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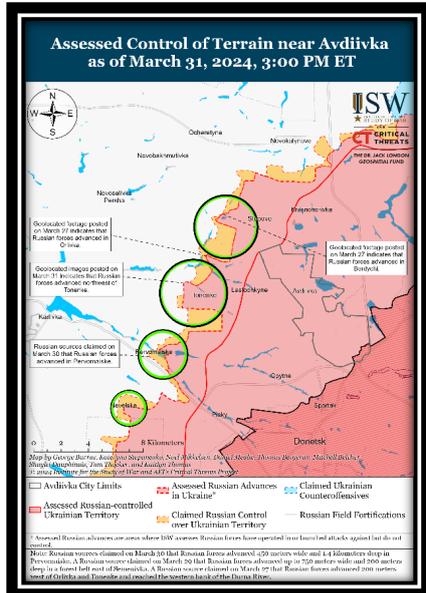
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Ukraine War Update, 1-31 March 2024

As of 31 March, Russian forces continue to maintain pressure on the entire front. Since the fall in February of Avdiivka, a bitterly fought-over coking town in Donetsk province, Russian forces have been pressing hard in eastern Ukraine.



Ukrainian forces appear to have repelled a Russian battalion-sized mechanized assault near Avdiivka, Donetsk Oblast, on March 30 — the first battalion-sized mechanized assault since Russian forces began the campaign to seize Avdiivka in late October 2023. The scale of the Russian mechanized assault on March 30 is significant. Russian forces have not conducted a mechanized assault this large since the beginning of the Russian localized offensive effort to seize Avdiivka in late October 2023.

While Ukraine is currently preventing Russian forces from making significant tactical gains, it faces considerable challenges due to growing shortages of military equipment including critically required artillery ammunition. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated in an interview with CBS News published on March 28 that Ukrainian forces managed to hold off Russian advances through winter 2023–2024 and that Ukrainian forces have stabilized the operational situation.

However, Imbroglia at the US Congress in approving a \$60 billion military aid package has been costly for Ukraine, Zelensky said. The Ukrainian military has been unable to plan future operations while legislators squabbled for nearly six months. He warned that hard-pressed Ukrainian forces might have to retreat to secure their front lines and conserve ammunition. Looking ahead, Zelensky said Ukraine’s options depend on the US Congress’s decision. Until Ukraine knows it has continuing U.S. support, “we will stay where we are now in the East.” He said Ukraine might conduct limited offensive operations, but “to push them out, we need more weapons.”

During March, both sides maintain constant attacks on each other’s critical infrastructure using missiles and drones. Russia concentrated airstrikes on Odesa, targeting the Black Sea port city and region almost every day. On 12 March, Ukraine targeted Russian energy facilities in one of its largest cross-border drone and rocket attacks of the war. Ukraine launched dozens of drones at targets in Russia on Tuesday, with one striking an oil refinery in the Russian region of Nizhny Novgorod that produces nearly 6% of Russia’s total refined crude, and another hitting an oil depot with petroleum products in the city of Oryol. In response, Russia launched a devastating strike on Odessa killing at least 20 people. On 17 March, the last day of the Presidential election in Russia, Ukraine launched 35 drones at targets across Russia that sparked a brief fire at an oil refinery, took aim at Moscow, and disrupted electricity supplies in border areas.

While Russia accused Ukraine of using “terrorist activities” to try to disrupt its presidential election, President Vladimir Putin won a record post-Soviet landslide in the election. Putin told supporters in a victory speech in Moscow that he would prioritise resolving tasks associated with what he called Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine and would strengthen the Russian military. Putin made it clear that the result should send a message to the West that its leaders will have to reckon with an emboldened Russia, whether in war or peace, for many more years to come.

On 22 March 2024, a terrorist attack carried out by the Islamic State occurred at the Crocus City Hall music venue in Krasnogorsk, Moscow Oblast, Russia. The attack left at least 144 dead and some 551 more injured. Even though the Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attack, Russian authorities suggested that Ukraine may have been involved in the attack at Crocus City. President Putin in his speech on 23 March said that “the Ukrainian side” had “prepared a window” for the terrorists to cross the border from Russia into Ukraine before they were apprehended. Notwithstanding Kyiv’s denial of the attack, Ukraine’s capital and the western region of Lviv came under a “massive” Russian air attack on 24 March.

The arrival of spring has given Ukraine little respite for the time being. Muddy terrain due to the thawing of snow would significantly constrain military movements during the coming month. However, this respite is unlikely to last long. As spring turns to summer, Russia may mount a big new offensive, as it did last year. Given the critical shortages of manpower and military ordnance, Ukraine’s ability to hold it off this time looks much less sure now than it did then.

Growing security threats in Pakistan and their implications

Terror attacks in Pakistan are increasingly becoming a serious concern for the country’s security. In the latest high-profile attack in Bisham, on 26 March 2014, a suicide bomber struck a convoy that was carrying Chinese engineers from Islamabad to their camp in Dasu, the district headquarters of the Upper Kohistan district of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KP), killing six including five Chinese nationals. It was not the first attack on the Chinese working in Pakistan. Chinese nationals have been targeted in the past and the last few years attacks on them have increased in the restive province of Balochistan. Only six days ago, on 20 March, the port city of Gwadar, which is being managed by a Chinese state-run firm called China Overseas Port Holding Company (COPHC), was targeted.

On 16 March, seven Pakistan soldiers including two officers were killed in an attack in North Waziristan. This had led Pakistan to carry out airstrikes inside Afghanistan to hit what it called hideouts of the Hafiz Gul Bahadur Group, a terror outfit that along with the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has been accused of having carried out multiple terrorist attacks inside Pakistan. The airstrikes had led to a strong reaction from the Afghan Taliban, that the consequences of such action “will be out of Pakistan’s control.”

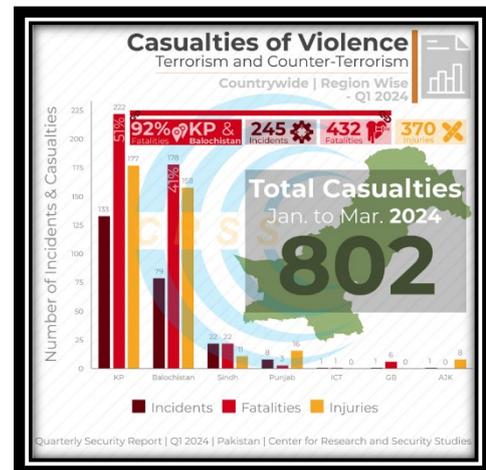
Terrorism has become a major irritant in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations ever since the Taliban returned to power in Kabul in August 2021. Many in Pakistan had hoped that, given the close links between their security establishment and the Taliban, the Taliban regime in Kabul would contain security threats for Pakistan emerging from Afghanistan. However, that has not been the case. Not only have terror attacks increased but terror groups have also diversified their targets—from attacking security forces, and installations to ambushing Chinese nationals working in Pakistan on various CPEC projects.

It is important to understand the attackers and their motives. The upsurge in terror attacks in Pakistan has been attributed to anti-Pakistan forces, like the TTP and other insurgents who have allegedly been provided unhindered space in Afghanistan, after the Taliban's return. Pakistan has raised the issue with the Taliban but the latter do not appear to be willing to act against the TTP. To build pressure on Kabul, Pakistan even decided to expel what it called “illegal Afghan refugees” in November 2023. But the decision has neither helped in stopping the terror attacks nor forced the Taliban to take action against these terrorists.

It should be made clear here that not all attacks are carried out by the TTP alone. Some attacks, particularly in Balochistan, are claimed by Baloch separatist groups. However, there are reports of tactical collaboration between the TTP and Baloch rebels in the media in recent years. If it is true, it would have severe implications for the Balochistan province. Hinting at the cross-border linkage of the rebel groups who are carrying out attacks on Chinese nationals in Balochistan, Pak Defence Minister Khawaja Asif claimed that “The source of terrorism in Pakistan is in Afghanistan and despite our efforts, Kabul is not making any progress in this direction.”

Such statements are indicative of the dissonance in Pak-Taliban relations in recent years. The Afghan Taliban have taken exception to such Pakistani allegations.

Pakistan witnessed as many as 245 incidents of terror attacks and counter-terror operations during the first quarter of 2024, resulting in 432 fatalities and 370 injuries among civilians, security personnel and rebels according to a report by a Pakistani think tank.



The surge in terrorist activities inside Pakistan has also jeopardised Pakistan's relations with Iran as well. In January 2024, Iran carried out strikes inside Balochistan, claiming that some members of Jaish-e-Adl, an Iranian Baloch terror group, were hiding in the province. Islamabad retaliated by hitting targets in Sistan- Balochistan province of Iran, claiming that some Pakistani Baloch militants were operating from there. Both countries accuse each other of not doing enough to stop the use of their respective lands against the other.

Apart from security concerns, the targets the terrorists have chosen have serious economic implications as well. Targeting Chinese nationals is intended to hurt Chinese investment in Pakistan. This is designed to make China worry about its projects under CPEC, which adds to the Chinese concerns about the ongoing economic crisis in Pakistan. It is no surprise that Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, along with his cabinet colleagues, had to visit the Chinese embassy in Pakistan to give an assurance that the security of the Chinese working in Pakistan would not be compromised.

Meanwhile, the Afghan Taliban appear in no mood to act against the TTP. They seem to use the group as leverage against Pakistan to build pressure on the latter to be mindful of Kabul's interests. Given the situation, terrorism will continue to be an irritant, particularly in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. If not stopped, terror attacks have severe security, economic and political implications for Pakistan.

Canberra remains cautious after Chinese FM Wang Yi visit, Beijing declares reset of ties

After a gap of seven years, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi was received in Canberra, Australia by his counterpart Penny Wong for a high-level visit, as relations between the two nations thaw after the tumultuous turn of ties in 2017. The visit followed the meeting in November 2023, between Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and President Xi Jinping, where Xi spoke of “embracing a new 50 years in China–Australia relations”. The media reported that plans for current Chinese Premier Li Qiang to visit Australia were “on track,” and expected in mid-2024. Wang also briefly met Prime Minister Anthony Albanese before travelling to Sydney for further meetings including with Australia's business community. China's ambassador to Australia, Xiao Qian, discussing the return of warmth to the ties had told media in January 2024, that “We will move on from stabilisation through improvement, onward to further consolidation and even development.”



While Beijing as Wang Yi highlighted expects, “no hesitation, no yawing and no backward steps” in the relationship, Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong's statement was more cautious in its reading of the visit. Wong said after the meeting “A stable relationship between Australia and China doesn't just happen, it needs ongoing work (...) and this was the

latest meeting in that process.” Wong went on to say that dialogue enabled both sides “to manage our differences” and both sides understood that “it does not

eliminate them”. Further emphasising “Australia will always be Australia and China will always be China.”

Australian analysts have pointed out that there is a perception gap on both sides as to what the thaw in ties translates to. The Saturday Paper carried an analysis quoting Former Australian ambassador and senior Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade official Kevin Magee alluded to this: “China expects more than stabilisation. Stabilisation is, as far as China is concerned, a step, and then the next step is closer relations and what the Chinese see as a less hostile approach to China.” For the Australian government, on the other hand, “stabilisation is basically an endpoint”. As other analysts have pointed out while the Australian government must stabilise relations given China’s position as Australia’s largest two-way trading partner, the Labour government is also cautious of not getting ahead of public opinion.

However ahead of the meeting, both sides had locked in a lot of work to build the momentum for the visit. Given that the crippling trade restrictions had cost the Australian economy an estimated 20 billion Australian dollars (US\$13 billion), discussions included the removal of the last trade tariffs – on Australian wine, rock lobster, and some abattoirs – that China imposed in 2020. Meanwhile, Australian Minister for Industry and Science Ed Husic accepted a recommendation from Australia’s Anti-Dumping Commission to discontinue anti-dumping measures against wind turbines from China. However among the differences raised was the domestically sensitive case of detained Australian Yang Hengjun, who was found guilty of espionage in a closed trial and sentenced to death with a two-year reprieve in February in China. Wong said Australians were shocked by the sentence and the government would not “walk away from our advocacy for Doctor Yang.”

Meanwhile, Wang Yi’s visit also saw the domestic debate within Australia heating up with media headlines playing up Wang Yi’s meeting with Former Australian PM Paul Keating a veteran centre-left leader who has been very critical of his own party in government for stirring trouble with Beijing. Mr. Keating, whose push for deeper ties with Beijing was a central facet of his 1991 to 1996 term has hailed Australia-China’s as historic at a time when the country’s conservative opposition, called the meeting a “calculated humiliation”. Adding to the polarising debate was the revelation by the head of Australia’s domestic intelligence organisation that a foreign spy group dubbed the “A-team” had cultivated and recruited a now-former politician. Following the unexpected revelations, Alex Turnbull, the son of former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, said in an interview that he had been approached about an infrastructure project by a group of suspected Chinese agents in around 2017 when his father was in government. He said the group had links to a former New South Wales state Labour Party parliamentarian without naming the person.

In this environment, while both sides have tried to paint the Wang Yi visit in a positive light, the larger strategic sentiment remains that – the simmering tensions have been obscured for the time being rather than resolved.