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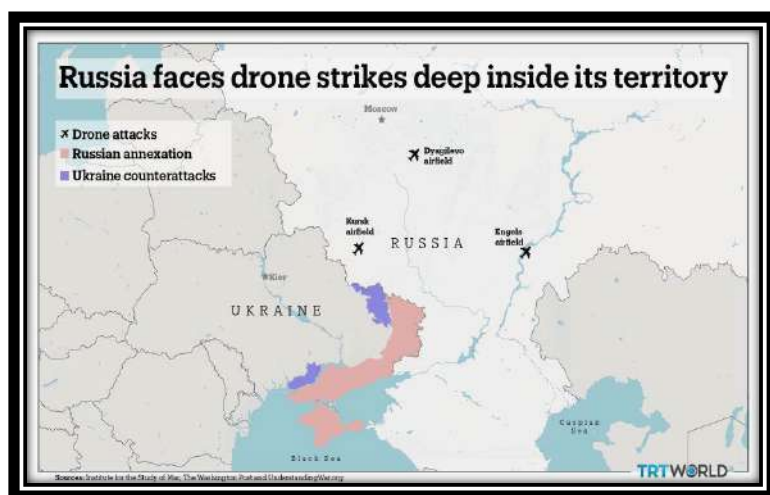
During the last fortnight, there has been no notable change in territorial control. Eastern Donetsk and Luhansk regions saw a major land offensive. Ukrainian counter-offensive has made marginal gains at the edges of the occupied Luhansk region along the Svatove-Kreminna line in the Luhansk region. Russian forces on the other hand maintained their offensive operations in the Bakhmut and Avdiivka areas Donbas areas. As per experts, the capture of Bakhmut could potentially change the course of the conflict. It could give Russia a platform to launch a broader campaign across many parts of Ukraine and also open the Russian military’s path to Slovyansk and Kramatorsk, two important industrial centres of Ukraine in the energy-rich Donbas region. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has described “Bakhmut, Soledar, Maryinka, Kreminna” as “the most difficult area” in the offensive by Russia in his video address on 10 December 2022. He said, “there is no living place left on the land of these areas that have not been damaged by shells and fire.’

Both sides have been facing significant constraints in their territorial offensives due to the constraint of weather compounded by fortified defences. With the frontline broadly deadlocked, there has been renewed interest in peace talks. France’s president, Emmanuel Macron, US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin, have all in recent days talking about a diplomatic solution. At the same time, there appear to be no signs of a let-up with ongoing intense fighting in eastern Ukraine. Kremlin has denied any proposal for a Christmas ceasefire. As per the Ukrainian assessment, Russia seems to be preparing for a new offensive as early as January next year. Ukraine is stepping up efforts to isolate and degrade Russian forces in and around the strategically vital city of Melitopol, ahead of a widely expected Ukrainian offensive in southern Ukraine.



During the last fortnight, relentless missile and drone attacks by Russia have significantly damaged Ukraine's critical energy infrastructure. Ukrainian capital Kyiv and port city Odesa witnessed multiple barrages of aerial attacks. Russian strikes have left around 40 per cent of the country without power compounding the difficulties of harsh winter. With its energy systems severely battered, and more Russian attacks likely, key pillars of the Ukrainian economy — coal mining, industrial manufacturing, information technology- face unsurmountable difficulty. As per some estimates, Ukraine's economy could contract by another 5 per cent next year, on top of the 33 per cent contraction this year.

Weathering unyielding aerial attacks from Russia, Ukraine executed its most brazen attack on 05 December 2022 targeting two military bases deep inside Russian territory. The Kremlin said that the weapons launched by Ukraine were Soviet-era jet drones and were aimed at bases in Ryazan and Engels, about 300 miles from the Ukrainian border. It said that its forces had intercepted the drones,



and that “the fall and explosion of the wreckage” had “slightly damaged” two planes, killing three servicemen and wounding four others. The strikes signalled a new willingness by Kyiv to take the fight to bases in the heart of Russia, raising the stakes in the war, and demonstrating an improved ability to attack at a distance.

On 12 December, G7 nations announced that they would be setting up a multi-agency platform for better coordination of aid and recovery support for Ukraine. Reportedly, the new platform will coordinate with existing mechanisms to provide short and long-term support. On 13 December, German Foreign Minister Baerbock stated that her country will approve a winter aid worth USD 52.68 million due to Russian missile attacks on the energy infrastructure of Ukraine. Meanwhile, US officials stated that Washington is finalising plans of dispatching the Patriot missile defence system to Ukraine. In addition, The Pentagon is also expanding the training that the U.S. military provides to Ukrainian troops, with plans to more than double the number of forces it instructs at a base in Germany.

Chinese President Xi Jinping visits Saudi Arabia

After a nearly three-year COVID-19-induced hiatus, President Xi Jinping has resumed his overseas visits. On December 7, 2022, Xi reached the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on a three-day visit. It was his third foreign visit after he resumed his foreign travels, the first being to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in September 2022 and the second being to Bali in Indonesia, where he travelled to attend the G-20 Summit. These visits are being seen as the renewal of Xi's global charm

offensive. The visit to Saudi Arabia was his second foreign visit post-20th Party Congress. During his visit, Xi met with King Salman and held bilateral meetings as well as the first China-GCC Summit and the first China-Arab States Summit in Riyadh.

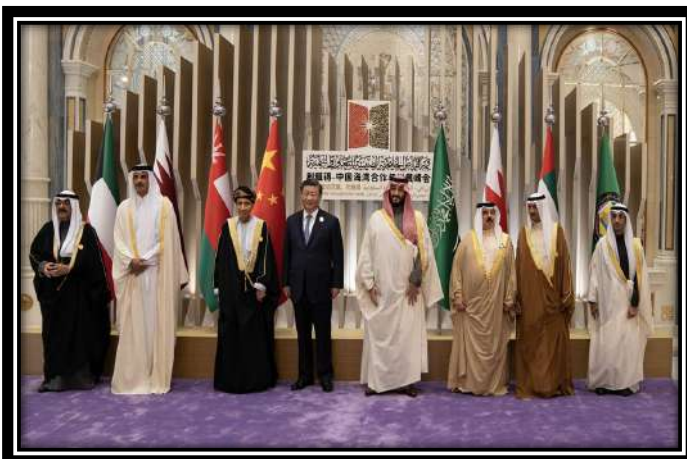
Chinese President Xi Jinping and Saudi Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman held a high-level bilateral meeting at Al Yamamah Palace in Riyadh. The two leaders discussed regional and international issues and signed a range of bilateral agreements. The two leaders exchanged views on important regional and international issues such as the Palestine-Israel conflict, the Russia-Ukraine war, the Syrian crisis and the Lebanese crisis etc.

Both the countries signed 12 agreements and Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) for cooperation in the fields of hydrogen energy, judiciary, Chinese language education, housing, radio and television, digital economy, economic development, standardisation, news coverage, tax administration, and anti-corruption. In addition to it, nine agreements and MoUs were signed between the government and private sectors of the two countries. Both countries also signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement. The two leaders highlighted the importance of enhancing cooperation through the Saudi-Chinese Joint Committee to achieve common goals. The two leaders discussed enhancing cooperation in various strategic areas such as energy, climate change, trade and investment, water and agriculture, financial sector, defence and security and healthcare etc.

One of the key agreements signed between the two countries is the 'Harmonisation Plan' between Saudi Vision 2030 and Belt and Road Initiative, which talks about enhancing joint cooperation and coordination between the two countries in various fields such as the automotive industry, supply chains, logistics, water desalination and infrastructure etc.

The visit saw the organisation of the first China-GCC Summit and the first Arab-Chinese Summit. The China-GCC Summit and the China-Arab States Summit affirmed the support for the "China-Arab community with a shared future in the new era", thereby highlighting the role of the China-Arab Cooperation Forum.

Xi Jinping delivered his keynote speech at the China-Arab States Summit titled "Building on Past Achievements and Jointly Creating a Brighter Future of China-GCC Relations". At the China-GCC summit, the Chinese President proposed Shanghai exchange for Yuan energy deals with the Gulf States in which China will work to buy oil and gas in the Chinese currency Yuan. The leaders stressed



the importance of strengthening the strategic partnership between GCC states and China and concluding a Free Trade Agreement between GCC and China soon.

Xi's visit to Riyadh coincided with periods of notable strain in US-Saudi Arabia relations. Saudi Arabia is exhibiting a desire to diversify its strategic relations and China is widely perceived as a natural destination for the diversification of its strategic relations. The Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal Farhan, while addressing the leaders at the Summit stated that cooperation with China; the world's second-largest economy, does not mean non-cooperation with the United States; the world's largest economy. He reiterated that the Saudi Kingdom does not believe in polarisation and will keep working with partners having mutual interests. Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, stated that the China-Arab summit has led Beijing's ties with Riyadh, the GCC and the Arab States into a "new era of comprehensive and in-depth development". China also invited Saudi Arabia as a guest of honour at the 6th session of the Arab-Chinese Exhibition in 2023.

U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit 2022

The United States hosted leaders from forty-nine African states and various African Union representatives for a three days summit from 13-15 December 2022. The conference was the second edition of the United States–Africa Leaders Summit first hosted by President Barack Obama in 2014. The Summit aimed to reinvigorate the US- Africa relationship which has somewhat dwindled under the indifferent approach shown by Trump Administration to the continent.

There has been a growing perception about the United States lagging behind China in cultivating Africa, a geopolitical contest that in recent years has expanded to include powers like Russia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates. The Biden Administration's 'Strategy towards Sub Saharan Africa', released in August 2022, highlighted the region's importance to U.S. national security interests and argued that the United States will leverage all of its diplomatic, development, and defence capabilities, as well as strengthen trade and commercial ties.



“The United States is all in on Africa’s future,” President Biden declared in an address to the delegations of 49 nations attending the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit. Mr Biden vowed to invest what aides calculated will be \$55 billion on the continent over the next three years

while supporting its ambitions for greater global leadership and bolstering efforts

to transform it into a more prosperous, healthier and technologically advanced region. President Biden highlighted that his Administration is committed to working closely with Congress to lend up to \$21 billion through the International Monetary Fund for low and middle-income countries, which will support African resilience and recovery efforts.

President Biden announced that his Administration is working with Congress to provide \$100 million for a new partnership to incentivize and bolster African efforts to implement and sustain security sector capacity and reforms. This three-year pilot program is designed to allow the United States and African partners, including civil society, to sync, share, and support solutions to security challenges. The US also reaffirmed its commitment to engage with complex political transitions in Africa. The US plans to invest \$75 million in the ‘African Democratic and Political Transitions (ADAPT)’ initiative to counter democratic backsliding in partnership with regional bodies, governments, and civil society in support of durable political transitions.

The Vision Statement released during the Summit outlined the contours of the strengthened partnership between the US and Africa. The United States Government and the AfCFTA Secretariat signed a Memorandum of Understanding to expand engagement to promote equitable, sustainable, and inclusive trade; boost competitiveness, and attract investment to the continent. Once fully implemented, the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area will create a combined continent-wide market of 1.3 billion people and \$3.4 trillion.

The United States has announced a plan to reform the United Nations Security Council, including support for permanent seats for countries in Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean, and voiced support for the African Union to join the G20 as a permanent member.

China was an unspoken factor in the Summit. the summit aimed to position the United States as a partner to African countries amid competition with China, which has sought to expand its influence by funding infrastructure projects on the continent and elsewhere. President Biden's announcement of \$800 million in new contracts for Cisco Systems and a smaller company named Cybastion “to protect African countries from cyber threats,” was a counterpoint to the dominance of Huawei.

To coordinate follow-through activities of the Summits deliverables and its progress, the US announced the establishment of a new Special Presidential Representative for U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit Implementation. President Biden announced his intent to name for this role Ambassador Johnnie Carson, former Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs and Ambassador to Kenya, Uganda, and Zimbabwe.