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Ukraine War Update, 1-29 Feb 2024

Sweden joins NATO

Prabowo's Win! Understanding Indonesia's 2024 General Election

Ukraine War Update, 1-29 Feb 2024

The Ukraine war has become almost static. Both sides have dug in; the front lines barely shifted during the last year. Ukraine's summer counter offensive counter-offensive failed to achieve any breakthrough, with its generals complaining of growing shortages of both arms and soldiers. During the past few months, Ukraine's forces have suffered setbacks on the Eastern front.

As the Ukraine war enters its third year, the mood in Kiev remains solemn with President Zelensky facing what may be his toughest test. He must hold together an exhausted society and try to rally splintering international support that has led to a critical shortage of ammunition at the front. Looking to dispel concerns the West is losing interest in the conflict, Italy's Giorgia Meloni and Canada's Justin Trudeau came to Kyiv on February 24, with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo.

During a press conference on February 25, Zelenskiy underlined the stakes over the next year. "The first year was just survival, utter survival ... The second year was resilience, resistance ... The third year will be decisive. It's a year of challenges from inside and outside. Zelenskiy admitted that much about Ukraine's future depends on these outside factors and particularly the mood in Washington.

Earlier on February 7, President Zelensky removed Gen. Valery Zaluzhny, Chief of Ukraine's army as part of a sweeping overhaul of his military command, the most significant shake-up in Ukrainian leadership since Russia invaded almost two years ago. Gen Zaluzhny's relationship with President Zelensky had deteriorated as Ukraine failed to make a breakthrough in its counter-offensive. While Gen Zaluzhny's dismissal has been speculated for weeks, the upheaval comes at a difficult moment for Ukraine in the war.



In the early hours of February 17th Colonel General Oleksandr Syrsky, who was appointed as Ukraine's commander-in-chief only on February 8th, announced that, in order to avoid their being encircled, he was pulling his troops out of the eastern town of Avdiivka and moving them to "more favourable lines". Although the fall of the embattled city of Avdiivka was expected for weeks, the loss of a well-defended and strategically located city marked Ukraine's worst defeat since the fall of Bakhmut last May.

Avdiivka had been a military stronghold for the better part of a decade, in the face of a withering Russian assault. The Russians stepped up their efforts to take the city on October 23, launching large-scale assaults to broadly encircle the area. Those attempts largely failed and resulted in some of the heaviest Russian losses of the

war. Early this year, the Russians managed to break into the city of Avdiivka itself, at which point Ukrainian losses started to increase significantly.

Since the failure of last summer's counter-offensive General Syrsky has talked about shifting the armed forces to a defence posture, a clear sign that the counter-offensive is well and truly over and Ukraine is switching to trying to hold what it still has. While withdrawal from Avdiivka had operation salience, unless Ukrainian forces can now rapidly secure new defensive lines the Russians will surge forward and capture yet more territory.

As Avdiivka fell it was clear that the Russians were keeping up the pressure over the whole eastern front line. Since the beginning of the year, Russia has continued its offensives against Ukraine. Over the past couple of months, the Russians have undertaken attacks in the northeast, the east and the south. Of recent importance, Russia has continued prosecuting its offensive operations to envelop and capture Avdiivka. However, it appears that Russia may be preparing to step up its offensive even further as winter turns to spring in Ukraine.

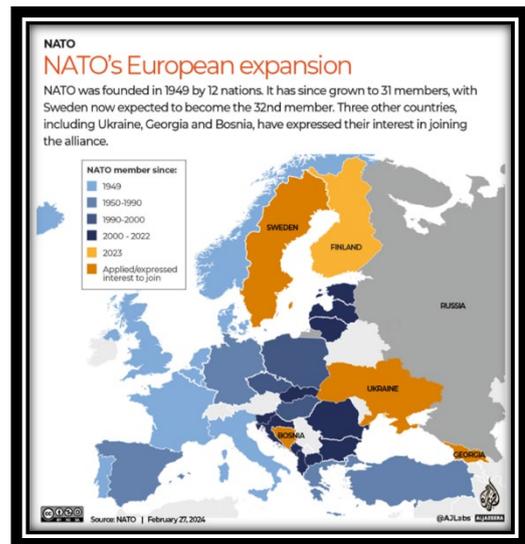
Ukraine's recent setback in war has led to significant debates in Europe about future military support to Ukraine. In a meeting of European leaders in Paris, French President Macron suggested it might be necessary to send ground troops to Ukraine. Past shibboleths such as sending long-range missiles and planes had been cast aside, Macron said, adding that "There is no consensus to officially back any ground troops. That said, nothing should be excluded. We will do everything that we can to make sure that Russia does not prevail." European countries were quick to distance themselves from the idea of sending combat troops and the French president faced a barrage of criticism of the suggestion. However, President Macron reiterated, on February 29, that his refusal to rule out the prospect of sending Western troops to Ukraine was "weighed, thought through and measured."

Sweden joins NATO

Hungary's parliament approved Sweden's application to join NATO on Monday, paving the way for the Scandinavian country to become the alliance's 32nd member. Hungary was the last holdout after Turkey agreed to Sweden's accession in January. Once neutral Sweden and neighboring Finland decided to seek NATO membership after Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. While Finland joined in April of last year, Sweden was kept waiting as both Turkey and Hungary held up the process.

"Sweden is now leaving 200 years of neutrality and nonalignment behind us," Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson said after Hungary's Parliament gave its approval Monday, overcoming the final hurdle. "It is a big step. We must take that seriously. But it is also a very natural step that we are taking." Since the early 19th century, Sweden embraced a policy of neutrality, refusing to take sides in wars or join any military alliance. This remarkably long era of nonalignment is coming to a close as ceremonial formalities for Sweden's ascension to NATO are expected soon.

For a country that hasn't fought a war in two centuries, the decision to join NATO was huge. Sweden declined to take sides during both world wars and throughout the Cold War, embracing neutrality as core to its security policy and even its national identity. Despite joining the European Union in 1995 and progressively enhanced cooperation with NATO, Stockholm had ruled out joining NATO due to strong public sentiment against such a move. As late as November 2021, just three months before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, then-Defense Minister Peter Hultqvist had asserted that Sweden would never join NATO while his center-left Social Democrats were in office.



With Russia's invasion of Ukraine, public opinion significantly shifted both in Finland and Sweden. Even Hultqvist and the Social Democrats made a U-turn, and in May 2022 Sweden and Finland jointly applied for NATO membership. Since both countries had already fulfilled the membership criteria, it was expected that their application would be fast-tracked given the urgency of the Ukraine war. While the majority of NATO members ratified the accession protocols swiftly, the process got held up due to the opposition of Turkey and Hungary.

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said both countries must abandon support for Kurdish groups that he said threatened Turkey's national security. During the NATO summit in Madrid in June 2022, Turkey, Sweden and Finland signed a trilateral agreement seeking to address Erdoğan's concerns. Further negotiations got prolonged due to anti-Ankara protests in both countries and issues related to blocked military supplies to Turkey. Taking umbrage to pro-Kurdish protests and the incident of the Quran burning in Stockholm in January 2023, Turkey decided to ratify Finland's ascension while keeping Sweden's bid to join NATO on hold. Turkey ratified the ascension of Finland in March 2023. After protracted negotiations with a new conservative government in Stockholm, Turkey's parliament ratified Sweden's accession protocol on January 23, 2024.

Unlike Turkey, Hungary did not specify any reason for holding ratification of Sweden's NATO membership. Hungary's Prime Minister Orbán indicated in November 2022 that Hungary would support both country's accession after Turkey's concern has been addressed. Mr Orbán also indicated reluctance among some MPs about the prospect of enlargement and its impact on Russia. In February 2023, he said that Hungary "supports Sweden and Finland's accession to NATO in principle, we first need to have some serious discussions." Following Turkey's ratification of Finland's membership, Hungary also ratified while keeping Swedish ascension on hold.

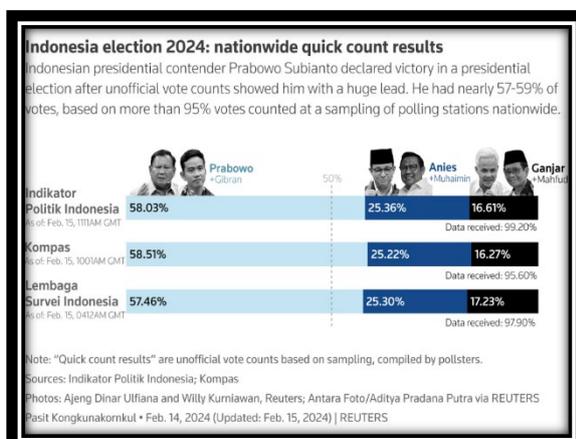
Sweden, like most members of the European Union, has long accused Hungary of undermining democracy and violating minority rights. However, in recent

times, Stockholm has largely refrained from criticism of Hungarian domestic policy. Mr Orbán's tough stance on Sweden, as well as his initial blocking of the Ukraine aid package, reflected his approach to establishing his country as a political force to be reckoned with in European geopolitics.

The political symbolism of two staunchly neutral states – Sweden and Finland – joining NATO is huge. Both have a long experience of managing their relationship with Russia while remaining fiercely independent. Abandoning neutrality and joining NATO because of Russia's actions is a major change in their respective foreign policies. Sweden's geographical position and military capability make it an essential part of any NATO defence contingencies. Its location means it can serve as a land transit route to reinforce both Norway and Finland, while also allowing NATO to largely take control of the Baltic Sea in any potential conflict with Russia.

Prabowo's Win! Understanding Indonesia's 2024 General Election

Indonesia, the world's third most populous democracy, conducted its general election on 14 February 2024. Approximately 75% of the 200 million eligible voters participated in selecting not only the president but also members of Parliament and local representatives. Prabowo Subianto, a presidential contender, garnered around 57 percent of the votes, based on more than 95% of the ballots counted as of 15 February 2024, across a sampling of polling stations nationwide.



While official results may require up to a month for confirmation, exit polls known as "quick counts," suggest that Prabowo Subianto, a 72-year-old former general, secured over 50% of the vote, indicating a landslide victory. This outcome also implies that the election will not proceed to a second round.

Under the election regulations, for direct election, the presidential and vice-presidential candidates' combination must receive more than half of the ballots in the first round of voting and secure more than 20 percent of the votes in more than half of Indonesia's provinces and regions. If no group meets these criteria, a second round of voting will be conducted between the two groups of candidates with the highest votes. In this election, Prabowo's vice-presidential running mate was Joko Widodo's eldest son, Gibran Rakabuming Raka. Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo, the seventh and current president of Indonesia, has served two consecutive terms, and this term marks his second and final one, concluding this year. According to the Indonesian Constitution, no individual can hold the presidency for more than two terms.

The runner-up, presidential candidate in this election is Anies Baswedan as of now, appears to have secured approximately 25% of the vote, while another candidate, Ganjar Pranowo, holds just around 17%. Both Anies and Ganjar urged the public

to refrain from concluding the outcome and await the official results. Additionally, their campaign teams stated that they were investigating reports of electoral violations, branding them as "structural, systematic, and massive fraud."

The world's largest single-day election witnessed nearly 259,000 candidates contending for 20,600 positions across the archipelago of 17,000 islands. In the legislative contest, a coalition of parties supporting Prabowo secured about 42 percent of the votes, suggesting that a potential Prabowo government could have robust parliamentary support.

Former general and commander of Indonesia's elite special forces, Prabowo, was previously recognized as the son-in-law of long-time leader Suharto. His military career extended from the mid-1970s to the late 1990s, during which he served in various positions. His final appointment was as Commander of Kostrad (Indonesian Army Strategic Reserve Command) in 1998. After departing from the military, Prabowo entered his brother's business and subsequently ascended as one of the foremost business tycoons in the country. Before venturing into politics, Prabowo's Nusantara Group presided over dozens of companies within Indonesia and overseas, encompassing sectors such as oil and natural gas trading, coal mining, palm oil plantations, and the fisheries industry.

In 2009, Prabowo Subianto made his debut in the Indonesian presidential race as the vice-presidential candidate alongside Megawati Sukarnoputri as the presidential candidate, but they were defeated by Yudhoyono. He made further attempts to secure the presidency in the 2014 and 2019 elections, but was unsuccessful on both occasions, losing to Jokowi. Following his 2019 victory, Jokowi extended an invitation to Prabowo to serve as the defence minister in his cabinet.

Election analysts attribute Prabowo's convincing victory this time to the absence of an electoral contest against the immensely popular incumbent, "Jokowi". Jokowi continues to enjoy approval ratings well over 70%. Even in this election, Prabowo's party, the Gerindra Party, secured third place according to "quick counts" conducted immediately following the voting for national and regional legislators. This outcome suggests that Prabowo will be unable to pursue his agenda unilaterally; rather, he will need to establish a coalition government, as he had pledged to do.

The incoming successor to President Widodo is expected to assume control of an economy currently undergoing significant growth and will be tasked with overseeing ambitious infrastructure projects, including the relocation of the nation's capital from Jakarta to Borneo, a venture estimated to cost over \$30 billion. Furthermore, the outcome of the election carries considerable implications for both the United States and China, given Indonesia's expansive domestic market, abundant natural resources such as nickel and palm oil, and its diplomatic influence within Southeast Asia. During President Widodo's tenure, there were notable improvements in economic growth and infrastructure development, marked by initiatives aimed at attracting major Chinese corporations and the electric car manufacturer Tesla to invest in the country's nickel mining industry.