



MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR  
DEFENCE STUDIES AND ANALYSES  
मनोहर पर्रिकर रक्षा अध्ययन एवं विश्लेषण संस्थान

# Strategic Digest

Vol. 5 | No. 16 | 16 August 2023

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## Ukraine War Update, 01-15 Aug 2023

During the last week, Ukraine claimed ‘partial success’ in its counter-offensive through ‘tactically significant’ advances along two major lines of attack. In the ground war, the Ukrainians are advancing south along two principal lines of attack: through the eastern village of Staromaiorske toward the Russian-occupied city of Berdiansk, a port on the Sea of Azov; and farther west toward the Russian-occupied city of Melitopol, a vital transportation hub near the coast. Although Ukraine has not advanced more than 10 to 12 miles on either vector of attack, its gains are important since it is compelling Russia to divert forces from other parts of the front line. Moscow’s redeployment may “likely further weaken Russian defensive lines in the aggregate,” creating “opportunities for any Ukrainian breakthrough to be potentially decisive.”

At the same time, Russian forces are mounting their own offensive operations in northeastern Ukraine around the city of Kupiansk. By forcing Ukraine to defend there, Russia is most likely trying to draw Ukrainian forces from other areas where they are on the offensive.



On 9 Aug, Ukrainian forces attempted to cross the Dnipro River dividing liberated and occupied Kherson, potentially breaching what has for months served as the frontline in the south of Ukraine. As per reports, Ukrainian forces were assessed to be maintaining a presence on the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast but have not yet established a bridgehead.

Ukraine has intensified its effort to disrupt Russian logistics through Crimea. On 07 Aug, explosions hit critical road bridges linking occupied Crimea with parts of the Kherson region under Russian control, as Ukraine escalates its targeting of Russian infrastructure and territory.

On 13 Aug, Ukrainian forces fired three missiles at the bridge connecting occupied Crimea to Russia, forcing Russian authorities to cover the structure in white smoke to deter further attacks and prompting a furious threat of retaliation. The Kerch Strait Bridge holds strategic and symbolic importance for Russia and is a critical supply route to Russian war efforts in the South and for the defence of Crimea.

The Russian officials said Russian air defence was able to shoot down two missiles in the first attack, and then another one, and that there was no damage. Footage and photos show smoke billowing up from the bridge, which Russian officials said was a smokescreen for workers. An explosion in October shut down both the Road Bridge and Rail Bridge for months. Last month, the bridge was attacked by Ukrainian sea drones.

The attack on Kerch Bridge comes amid a new campaign of Ukrainian drone strikes targeting Moscow in recent days. On 10 Aug, Russia's defence ministry said early on Thursday it had downed 11 Ukrainian drones near Crimea overnight, as well as two drones flying toward the capital Moscow. On the other hand, Russia has also intensified missile and artillery attacks on Ukraine including the capital Kiev.

Since the suspension of the Black Sea grain initiative, the Black Sea, a largely overlooked part of the war in Ukraine, has suddenly become a cauldron of military and geopolitical tensions. Russian warships patrol the surface of the Black Sea, launching missiles at Ukrainian towns while creating a de facto blockade, threatening any vessel that might try to breach it. Ukraine on the other hand has begun to use its maritime drone with increasing effectiveness.

On 05 Aug, a Ukrainian maritime drone struck and disabled a Russian landing ship in the Russian port of Novorossiysk by an unmanned Ukrainian boat. A day later, Ukraine carried out a drone strike on a Russian tanker in the Kerch Strait. These developments on sea highlight the growing willingness and capacity of Ukraine to strike far from unoccupied Ukrainian territory.

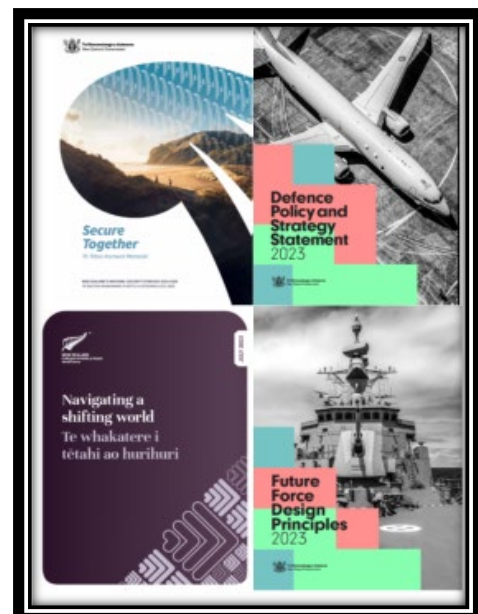
In retaliation, Russia launched a multi-wave overnight assault on Ukraine. As per Reuters, dozens of ships are backed up around critical Danube arteries close to Ukraine's river gateways days after Russian drone attacks on Ukrainian ports.

On 13 Aug. a Russian warship fired warning shots and boarded a cargo ship it claims was headed to Ukraine in the Black Sea on Sunday, according to Russia's defence ministry. Russia said the warship fired warning shots when the captain of the Palau-flagged dry cargo ship failed to respond to a request to stop for an inspection.

## New Zealand Revamps National Security Policy

Geographic insularity has shaped to a large extent New Zealand's low-key approach towards geopolitical development and its ambivalence towards strategic alignment. However, there has been a growing realization of the need for a new approach to dealing with the challenges of "a more contested and difficult world".

In July 2023, New Zealand Prime Minister Chris Hipkins outlined his broad vision to revamp National Security Policy in his first big set-piece address on New Zealand's place in the world signalling New Zealand's changing tone about a more worrying world. He announced that his government would soon release "an



interrelated series of strategic policy documents and assessments, spanning across New Zealand's national security, foreign and defence policy, including New Zealand's first National Security Strategy."

On 04 Aug, New Zealand released its first-ever National Security Strategy along with the first two documents of the Defence Policy Review. A week later on 11 Aug, The New Zealand Security Intelligence Service published its first-ever unclassified comprehensive assessment of the threats of violent extremism, foreign interference and espionage facing contemporary New Zealand. Earlier in July, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs released its strategic foreign policy assessment. The national security strategy, 'Secure Together-Tō Tātou Korowai Manaaki', along with these three documents, rounds out the revised New Zealand worldview and its changed tone.

Announcing the new strategy, Defence Minister Andrew Little said: "In 2023 we do not live in a benign strategic environment." He went on to say: "Aotearoa New Zealand is facing more geostrategic challenges than we have had in decades – climate change, terrorism, cyberattacks, transnational crime, mis- and disinformation, and competition in our region which, up until recently, we thought was protected by its remoteness." While the new assessments and strategic statements have come from different state agencies, they are coherent in their articulation of the risks to New Zealand's security.

In a similar vein, the strategic foreign policy assessment talks about three big shifts in the world: a move "from rules to power", from "economics to security", and from "efficiency to resilience". Collectively, it says these changes mean "many of the assumptions in relation to global and regional affairs that have underpinned New Zealand's foreign policy for a generation or more are coming under real and sustained pressure."

The new strategy identifies 12 national security issues, ranging from terrorism and climate change to attempts to subvert New Zealand's democracy. While no one challenge is expressly prioritised, there is a clear emphasis on geostrategic competition and the threats to a rules-based international system. Many of the assumptions about global and regional affairs that have underpinned New Zealand's foreign policy for a generation or more are coming under real and sustained pressure.

The new strategies and assessments signal growing realism over China and repeatedly highlight how China's rise is upending old norms and behaviours. "An increasingly powerful China is using all its instruments of national power in ways that can pose challenges to existing international rules and norms," read one policy document.

The documents also emphasize that New Zealand's security has to be collective, and there is no lurching towards isolationism. More collaborations are likely to address shared security challenges. As New Zealand's closest partner and only formal ally, Australia is "indispensable to New Zealand's national security".

Throughout the new documents, the US is variously described as a “crucial” defence partner in general, and “critical for New Zealand’s security” in the Indo-Pacific and Pacific regions. The Five Eyes intelligence network (which also includes Britain and Canada) is described as “an invaluable support to our understanding and ability to respond to emerging and complex security issues”. The newer multinational security partnerships – namely AUKUS and the “Quad” (US, India, Japan and Australia) are also considered important they “may” provide the opportunity for New Zealand to further pursue its interests.

The review, initially scheduled for completion by mid-2024, comes at a time when the country’s defence forces are stretched thin. The first part of the country’s defence review said that New Zealand's military capabilities had fallen behind and that its geographical isolation was no longer a security guarantee. The Defence Force needs to improve its combat readiness and effectiveness, as well as other military capabilities, and increase its presence in the Pacific which needs greater investment in both the short and medium term. The governing Labour Party has suggested spending must increase but has not said by how much.

### **Niger-Coup and its Aftermath**

In recent years, the Sahel region in West Africa has witnessed several military coups and unconstitutional power grabs by disgruntled military officers resulting in a chronic cycle of insecurity. Broadly, two trends are visible in the region. First, the rapid spread of jihadist terrorism over the decades with groups like Boko Haram and the Islamic State in the West Africa Province (ISWAP) expanding their area of operations. Second, the retreat of civilian rule with men in uniform overthrowing elected civilian governments that had lost their legitimacy due to their inability to fight jihadist insurgencies.

The latest example comes from Niger when on 26 July 2023, the country’s presidential guard detained President Mohamed Bazoum, and presidential guard commander General Abdourahamane Tchiani proclaimed himself the leader of a new military junta, known as the Conseil national pour la Sauvegarde de la patrie (CNSP). This is the sixth coup the region has experienced in the last three years, preceded by the double coups in Mali and Burkina Faso and one in Guinea. The



coup leaders justified their actions with the continued deterioration of the security situation and poor economic and social governance.

Niger, a landlocked country in West Africa is believed to be an anchor of democracy and the last bastion of the West in the region. It hosts 1500 and 1100 French and U.S. troops respectively and hosts a U.S. air

drone base in the Agadez region. Niger provides nearly 15 percent of France's uranium needs and accounts for a fifth of the European Union's (EU) total uranium stock. With the current crisis, the West is apprehensive about further expansion of Russian influence, via its Wagner paramilitary group.

The international community and the West African regional bloc the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), was quick to condemn the coup d'état. They are even considering military intervention by deploying a "standby force" to restore constitutional order in Niger. Nigeria, the region's largest power and its President Bola Tinubu, the current ECOWAS chair, is trying to find a diplomatic resolution to the conflict. Any form of regional or foreign intervention would be consequential and further destabilise the region. Mali and Burkina Faso declared they would consider any intervention in Niger to be a declaration of war on their own countries. Although there is a precedence of the ECOWAS intervening militarily, like in Sierra Leone or Liberia in the 1990s or in 2017 when the former President of The Gambia Yahya Jammeh refused to hand over power to Adama Barrow, the current realities make an ECOWAS intervention in Niger a risky bet.

Firstly, the ECOWAS does not enjoy full-scale legitimacy among the citizens of Niger. Following the coup, some Nigeriens took to the streets in demonstration of their support for the putschists. Worryingly, some videos emerged of citizens waving Russian flags and chanting pro-Russia slogans. The very idea of ECOWAS being ready and willing to fight the junta rather than combatting the terrorists is swaying public reaction against the regional blocs' decision. Moreover, the fluid nature of the conflict could result in a prolonged intervention and a lack of a comprehensive exit strategy or transition plan. Secondly, there is a perceived security threat along the Nigeria-Niger border. The porous and unmonitored borders could increase terrorists crossing the borders and an influx of refugees into neighbouring countries. Armed conflict could spread quickly across the Lake Chad and Sahel regions. Thirdly, shouldering both the financial and humanitarian costs of the intervention will be difficult. Whether it is Nigeria, Ghana, or Senegal, all these countries are confronted with serious economic woes, political challenges, and internal security concerns. This makes the prospect of a failed military intervention far outweighs any projected gains.

As the current situation stands, ending the crisis through diplomatic means is the best bet for the region. The present stalemate is turning out to be a test of patience and perseverance of the democratic ecosystem. As ECOWAS' deadline for the Niger junta to step down and reinstate President Bazoum passed, non-state actors such as traditional and religious leaders are attempting to mediate the situation. A group of senior Nigerian Islamic scholars met representatives of the junta in Niamey on 13 August 2023 during which the junta members expressed willingness to explore diplomatic ways of resolving the standoff. All of that now remains contingent upon the ECOWAS lifting its sanctions, Nigeria restoring its supply of electricity to Niger, and the country reopening its borders to let food and medical aid reach vulnerable populations.