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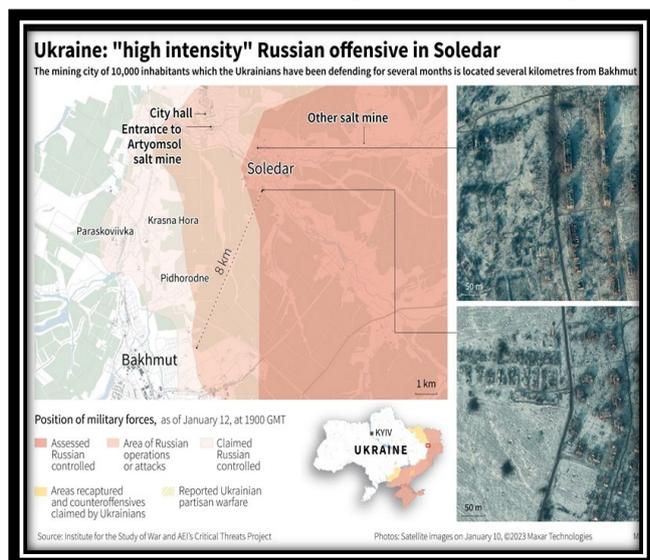
Ukraine War Update 01-15 Jan 2023

The new year saw a precision strike on a complex in the Russian-controlled city of Makiivka. Without claiming the strike, Ukraine's military command said up to 400 Russian soldiers were killed in the incident in the city in the Moscow-controlled parts of the Donetsk region. Russia's defence ministry attributed the illegal use of mobile phones by its soldiers to the Ukrainian missile strike that killed 89 Russian servicemen. On the other hand, Several waves of Russian drones targeted critical infrastructure in Ukraine's capital of Kyiv and surrounding areas on 01 Jan 2023. The Ukrainian ministry of defence claimed it shot down 39 Iranian-made Shahed drones, as well as a cruise missile.

As Russia Ukraine War moved into a new year, leaders of both countries resolved to stay on the course. In the longest new year address of his two decades in office, President Putin said Russia would "never give in" to the west. President Volodymyr Zelensky said that his only wish for Ukrainians for 2023 was a victory.

On 05 Jan, President Putin instructed his defence minister, Sergei Shoigu, to introduce a 36-hour ceasefire along the entire line of contact in Ukraine from noon on 05 Jan 2023 to midnight on 07 Jan 2023 to allow people "in the areas of hostilities" to mark Orthodox Christmas. Before the ceasefire announcement, Putin told the Turkish President that Russia was open to dialogue over Ukraine but Kyiv would have to accept the "new territorial realities". Ukraine rejected the ceasefire proposal out of hands saying it was a trick. The war would end, Zelenskiy said, when Russian troops left Ukraine or were thrown out. The ceasefire was not adhered to by both sides.

While there was no significant change in the broader battlefield, the Bakhmut



region in Donetsk province saw a significant intensification of the Russian offensive with troops from Russia's Wagner group claiming control of Soledar town in the proximity of Bakhmut. Russian forces have been trying to capture Bakhmut and Soledar since August 2022 through repeated assaults.

On 13 Jan 2023, Russia's defence ministry said its forces had taken full control of Soledar, its first claim of victory in months of battlefield setbacks, while Kyiv said fierce fighting was continuing in the town. A Russian victory in Soledar, a salt-mining town north of Bakhmut, would be Russia's first tangible gain in the war since July 2022, when its troops took control of Sieverodonetsk and Lysychansk in the Donbas. It would give Russian forces a springboard to press on toward Bakhmut, a ruined city that lies only 10 miles away and is now at the centre of the war.

As intense fighting continued in the eastern town of Soledar, the news came about a major shakeup of Russian military leadership. Moscow appointed Valery Gerasimov, chief of the general staff, as its overall commander for the war in Ukraine. The Russian defence ministry said the seniority of the commander in charge reflects the expansion of the scale of the Ukraine conflict and the need to improve organisation and command. Gerasimov, 67, an army general and deputy defence minister, has been chief of the General Staff for more than a decade and played a key role in planning the Ukraine war from the start. Gerasimov's deputies will be Army General Sergei Surovikin, the previous theatre commander who was appointed three months ago; Army General Oleg Salyukov; and Deputy Chief of the General Staff Colonel-General Alexei Kim.

There has been growing apprehension in the west that Ukraine may have only a narrow window to prepare to repel an anticipated Russian springtime offensive. Western countries are now moving fast to provide the Ukrainians with sophisticated weapons they had earlier refused to send for fear of provoking Moscow. France, Germany and the United States have promised to send armoured fighting vehicles to Ukraine's battlefields for the first time. The UK prime minister has confirmed that the UK will provide a company of its Challenger 2 main battle tanks and other advanced artillery support to Ukraine in the coming weeks. Kyiv has been pleading for Western tanks almost since the start of the war. on 15 Jan 2023, Ukraine's ambassador in Berlin, Oleksii Makeiev, urged the German government to provide his country with Leopard 2 battle tanks quickly. "German weapons, German tanks are essential for survival," he told.

Kishida and Biden Summit - A New High Watermark in Alliance Partnership

President Joe Biden told Prime Minister Fumio Kishida at the White House on 13 January 2023 that the two were meeting "at a remarkable moment in our alliance" with the U.S.-Japan alliance at a new high-water mark. "Rather than figuring out how we can work more closely together, a more difficult job would be trying to figure out how and where we disagree," Biden said. Mr Kishida said his administration had decided to take major steps aimed at "fundamentally reinforcing our defence capabilities," including increasing military spending and growing the nation's missile strike abilities.

The two leaders did not mention China in their opening remarks. However, the joint statement after the meeting highlighted growing challenges in the Asia region that ranged "from actions inconsistent with the rules-based international order by China to provocations by North Korea."



Prime Minister Kishida's first visit to Washington also saw a powerful endorsement from Biden for what the U.S. president said was Tokyo's "bold leadership" in fundamentally reinforcing its defence capabilities amid growing challenges from China, North Korea and Russia. Emphasising that the US-Japan security alliance has never been stronger, The two leaders reaffirmed that the Alliance remains the cornerstone of peace, security, and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific. President Biden reiterated the unwavering commitment of the United States to the defence of Japan under Article V of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security, using its full range of capabilities, including nuclear. He also reaffirmed that Article V applies to the Senkaku Islands.

Washington was the final stop in Kishida's whirlwind tour of G-7 tour which began in Europe, with a visit to France. There, he and President Emmanuel Macron vowed for the G-7 to "unite in response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine, and to continue to implement strict sanctions against Russia and strong support for Ukraine." From Paris, Kishida travelled to Rome to meet with Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and the two leaders emphasised that "both countries have a responsibility to lead the international community as members of the G7, which share fundamental values." His final European stop was in London, where alongside Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, Kishida signed a new defence agreement that will allow Japanese and British forces to exercise in each other's countries and will define the status of the visiting forces. Italy and the UK will be part of a consortium building Japan's next-generation support fighter.

The Summit between Biden and Kishida was preceded by the US and Japan Security Consultative Committee (2+2) meeting on 11 Jan 2022. Secretary of Defense Austin, Secretary of State Blinken, Japan Minister of Defense Hamada, and Japan Minister for Foreign Affairs Hayashi resolved to oppose any unilateral change to the status quo, reiterated their commitment to uphold a free and open Indo-Pacific, and reaffirmed that the U.S.-Japan Alliance is the cornerstone of regional peace, security, and prosperity. Recognizing the convergence of their nations' new national security and defence strategies toward bolstering deterrence in an integrated manner, the Ministers provided a vision of a modernized Alliance postured to prevail in a new era of strategic competition.

In unusually blunt terms, the U.S. and Japanese foreign and defence ministers condemned China's increasing aggressiveness in the Indo-Pacific and elsewhere, called out Russia for its war with Ukraine and castigated North Korea for ramping up its nuclear and missile programs.

A significant upgrade to the US force posture in Japan, including the stationing of a Marine Littoral Regiment (MLR) by 2025 was announced. Under the new arrangement, the 12th Marine Regiment, an artillery unit, will transform into a more mobile unit i.e. the 12th Marine Littoral Regiment. The littoral regiment will have battalion-size units, about 2,000 troops total, and have long-range fire capabilities that can hit ships. The new configuration will allow Marines to more quickly deploy if tensions intensify in the region. Both sides also agreed to

enhance anti-shipping missile capabilities on Japan's Islands. The US will also help Japan develop "counterstrike capability".

The United States and Japan also resolved to jointly strengthen Alliance activities with allies and partners within and beyond the region. They resolved to advance the trilateral partnership with Australia and committed to deepening cooperation with the Republic of Korea, including on ballistic missile defence, anti-submarine warfare, and maritime security. Ministers also reconfirmed the importance of the Quad and supported increased cooperation with partners in Southeast Asia and Pacific Islands.

President Marcos's State Visit to China

Despite concerns over the renewed spread of COVID in China, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos visited Beijing for a three days state visit from Jan 03-06, 2023. This was Marcos' first visit to China as president and his first official visit to a country outside the ASEAN. Notwithstanding assurances about shifting Philippine-China relations "to a higher gear" under his watch, Mr Marcos seemed to be adjusting Duterte-era foreign policy approach to China with increased parleys with the US and its allies. This visit aimed to set the tone of the Philippines-China bilateral relations for the next five years.

"I will be opening a new chapter in our comprehensive strategic cooperation with China," Marcos said before departing for Beijing. Alluding to the ongoing maritime disputes in the South China Sea, he said that such issues "do not belong between two friends such as Philippines and China" and that he and Xi would "seek to resolve those issues to the mutual benefit of our two countries." China said ahead of the visit that it hoped for a 'golden era' in relations between the two countries.



During the summit meeting between the two leaders, Chinese President Xi Jinping expressed China's to resume oil and gas talks and manage maritime issues "cordially" with the Philippines. Marcos told reporters, "We also discussed what we can do to move forward, to avoid any possible mistakes, misunderstandings that could trigger a bigger problem than what we already have." Marcos said he received Xi's promise for a compromise and solution that could allow Philippine fishermen to operate in their historic fishing grounds.

The two countries signed 14 bilateral agreements on Wednesday, including deals on agriculture, infrastructure, development cooperation, maritime security, and tourism, among others, the Philippines' presidential office said in a statement. The two sides agreed to conduct cooperation in the four key areas of agriculture, infrastructure, energy, and cultural and people-to-people exchanges. Xi also promised wide cooperation, from support for Chinese investment in the Philippines to helping its neighbour develop its villages and agricultural technology, basic education, meteorology and space, and vaccines.

The joint statement released during the visit highlighted an in-depth and candid exchange of views between the two leaders on the situation in the South China Sea, both leaders “emphasized that maritime issues do not comprise the sum-total of relations between the two countries and agreed to appropriately manage differences through peaceful means.” Both sides agreed to establish a communication mechanism on maritime issues between the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) of the Philippines and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China.

On oil and gas cooperation, both sides agreed to bear in mind the spirit of ‘the Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation on Oil and Gas Development between the Government of the People’s Republic of China and the Government of the Republic of Philippines’ signed in 2018 and agreed to resume discussions on oil and gas development at an early date.

This nebulous attempt to revive discussion about joint exploration in the disputed territory has been dealt a severe blow by the judgement of the Philippine Supreme Court delivered on 10 Jan 23 regarding the constitutional validity of the Joint Marine Seismic Undertaking (JSMU) agreement signed between China, Vietnam and the Philippines in 2005 for hydrocarbon survey in 2005. The Court ruled JSMU as unconstitutional which severely undermines any future efforts by the Philippines government to revive discussion on joint hydrocarbon collaborations in the South China Sea.

In the arrival speech in Manila following his Beijing visit, President Marcos said, "I emphasised to President Xi how my administration intends to pursue an independent foreign policy, that we are more than willing to cooperate whenever possible in the pursuit of regional peace and our two countries' national interest." As a result of the Philippines Supreme court judgement on JSMU, the already small possibility that joint resource exploration could serve as a prelude to some kind of settlement between Beijing and Manila, or at least an abeyance of tensions, seems to have narrowed further. It seems that the uneasy status quo in the bilateral relationship will continue to persist.