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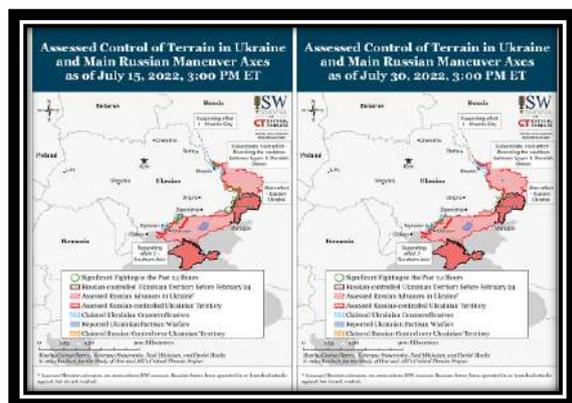
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Ukraine Conflict Update 16-31 Jul 2022

During the last fortnight, there has not been any significant change in the overall battlefield in the Ukrainian conflict. Even though Russian forces had concentrated their efforts on the eastern offensive, they have not been able to gain any significant territory in the Donetsk region since 16 Jul even after resuming the offensive on termination of operation pause. Donetsk is part of the larger Donbas region, along with Luhansk Province. Russia took control of Luhansk earlier this month. While the Russian Foreign Minister in a briefing to media on 21 Jul claimed Russian military readiness to expand war aim beyond the eastern front, Russians' ability to forward movement seems to be petering out.



In the meantime, Ukraine has made some creeping gains in the southern region of Kherson. Ukrainian forces have successfully employed the Western-supplied rocket system to destroy Russian ammunition depots and command centres with high degrees of accuracy. The HIMARs have fired hundreds of satellite-guided rockets in Ukraine.

On 29 Aug 2022, an explosion in a barracks of the prison camp in the Russian-occupied town of Olenivka killed around 50 captured fighters. An estimated 2,500 prisoners held at the compound in Olenivka were Ukrainian fighters from the Azovstal Iron and Steel works in the city of Mariupol. Their surrender in mid-May marked the end of one of the war's most brutal battles and handed Russia a significant victory, as well as a bargaining chip. Russia's defence ministry has attributed long-range artillery attacks as the cause for the death of these prisoners. Ukrainian officials called those accusations absurd, charging that Russia caused the carnage to cover up atrocities they had committed at the prison. The Kremlin has not yet responded to the International Red Cross (ICRC) request to access the Olenivka prison.

As on 31 Jul 2022, Russian forces have resumed localized ground attacks northwest and southwest of Izyum and may be setting conditions for offensive operations further west into Kharkiv Oblast or toward Kharkiv City. Russian forces continued ground attacks northwest of Slovyansk, northeast of Siversk, and to the east and south of Bakhmut. Russian forces made marginal gains in the Avdiivka area and continued ground attacks towards Avdiivka and Pisky. Russian forces continued to undertake defensive measures in Kherson Oblast in preparation for a Ukrainian counteroffensive in the region. Ukrainian forces have identified Kherson as a top strategic priority. Ukraine is anxious to recover its territory and justify the confidence of its people that this war can be won. This is an area of vital importance to the Ukrainian economy because of its power plants and ports. In the last fortnight, Ukraine carried out precision strikes using US-supplied weapons on the Antonovskiy bridge in the Kherson region, damaging a

key Russian supply line. Ukrainian forces have retaken dozens of villages and towns along the border, according to the region's military governor, Dmytro Butrii, and are pushing towards Kherson's regional capital. Notwithstanding, these probing offensive actions, a full counter-offensive to retake the city is yet to unfold. In response, Russian troops have been reported to be moving in large numbers to Ukraine's south. Whether this reorientation of Russian forces to the South will impact the Russian offensive action in the Donbas region remains uncertain.

The first grain shipments from Ukrainian ports on the Black Sea are expected to begin shortly. On a rare trip out of Kyiv since Russia's invasion, Ukraine's president visited Odesa on 29 Jul 2022 to show his country's readiness to start exporting grain under a U.N.-brokered deal aimed at easing global food shortages.

Russia-Turkey-Iran Summit in Tehran: Key Issues

On 19 July, Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi hosted Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Russian President Vladimir Putin for the 7th trilateral summit in the Astana format on Syria. Both Erdogan and Putin had last visited Tehran in September 2018 for a similar tripartite summit focused on Syria.



The tripartite summit assumed added geopolitical significance as it came close on the heels of US President Joe Biden's visit to Israel and Saudi Arabia aimed at reasserting US leadership in the region and pressuring Iran amid stalled nuclear talks. The summit in Tehran, therefore, demonstrated the centrality of Russia and Iran in the

Syrian theatre and the wider region. However, the primary aim of the summit was to continue trilateral cooperation in Syria, especially in counter-terrorism at a time when Turkey has been warning that it will launch another military operation in northern Syria.

In May 2022, Turkey, which has carried out four incursions into northern Syria since 2016, announced that it will launch an operation to create a 30-kilometre-deep security zone on the Syrian side of the Turkish border. Previous Turkish operations have targeted the east of the Euphrates River controlled by the People's Defense Units (YPG), and other Kurdish militias operating under the umbrella of US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). YPG is viewed in Ankara as an extension of the separatist group Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

Iran and Russia, which have tolerated earlier Turkish operations in the east of the Euphrates got alarmed after it became clear that apart from Kobani, Ain Issa and

Manbij (all located east of the Euphrates), the town of Tal Rifaat, which is located north of the Aleppo governorate, was among the probable targets. Analysts have observed that from the strategic perspective of Tehran taking control of Tal Rifaat would be a prelude to Turkish Armed Forces and Turkey-backed rebels fighting under the banner of the Syrian National Army marching towards Aleppo city.

Iran's foreign minister Hossein Abdollahian opened a political channel to resolve the crisis when he visited Turkey and Syria in late June 2022. In Tehran, the three leaders agreed to find a political solution to the crisis and reaffirmed their ongoing cooperation in the fight against terrorist groups and a joint stand against "separatist agendas aimed at undermining the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria and threatening the national security of neighbouring countries".

Given both Russia and Iran's support for expanding the sovereignty of the Syrian government to the whole territory of Syria, Raisi and Putin also made a joint call for the withdrawal of the 'unjustifiable' presence of US forces from the east of the Euphrates river in northeast Syria. Since October 2019, the US has maintained troop presence in the oil-rich regions near the border with Iraq and southeast of Deir Ez-Zor.

Following the trilateral summit, Erdogan and Raisi co-chaired the 7th meeting of the Turkey-Iran High-Level Cooperation Council. Crucially, the two countries agreed to extend the gas supply for another 25 years and to increase bilateral trade to \$30 billion. Until recently, Iran-Turkey energy-ties have been unaffected by regional and global politics. However, the temporary disruption of Iranian gas supplies in January 2022 caught Ankara unprepared and fuelled speculations that it was a retaliatory move against the warming of ties between Ankara and Tel Aviv.

President Putin in his meeting with Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei received support for his war in Ukraine. Calling NATO a 'dangerous entity', which knows no boundaries, Khamenei told Putin "if you didn't take the initiative, the other side would cause a war with its own initiative."

Japan Defence White Paper 2022 - Key Highlights

Japan Defence White Papers, released on 21 Jul 2022, opens with a rather grim assessment of the international strategic environment. 'The international community is currently facing its greatest trial since WWII.' So begins Kishi Nobuo, the Japanese Minister of Defence, in the foreword. Threading Russian aggression in Ukraine with other existential threats arrayed against Japan i.e. People's Republic of China (PRC) seeking to change the international status quo by force, as well as North Korea's escalatory ballistic missile launches and expanding nuclear arsenal, Kishi highlights growing cooperation among these aggressor states.



Last year's defence white paper of Japan elicited an angry rebuke from Beijing due to its emphasis on the necessity for strategic stability around Taiwan. Disregarding Chinese sensitivities regarding Taiwan, the current white paper not only echoes concern about cross-strait stability but also considers the invasion of Taiwan by China as a potential contingency. The white paper argues that Japan "must pay close attention to the situation, with an even greater sense of vigilance."

Although Taiwan and Japan do not have formal diplomatic ties, the two sides have long maintained a robust relationship in a variety of informal spheres. Highlighting these ties, the white paper called the self-ruled island "an extremely important partner and a dear friend of our country, with whom we share fundamental values such as freedom, democracy, basic human rights and the rule of law."

A senior Defence Ministry official said, "Taiwan is the region with the highest risk in the world, next to Ukraine. We need to have the Japanese people know what kind of situation would unfold," explaining the reason why a hypothetical crisis in Taiwan has been included in the paper. Chinese defence ministry spokesperson expressed China's strong dissatisfaction and firm opposition to Japan's "irresponsible remarks on China's national defence and military development" in the defence white paper.

In addition to highlighting the enduring relevance of the US-Japan alliance framework, the white paper highlights two lines of action as Japan's coping strategy in this 'new period of crisis in the twenty-first century. One is to express solidarity through strengthening ties with like-minded partners, principally the United States (US), Australia, India and some European nations. The other is by 'bringing together Japan's knowledge and technology and putting all its collective efforts into strengthening its national defence capabilities.'

Citing comparative OECD estimates of defence spending, the white paper has argued that despite a constant increase in Japan's defence for a decade, Japan's defence spending as a percentage of GDP remains lower than all other Group of Seven nations, as well as Australia and South Korea. A 2% target pledged by Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party would bring Tokyo in line with a minimum commitment set by North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members, and given the size of its economy, would make Japan the world's No.3 in total defence spending after the United States and China.

This white paper arrives in a context where all three of the main documents on Japan's national security (National Security Strategy, the National Defence Program Guidelines, and the Medium Term Defence Program) are up for review. The defence white paper provides a brief preview of policy postulates under consideration in the review process which is likely to complete by the year-end. While major strategic assumptions highlighted in the defence white paper are unlikely to undergo significant change, Japan will certainly face a tough decision on how to express Japan's posture toward China and how to describe its future policy on Japan-China relations.