



# Strategic Digest

Vol. 4 | No. 21 | 01 November 2022

**Ukraine War Update 16-31 Oct 2022**

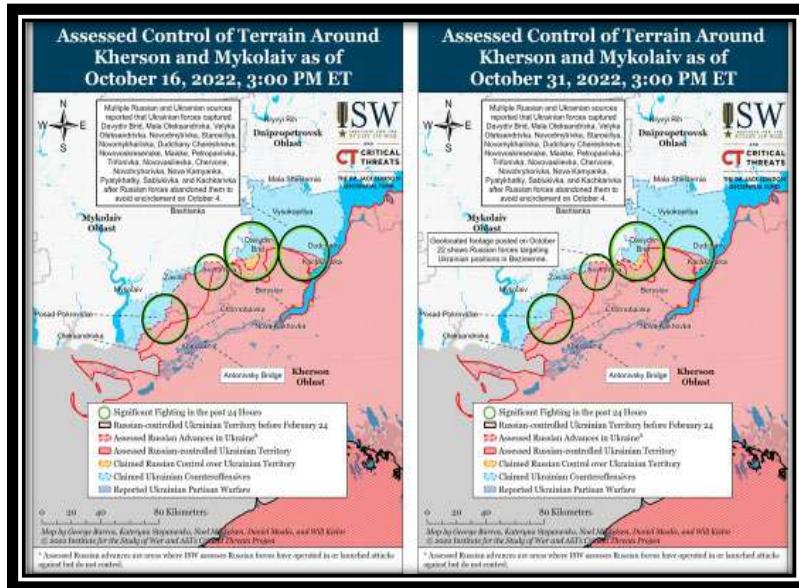
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## Ukraine War Update 16-31 Oct 2022

31 October 2022 marked the 250 days of the Russia-Ukraine war and it appears that the conflict is likely to continue well into 2023 with the limited probability of scaling back or compromise. Winter is about to return and with it questions about how it will affect this war – whether in the impact of energy shortages and high prices in Europe.

During the last fortnight, Ukrainian forces have conducted a counter-offensive in northeastern Kharkiv Oblast. While there has not been a large change in the battlefield, Ukraine has continued to maintain pressure on Russian forces in the region. In Central Sector, Russian forces comprising soldiers from the Wagner group have continued their sustained offence on the strategically placed towns of Bakhmut and Avdiivka in Ukraine's industrial heartland of Donbas, killing one civilian yesterday in Bakhmut.



In the southern Kherson sector, Ukrainian forces have pushed Russians out of the Charivne and Chkalov settlements in the Kherson region. While Ukraine's counter-offensive against Russian forces in the southern Kherson region is proving more difficult than it was in the northeast because of wet weather and the terrain, Russia's grip on the city of Kherson appears increasingly fragile. Gen Sergei Surovkin, the new commander of Russian forces in Ukraine, admitted in a TV interview that the situation in Kherson was "not easy". Russian-installed officials were said to be desperately trying to turn Kherson city into a "fortress" while attempting to evacuate tens of thousands of residents. Russia and Ukraine have accused each other of planning to blow up the Nova Kakhovka dam which could flood a swathe of southern Ukraine, including Kherson.

Russia continued with widespread aerial bombing of Ukraine's critical infrastructure, including power plants, electricity grid and other infrastructure across Ukraine with missiles and drones in an apparent bid to undermine Ukraine's moral and war-waging potential. As per the Russian defence ministry, these attacks on Ukraine's energy and military infrastructure had damaged or destroyed about a third of the country's power generation capabilities. Ukraine claims that a large portion of Russian missiles and drones have been intercepted by its AD elements.

On 23 October, Russia began to claim that Ukraine was preparing to detonate a low-yield radioactive device or 'dirty bomb'. Russia's defence minister, Sergei Shoigu, spoke to his counterparts in US, Britain, French, Turkey, India and China

and expressed fears that Ukraine may use a “dirty bomb”, a conventional weapon containing radioactive material. Later during the week, President Putin claimed that Russia knew “about an incident with a so-called ‘dirty bomb’ being prepared”, and that Russia knew “where, generally, it was being prepared”. While Russia has not provided any evidence in support of this claim, nuclear investigators have been dispatched to two locations in Ukraine by United Nations where Russia alleged the activities were taking place, and are expected to reach a conclusion “in days”.

29 October, Russia’s defence minister, Sergei Shoigu, has said the partial mobilisation of reservists announced in September “has been completed” and “no further measures are planned”. Speaking at a meeting with Vladimir Putin broadcast on state television, Shoigu said 82,000 mobilised recruits were in the conflict zone and a further 218,000 in training in barracks. The battle effectiveness of this mobilization is yet to be observed.



In an audacious attack on Russia’s Black Sea Fleet port in Sevastopol, a swarm of drones struck a few of Russia’s naval ships at 4.20 am on 27 October 2022. While Ukraine did not claim direct responsibility, Russian authorities claimed that the drone attack was successfully repelled. According to the Russian Ministry of Defense, the terrorist act was planned and executed by a unit of the British Navy. Ukrainian military troops

were trained under the supervision of British specialists based in Ochakovo.

On 30 October, The Russian government has written to the United Nations saying it is indefinitely suspending the Black Sea grain deal that allowed vital exports of Ukrainian food supplies. Moscow has said that provisions of the Black Sea grain deal to ease Russian agricultural and fertiliser exports were not being met. Twelve-grain export ships have left Ukraine today, despite Russia pulling out of the Turkey-UN-brokered grain deal. Russia called ship movements through the Black Sea security corridor “unacceptable”.

### The US National Defence Strategy- Key Highlights

Sequenced with the release of the unclassified National Security Strategy (NSS), The US Department of Defence released the unclassified 2022 National Defence Strategy (NDS) a fortnight later on October 27, 2022. The NDS is the capstone strategic guidance document for the Department of Defence that translates national security priorities outlined in the NSS into guidance for military planning and activities.

The NDS, for the first time, includes the Nuclear Posture Review (NPS) and the Missile Defence Review (MDR) as annexures. In years past, these guidance documents were promulgated separately. US DoD has argued that bundling these strategic prescriptions in a single document has resulted in substantive coherence, and a more integrated and seamless approach to issues like deterrence and risk management and it resulted in a very tight strategy resources linkage.

In consonance with strategic articulations in NSS, Beijing is considered a “pacing challenge” and “most consequential strategic competitor” while Russia has been termed as an “acute threat” that can pose systematic challenges to the United States over the long term.

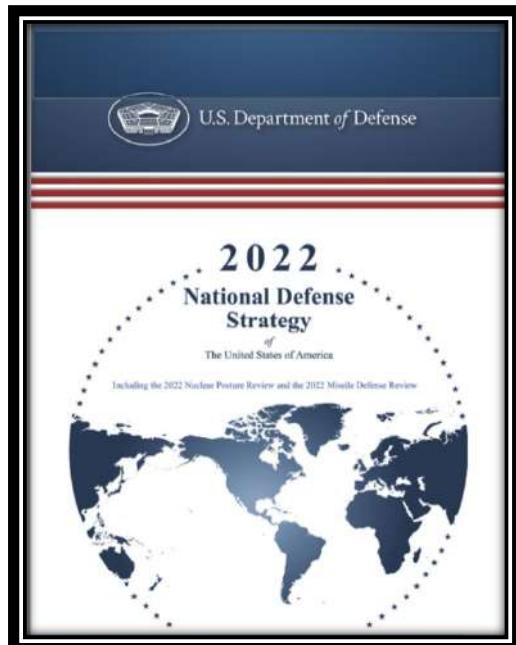
Similar to the previous National Defence Strategy of 2018, the new document notes that Iran, North Korea, threats to homeland security and violent extremist organizations also pose significant threats to the United States.

The strategy identifies four top-level defence priorities that the US DoD must pursue to strengthen deterrence. The first two priorities have been set out as a defence of the US homeland and effective deterrence against strategic attacks against the US, its Allies and partners. The Third aims to deter aggression and be prepared to prevail in conflict, when necessary. Signifying the Indo-Pacific region as its key area of strategic locus, the US DoD prioritizes challenges posed by China in the Indo-Pacific region over the Russian challenge in Europe. The fourth priority aims to ensure our future military advantage.

The new strategy calls for pursuing three primary lines of effort to restore the United States' comparative military advantage: integrated deterrence, campaigning and building enduring advantages. Integrated deterrence has been considered the bedrock of the US Defence strategy had been referenced very prominently in NSS released earlier. It calls for the military to work within all domains, theatres and spectrums of conflict seamlessly with other US government agencies and international allies and partners. Notwithstanding the substantial doctrinal focus on this concept of ‘integrated defence’, NDS does not provide sufficient clarity on how this concept will be implemented.

The second priority — campaigning — involves military actions and initiatives meant to advance the department's strategic priorities over time, such as exercises that allow the US military to train how it will mobilize and conduct logistics during a conflict.

The strategy for “building enduring advantages” includes a focus on US DoD's internal reforms such as investments in the Pentagon's workforce, improvements to acquisition processes and making US military infrastructure more resilient in the face of climate change.



The NDS specifically notes the prevalence of the grey zone conflict/hybrid war in the security environment and the usage of such tools of coercion by strategic competitors and adversaries. The document aims to “address acute forms of grey zone coercion from the PRC’s campaigns to establish control over the East China Sea, Taiwan Strait, South China Sea, and disputed land borders such as with India.” In the context of campaigning to sustain military advantages, the NDS explicitly prescribes “[addressing] grey zone challenges” as an objective from an offensive or deterrent perspective through imposing costs, leveraging the information domain, and managing escalation.

The NPR has retained the Pentagon’s customary language. It said deterring an attack was “the fundamental role,” not the sole purpose, of the weapons. With the U.S. nuclear capability remaining the “ultimate backstop” for strategic deterrence, the US plans to continue modernization efforts on the nuclear triad. Some commentators have argued that the US articulations leave open the possibility of the “first use” of nuclear weapons by the US. Similarly, the Missile Defence Review (MDR) largely represents a continuation of current policy on missile defence and does little to clarify the administration’s strategy on how missile defence should be adjusted to meet growing threats. Both documents are much more concise and brief than their earlier versions.

## The 20th Party Congress and the New CMC

Recently concluded 20th National Party Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) announced a new Central Military Commission (CMC). The following are the member of the new CMC, arranged in their seniority order: Gen. Zhang Youxia (Vice Chairman), Gen. He Weidong (Vice Chairman), Gen. Li Shangfu, Gen. Liu Zhenli, Adm. Miao Hua, Gen. Zhang Shengmin.



72 years old Gen. Zhang Youxia, a Sino-Vietnamese war (1979) and the battle of Laoshan (1984) veteran and the son of famed Gen. Zhang Zongxun who earned his reputation in the war against Japan in the 1930s, has been retained from the outgoing CMC. He comes from the ground forces background. 65 years old Gen.

He Weidong has significant experience in Western theatre. In 2016, he was appointed as Deputy Commander of the Western Theatre Command and Commander of the Western Theatre Command Ground Force.

Later, in 2019 he became Commander of the Eastern Theatre Command.

Gen. Li Shangfu is 64 years old and comes from an aerospace engineering background, and Strategic Support Force (SSF). He has experience of 31 years of working at the Xichang Satellite Launch Center. He has been under the U.S. Countering America’s Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) sanctions since 2018.

Gen. Liu Zhenli has the distinction of being the youngest member of the CMC. He is 58 years and comes from the PLA Army background. Gen. Liu has combat experience from the Sino-Vietnam skirmishes that took place in the 1980s. The most notable about him is that in his military career, he has discharged the duty of “protecting the capital of Beijing” and has a stint in the People’s Armed Police (PAP).

67 years old Adm. Miao Hua has been retained from the previous CMC. Although he represents the PLA Navy, he comes from political commissar background. He began his career in the PLA Army in 1969 but later shifted to the political commissar side in the 1980s. He became a member of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection in November 2012 after Xi Jinping took over the charge of the Party as its General Secretary. He shifted to the PLA Navy in 2014 as the political commissar of the PLA Navy. Adm. Miao Hua is believed to be Xi’s old political ally from the days of his Governorship of Fujian province in the 1990s where Adm. Miao Hua also served during that period.

Gen. Zhang Shengmin, 64 years old, is from PLA Rocket Force (PLARF). However, he is more known for his accomplishment that he headed the Discipline and Inspection of the CMC since 2017. He served in the previous CMC too. He has been taking care of perhaps politically most sensitive responsibility under Xi. He is also from the political track of service in the PLA.

Overall, one can argue that political considerations have dominated the composition of the CMC. 72 years old Gen. Zhang Youxia’s retention is not only a nod to his political heritage and a tribute to his participation in the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese war, which is the last large-scale war that the PLA fought, but more importantly, he, with his capital of long experience and goodwill, has played an instrumental role in military reforms under Xi. Gen. He Weidong has the most extensive and relevant military operational experience among all. His promotion to the CMC is being viewed as a measure to handle the Taiwan situation as he commanded the Eastern Theatre Command. Incidentally, he is reported to have got fast promotions under Xi and owes his rise to him. Gen. Li Shangfu’s appointment seems to be intended to convey a message about China’s seriousness for joint-ness in military affairs. More importantly, his elevation may also be seen as a response and reward for the U.S. CAATSA sanctions. He is believed to be China’s next defence minister—a possibility that might see complications in relations with the US. Political considerations behind Gen. Liu Zhenli’s induction and Adm. Miao Hua’s and Gen. Zhang Shengmin’s retentions are hard to ignore.

In comparison to the previous CMC in which Gen. Wei Fenghe had the experience commanding PLA Rocket Force and PLA Second Artillery Corps, Gen. Xu Qiliang commanded the PLA Airforce and Gen. Li Zuocheng had the experience of commanding the Joint Staff Department of the CMC, PLA Ground Force and earlier the Chengdu Military Region, political loyalty seems to have been the prime consideration in the present CMC. This is in keeping with Xi’s overall power consolidation. Incidentally, Xi has not appointed any civilian vice chairman in the new CMC as well. The civilian vice chairman is considered to be the successor and next in line for the top position in the CPC.