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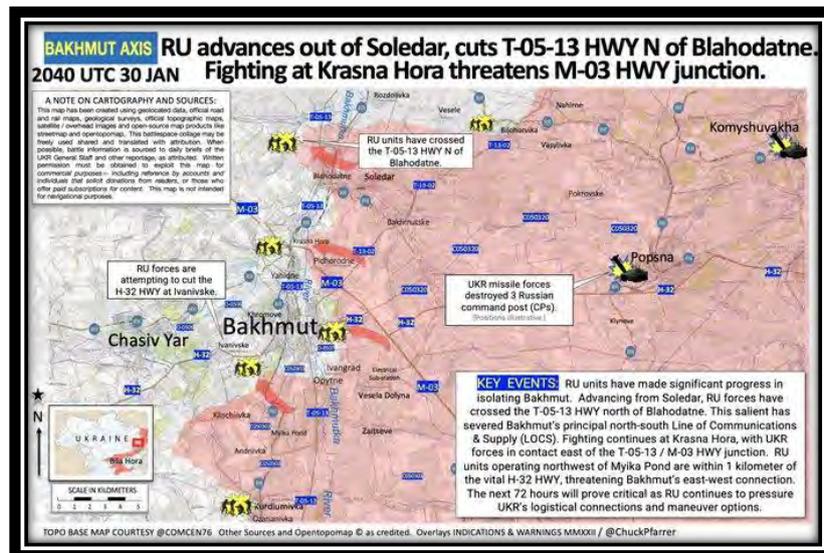
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Ukraine War Update 16-31 Jan 2023

During the last fortnight, there were not any large-scale strategic or operational changes on the broader frontline in Ukraine even though Russian forces have made small gains in Donetsk and Luhansk. After the capture of Soledar, Russian forces continued to make incremental advances towards Bakhmut. Russian forces continued attacks on positions across the frontline near the eastern cities of Bakhmut and Donetsk. The situation in Bakhmut and Vuhledar was “very tough”



with both areas and other parts of the Donetsk region “under constant Russian attacks” As per reports, the risk of Bakhmut being encircled was said to be growing, with Ukraine’s army facing shortages of artillery.

Russian forces have resumed ground attacks in the Vuhledar area and are conducting

small-scale assaults in Zaporizhzhia Oblast and around Donetsk City. Ukrainians are increasingly pressed near Kreminna. Russian forces have maintained their relentless missile and rocket attack inside Ukraine causing widespread damage, even though Ukrainian air defence has managed to intercept incoming missiles and drones. Ukrainian experts have argued that Russian Forces are carrying out "limited spoiling attacks" across most of the front line in Ukraine to "disperse and distract" Ukrainian forces and "set conditions to launch a decisive offensive operation" in the eastern Luhansk region.

Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu announced on January 17 that he will implement Russian President Vladimir Putin's directive to conduct large-scale military reforms between 2023-2026 to expand Russia's conventional armed forces, likely in preparation for a protracted war in Ukraine and also to set conditions to build a significantly stronger Russian military quickly. These will include an increase in the size of the army to 1.5 million troops from the existing 1.35 million. Shoigu announced that Russia will reestablish the Moscow and Leningrad military districts, form a new army corps in Karelia (on the Finnish border), form new self-sufficient force groupings in occupied Ukraine, and form 12 new manoeuvre divisions. The reforms seem to be directed more toward long-term goals, rather than correcting the current situation on the front.

In anticipation of the enhanced tempo of battle in spring, western countries have significantly enhanced military aid to Ukraine. In January 2023, the United States, France, and Germany announced plans to provide Ukraine with infantry fighting vehicles, including M2 Bradleys and Strykers, AMX-10 RCs, and

Marders, respectively. The United Kingdom decided to provide a dozen Challenger II tanks and 30 AS-90 155mm self-propelled howitzers. The United States and Germany announced plans to give Ukraine one battery each of the Patriot air defence system, and the Netherlands pledged to contribute Patriot missiles and launchers.

After months of mounting pressure, the United States and Germany agreed to send tanks to Ukraine on January 25. While the Americas will supply 31 M1 Abrams tanks, Germany will send 14 Leopard 2 tanks. Before the US and Germany, the United Kingdom agreed to send 14 Challenger 2 tanks to Ukraine. France has also announced plans to give its AMX-10 RC light combat tanks to the country. French President Emmanuel Macron said on Sunday he does not rule out the possibility of sending Leclerc tanks to Ukraine. Poland will send an additional 60 tanks to Ukraine on top of the 14 German-made Leopard 2 tanks it has already pledged.

Ukraine had asked for 300 Western tanks, but even with the latest additions, the total number committed is fewer than 100. In addition, the Abrams might take “many months” to be operational in Ukraine given the technological and logistical complexity. Even the Leopard 2s will also not reach the battlefield for at least another two months. It is still unclear if these tanks would prove to be the game-changer that they are billed to be. The Western allies are hoping that the Leopard 2 would be able to hold off the spring offensive and inflict significant damage on the Russians until the Abrams reach to deliver the punch.

Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said Thursday that Moscow views sending tanks to Ukraine as “direct involvement in the conflict”. The Kremlin warned the west’s supplying of further weapons to Ukraine would only lead to “significant escalation” of the conflict.

While already committed to supplying armour personnel carriers and tanks, the west seems to be reluctant to send fighter jets to Ukraine. Several Western leaders have expressed concern that providing warplanes could escalate the conflict and draw them in deeper. The U.K. government, among Kyiv’s staunchest supporters and military suppliers, said sending its fighter jets is “not practical.” German President Scholz reiterated on 29 Jan that Germany will not send fighter jets. A day later, Biden told reporters at the White House, “No” when asked if the United States would provide the jets.

Chinese Foreign Minister's visit to Africa: Key Takeaways

Keeping with the tradition of his predecessors beginning their annual overseas travel with a visit to Africa, Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang embarked on a multi-leg tour to five African countries from 09 - 16 January 2023, for his first foreign visit after taking office. This is the 33rd consecutive year that Africa has been the destination of Chinese foreign ministers’ annual first overseas visit.

Qin's itinerary had been well thought out covering one country from each of the six regions of the African Union. He visited Ethiopia (East), Gabon (Central), Angola (South), Benin (West) and Egypt (North). Each of these countries holds primordial importance in the current geopolitical dynamics of the African continent. Chinese FM's visit to Africa came at a time of intensifying China-US geopolitical and geo-economic competition. Of late, both countries have been vying to deepen relations with Africa. Just a few weeks back, US President Joe Biden hosted dozens of African leaders in Washington a month before Qin's visit, pledging funds and investment

The visit also included a surprise surprise stop in Bangladesh. In a statement, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China said, "Foreign Minister Qin Gang had a brief meeting with Bangladeshi Foreign Minister Abul Kalam Abdul Momen at an airport in Dhaka during a technical stopover on his way to visit Africa." China did not reveal much about the meeting but talking to the media, Momen said during the meeting, he raised the widening trade gap with Beijing. As per reports, Momen sought "special measures" from China to resolve the Rohingya issue in their country and offered reassurances about Bangladesh's neutral stance in the geopolitical competition.

As briefed by spokesperson Wang Wenbin, the Foreign Minister's visit



showcased the importance that China attaches to its traditional relationship with the African continent and the priority it accords to deepen the China-Africa comprehensive strategic and cooperative partnership. In the wake of the recently concluded US-Africa Leaders' Summit, the geopolitical backdrop of Qin's visit to Africa is that

lately there have high officials of major powers courting African nations for diplomatic support and resources amidst the Ukraine conflict and its ramifications.

Along with meeting the Heads of Government and his counterpart Foreign Ministers of the five countries, Qin also held meeting with the African Union (AU) Chairperson and the Arab League Secretary-General. The key themes of focus during Qin's visit were China's Belt and Road projects, distinct features of Chinese modernization, people-to-people connect, debt restructuring, infrastructure and solidarity for the cause of developing countries in the international arena. During the meeting, Qin remarked that "Africa should be a big stage for international cooperation, not an arena for major-force rivalry". Stating that the "so-called China's "debt trap" in Africa is a narrative trap imposed

on China and Africa”, he stressed China’s commitment to helping Africa ease its debt burden. Reportedly, Qin announced a partial forgiveness of the debt owed by Ethiopia, however, the amount of the forgiven debt was undisclosed.

In the final leg of the tour, in Egypt, Qin addressed Sino-Egyptian relations, increasing Chinese tourism to Egypt, investments for infrastructure projects



under China’s Belt and Road Initiative and regional issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In a joint press conference held with Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry in Cairo on 15 January, Qin Gang issued a string statement and called on Israel to "stop incitements and provocations, and to

refrain from taking unilateral actions that could worsen the situation”.

Qin also held separate talks with the Arab League Secretary-General Ahmed Aboul-Gheit. Building on the outcome documents signed at the First ‘China-Arab States Summit’ held in December 2022, Qin indicated China’s readiness to build a China-Arab community and safeguard the common interests of developing countries.

China has consistently remained Africa’s largest trading partner for the last 13 years; and is a major investor in mining projects and infrastructure including roads, telecommunications, railways and hospitals among others. While Beijing has progressively strengthened its engagement with Africa, China is also facing severe criticism over the poor quality of its infrastructure projects and unsustainable debt burden. Qin’s recent visit demonstrates that Beijing is eager not only to reshape its perception in Africa but also to fast-track China’s engagement with the region.

Drone attack targets Iran’s defence facility in Isfahan

On 28 Jan 23, a coordinated drone attack damaged an Iranian government weapons factory in the central city of Isfahan. While details of the attack remain scarce, Iran’s Defence Ministry statement described three drones being launched at its ammunition workshop, with two of them successfully shot down. A third apparently made it through to strike the building, causing “minor damage” to its roof and wounding no one, the ministry said. The Iranian Defence Ministry offered no information on who it suspected carried out the attack and said “such blind-sighted attacks will have no bearing on the country’s development.”

The state-run IRNA news agency later described the drones as “quadcopters equipped with bomblets.” Iranian state television later aired footage of debris from the drones, which resembled commercially available quadcopters. Such drones have a short flight range, and in Saturday’s attack, they were believed to have taken off from inside Iran. The origin of the drones involved in the attack was not yet clear but because of Isfahan’s distance from Iran’s international borders, the attack was also likely organized from inside Iran.

The attack comes after Iran’s Intelligence Ministry in July 2022 claimed to have broken up a plot to target sensitive sites around Isfahan. Iranian security forces had arrested Kurds who it said had been working with Israel to prepare such an operation. Later Iranian troops destroyed the house of a Kurdish businessman near Erbil based on inputs that it was being used by Mossad officials to direct drone attacks inside Iran. The Kurdish regional government strongly denied the claims.

Some social media channels associated with Iran’s Revolutionary Guards Corps, have accused Israel and its agents inside the county of being behind the attack and warned: “experience has shown that Iran will retaliate.” While there was no immediate confirmation about who was responsible, the attacks appear to fit a pattern of strikes against strategic sites across Iran that have been attributed to Israel in recent years. A fire erupted at a fuel refinery in the northwest of Iran at about the same time as explosions were heard in Isfahan, at 11.30 pm local time.

Israel remained silent on Sunday in the aftermath of the Isfahan attack, though the Jerusalem Post newspaper noted that “there are also few organisations globally besides the Mossad which are reported to have the advanced and surgical strike capabilities displayed in the operation”.

In the last three years, the shadow war between Iran and Israel has intensified. Israel has often been accused by Iran of carrying out strikes on Iranian military and nuclear facilities and assassinating scientists and a senior military official. During the tenure of Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, Israel also started targeting Iranian defence and military officials and key infrastructure. Mr Bennett called it the “octopus doctrine” of striking inside Iran to damage its capacity to arm proxy militias in the region hostile to the Jewish state.

Iran has retaliated to such attacks in the past by targeting Israeli-owned ships with drones in the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea and by firing ballistic missiles into Kurdish northern Iraq where, it said, Israel planned and carried out a drone attack on an Iranian drone factory in March 2022. And Tehran has also carried out cyberattacks on Israeli civilian infrastructure.

If Israel was behind Saturday’s attack, it would mark the first known covert operation in Iran ordered by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, a known hawk on Iran, since he returned to office last month. It would also suggest that he will continue the policy of his predecessor to expand the target list inside Iran.