trigger a meltdown at the site, with devastating impact on human life and the environment.

Ukrainians have been on the receiving end of such a crisis earlier, too, under Soviet rule. In April 1986, an explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, 60 miles north of Kyiv, contaminated millions of acres of forest and agricultural land, poisoned fish, and led to deformities at birth in livestock—all that in addition to the devastating and direct impacts on humans, including thousands of recorded cases of cancer.

Russian troops occupied Chernobyl right after the launch of the full-scale invasion last February but evacuated the site at the end of March. During their stay, they dug trenches in the exclusion zone, which is still considered highly radioactive, imprudently exposing themselves to radiation.

On the 37th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster last month, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky warned of a repeat and said the presence of Russian troops at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant has “again put the world in danger.” He demanded that Russia be prevented from using nuclear power stations to “blackmail” Ukraine, presumably via an implicit threat if Ukrainian forces attempted to win back the region and its prime asset.

Foreign Policy's conversations with Ukrainian experts suggest they find a military operation to retake the nuclear plant more attractive than sitting idly by and waiting for a disaster as Russia deploys heavy armaments and uses the sensitive installation as a military base.

“Negotiations with a terrorist state won't lead to anything,” said Oleksandr Kharchenko, the managing director of the Energy Industry Research Center in Kyiv. “The only solution is that the Ukrainian military retakes the power station. I am sure they are smart enough to change the situation to the better.”

The *Times of London* [reported](#) last month that Ukrainian forces had already at least once attempted to recapture the plant, in a special forces raid that withdrew on meeting stiff resistance from the Russians.

Alina Frolova, a former Ukrainian deputy defense minister, agreed with Kharchenko that Ukraine had every right to reclaim its territory but added that there was no guarantee that a Ukrainian military operation could be carried out without risk of an escalation in an already fragile security dynamic at the plant. “We are in the middle of the most unconventional war. Do you think anything can be done safely? Nothing can be done safely—there is always risk. Russia can blow up the plant.”

Russian forces have stored ammunition inside the turbine halls with reactors, placed guns on the roofs of the plant, and roam around with weaponry near the site where radioactive material is stored, all of which present an imminent danger to the safety of the plant, according to Petro Kotin, the president of Energoatom, Ukraine's state nuclear plant operator.



James Stavridis, a former supreme allied commander Europe of NATO, moderates a panel talk at the 2018 Munich Security Conference.

It is the first time in the history of modern warfare that a nuclear power plant has been weaponized by an invading force to gain an upper hand in the conflict. Steven Nesbit, a former president of the American Nuclear Society, said the occupation of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant by Russian forces was “clearly a gross violation of all norms of human behavior.”

The American Nuclear Society has learned that Russian forces have “mined the perimeter of the station and placed military equipment directly in the power-generating portion of the nuclear power plant,” Nesbit told *Foreign Policy*. He added that more than 500 Russian military personnel are reportedly at the station at any point in time.

There are other risks to the safety of the plant. The four main supply lines powering the plant were brought down in shelling from both sides in the war, cutting it off from Ukraine’s electricity grid. Now, separate power supply is needed to cool the reactors—but that is intermittently interrupted, increasing the risk of a meltdown. Moreover, there is a concern that not all the specialized staff needed to operate the plant are available any longer.

Some have been killed in Russia’s infamous basements, or underground torture cells. Nearly half of the 11,000 workers at the plant fled when they could, and many others refused to work under the Russians. Only about a quarter have signed a contract with a subsidiary of Rosatom, Russia’s state-run nuclear energy company, either under threat or when lured with double the pay. Yet accounts of torture and

highhandedness by Russians have created the kind of stress far too risky to be endured by essential staff required to maintain the functioning of a sensitive installation.

Kharchenko told *Foreign Policy* that he had personally heard of several cases of torture of the Zaporizhzhia staff. "In one case, a man was taken by Russia and tortured and never returned home. His relatives even requested the Russians to send him back, but no information was provided to them."

Shelling from both sides has further endangered the safety of the plant.

Late last month, Rafael Grossi, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), said experts with the agency stationed at the plant reported shelling nearly every day over a week, underlining the potential dangers of "continued military activity in the region."

"I saw clear indications of military preparations in the area when I visited the [Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant] just over three weeks ago. Since then, our experts at the site have frequently reported about hearing detonations, at times suggesting intense shelling not far from the site. I'm deeply concerned about the situation at the plant," he [said](#) on April 21.

The IAEA has said Russia has violated each of the seven pillars of nuclear safety and warned that the plant's safety was on "[borrowed time](#)." It wouldn't, however, spell out why Grossi's efforts to get both Ukraine and Russia to agree to a demilitarized zone have collapsed.

Since an understanding was agreed on the passage of Ukrainian grain through the Black Sea, some felt there was hope a similar agreement could be reached on a safe zone around the nuclear plant. Those efforts, however, have stalled.

In January, Grossi had said he [remained](#) "determined to make the much-needed protection zone a reality as soon as possible." But by late March, he seemed to have given up when he said the concept had evolved and that he was now focused on "protection [of the plant] itself and the things that should be avoided." Grossi did not elaborate what led to the failure of his original plan. *Foreign Policy* reached out to the IAEA and asked for clarification but was pointed to Grossi's March [statement](#), which only went as far as to say "territorial aspects" of that idea posed certain problems.

The Russian news agency TASS [reported](#) in February that Russia had agreed to discuss a safe zone but that Ukraine did not wish to grant the Russian occupation the legitimacy given by engaging in talks over what is Ukrainian territory. Ukrainians believe Russia is not serious about giving up control of the plant while it is still trying to connect it to the Russian grid under the wholesale control of Rosatom. "This is the same as stealing Ukrainian grain, coal mines, factories. This is the Russian stealing policy more than anything else," Frolova said. "Like they are [stealing toilets](#) from people's homes."