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# Strategic Digest

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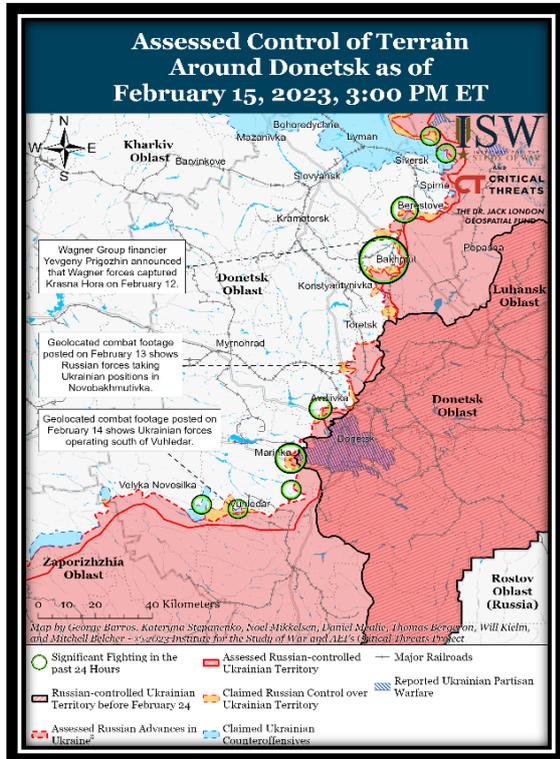
**Ukraine War Update 01-15 Feb 2023**

**The Balloon Saga continues to haunt US-China Relation**

**32nd ASEAN Coordinating Council (ACC) Meeting and ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Retreat**

## Ukraine War Update 01-15 Feb 2023

During the last fortnight, the frozen battle line in Ukraine has begun to heat up. There has been a noticeable intensification of combat activities on battlefronts in



Donetsk and Luhansk. As on 15 Feb 2023, Russian forces continued offensive operations northwest of Svatove and along the Svatove-Kreminna line. While the battle continues to rage around Bakhmut, along the western outskirts of Donetsk City, and in western Donetsk Oblast. While Russia claimed to have advanced 3KM into the Ukrainian-held line in Luhansk, Ukraine has refuted this claim.

The battle for the city of Vuhledar, which has been viewed as an opening move in an expected Russian spring offensive, has been playing out since the last week of January. The offensive comprising two of Russia’s most elite brigades — the 155th and 40th Naval Infantry Brigades was not successful. Both Brigades have suffered significant losses which include at least 130 armoured vehicles, including 36 tanks. Even though Ukrainian forces managed to blunt the offensive, it came at the cost of significant casualties.

Russia ramped up its shelling campaign in the east of Ukraine, as part of a concerted effort to seize more land. An intense battle has been raging around Bakhmut. Russian forces have incrementally gained ground and have tightened their grip, in what could be a prelude to a Ukrainian withdrawal and the biggest tactical gain for the deeply troubled Russian invasion since July.

In the last few months, both sides have been preparing for the much-anticipated spring offensive. Both sides have strengthened their defences and are looking for vulnerabilities, hoping to exploit gaps, and setting the stage for the next stage of the battle.



Russia has launched a fierce counterattack to protect Kreminna, which sits on a major north-south highway in Luhansk. It is also attacking Vuhledar in the southeast, where Ukrainian positions are just a few miles from the only rail link to Crimea. Russia's troops' positioning suggests it could try to swing down from the north and up from the south in a pincer

movement that encircles Ukrainian forces in the Donbas. Kharkiv and Sumy could see a diversionary attack.

Ukraine has limited prospects to push forward in the east, where Russia has had fortified positions and established supply lines since 2014. As per analysts, Ukraine's most promising counteroffensive is in the south. Much of the Russian-occupied territory there is in range of long-range artillery and HIMAR. Melitopol would be the likely target for a Ukrainian offensive as the city sits astride two major highways and a crucial rail line.

On 03 Feb 2023, Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the European Commission visited Kyiv for EU-Ukraine Summit. The highly symbolic visit was the first EU political mission of its kind to a country at war. A week later, President Zelensky returned to visit Brussels-his first stop in the EU capital since the Russian invasion. The visit came after a brief stopover in London and a meeting in Paris with both French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz.

In London, Zelenskiy secured long-range missiles and the training of Ukrainian pilots on NATO-standard fighter jets. In Paris, Macron was very much open to the idea of sending Mirage planes. In Brussels, Zelenskiy addressed all 27 EU leaders, first in a plenary session and then in smaller groups, to secure deliveries of fighter jets as soon as possible.

The overall pitch of Zelensky, during his Europe tour, was to secure commitment for more weapons given the impending Russian military offensive. On the question of Ukraine's EU membership, Zelenskiy pushed for the opening of EU accession talks in 2023. The Ukrainian president also asked for more EU sanctions, in particular for more measures against Russian drones, missiles, and IT services. He also called for the sanctioning of Rosatom, Russia's state-owned nuclear energy firm.

As the Ukraine war approaches its anniversary, NATO countries and Western allies on 15 Feb 2023 announced more weapons and ammunition for Ukraine, moving to boost Kyiv's military capabilities as Russia escalated attacks in the east. The alliance's defence chiefs had gathered in Brussels to coordinate a long-term response to the Russian invasion.

### **The Balloon Saga continues to haunt US-China Relation**

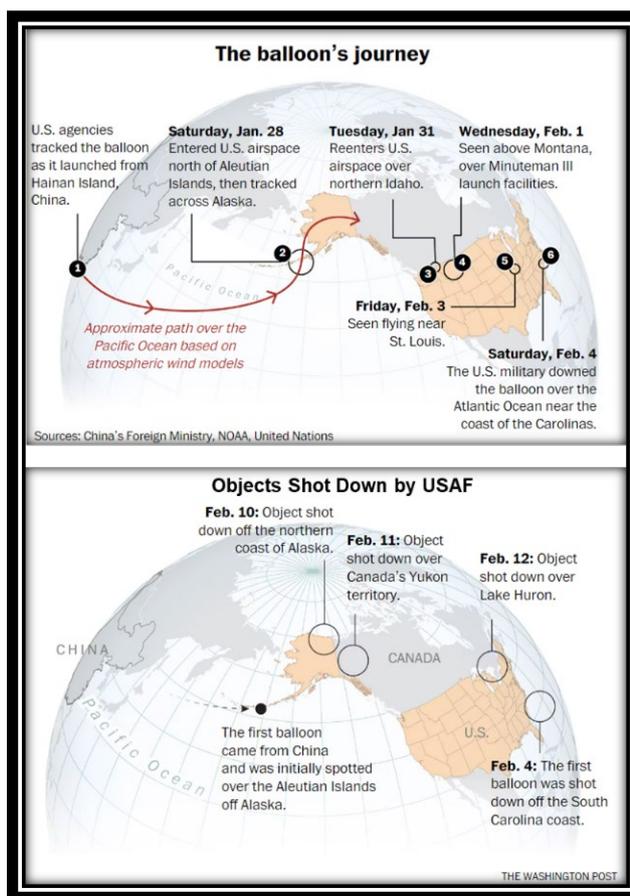
A massive white orb -- the size of three school buses, and suspected of being a Chinese spy balloon -- drifted across US airspace until it was shot down by the United States Air Force (USAF) on live television on 04 Feb 2023. The balloon saga blew up on social media and also deepened diplomatic tensions between China and the US. The discovery of what the Pentagon labelled a "high altitude surveillance balloon" led to the cancellation of the visit of the US secretary of State Anthony Blinken to Beijing. Another Chinese balloon was detected over Latin America during the same time. Later, USAF tracked and shot down three more aerial floating objects over the US and Canadian airspace between February 10-12, 2023 whose origin has not yet been established.

The Pentagon assesses that Chinese surveillance balloons flew over parts of the US three times during the Trump administration and once previously under Biden's tenure, and escaped immediate detection. Officials have said these surveillance airships, operated in part by the PLA air force, have been spotted over five continents. The surveillance balloon effort has operated for several years partly out of Hainan province off China's south coast and has collected information on military assets in countries and areas of emerging strategic interest to China including Japan, India, Vietnam, Taiwan and the Philippines. It has also been argued that balloon-based surveillance was a discrete program — part of a larger set of programs that are about gaining greater clarity about military facilities in the United States and a variety of other countries.

Beijing insists balloons, which floated over Continental America in Early Feb 2023, were only used to collect meteorological information and just happened to accidentally drift into US airspace. Before the balloon was shot down, China expressed regret and said it respected the White House's decision to postpone a visit to Beijing by Antony Blinken. That briefly held out the possibility that the two sides could manage the crisis and reschedule the visit, which was supposed to consolidate the detente since Presidents Joe Biden and Xi Jinping met in November.

But China's rhetoric later hardened. Its foreign ministry expressed "strong dissatisfaction", accusing America of over-reacting and violating international practice. It pledged to safeguard the interests of "relevant Chinese companies" and said it reserved the right to respond. China on 13 Feb 2023 accused the US of running the "largest spy network in the world". Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson also said the United States had sent 10 balloons illegally into Chinese airspace since last year, an accusation that prompted an immediate and furious denial from the White House.

In recent months Beijing has softened its diplomatic rhetoric and signalled a willingness to thaw ties with the United States and other Western countries. The balloon saga derailed Beijing's carefully tended diplomatic campaign and forced it into damage-control mode. At the same time, the balloon handed the United States, already engaged in heightened competition with China, a rare opportunity to rally both public concern and international solidarity.



The US Navy and FBI are continuing with their efforts to recover the wreckage of the downed balloon. On 14 Feb 2023, US Northern Command indicated that Search crews found "significant debris from the site, including all of the priority sensor and electronics pieces". U.S. officials still trying to make a definitive conclusion about the exact nature of the object.

On 15 Feb 2023, the Washington Post reported that analysts are now examining the possibility that China didn't intend to penetrate the American heartland with their airborne surveillance device. The report suggests that the ensuing international crisis that has ratcheted up tensions between Washington and Beijing may have been at least partly the result of a mistake. It remains unclear whether this new assessment will help in ameliorating the bilateral tension as the report also highlighted that even if the balloon were inadvertently blown over the U.S. mainland, Beijing decided to seize the opportunity to try to gather intelligence.

Numerous countries have seen public opinion on China turn on a specific episode. For Australia, it was Beijing's interference in domestic political affairs in 2019. In Canada, it was the seizure and detention, for more than 1,000 days, of two of its nationals. In India, border skirmishes turned the national mood, and in Britain, it was the extinguishing of Hong Kong's democracy. Beijing's spy balloons may supply a similar turning point in US-China relations.

### **32nd ASEAN Coordinating Council (ACC) Meeting and ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Retreat**

The ASEAN Foreign Ministers assembled in Jakarta, Indonesia on 3-4 February 2023 for the 32nd ASEAN Coordinating Council (ACC) Meeting and ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Retreat. Timor-Leste attended the meeting for the first time as an 11th member of ASEAN, with the status of the observer while Myanmar remained absent from the gathering due to Naypyidaw's lack of cooperation in implementing a five-step agreement made in 2021 between ASEAN leaders and Myanmar's military leader, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing.



This minister's talks in Jakarta are overshadowed by the deteriorating situation in military-ruled Myanmar in many ways. In her opening remarks Friday, Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi said the ministers were meeting amid immense global challenges to which the Indo-Pacific region is not

immune, including geopolitical, food, energy, financial and ecological crises, as well as major power rivalries that could spill over and potentially destabilize the region. "Internally, we are facing the situation in Myanmar that tests our

credibility,” Marsudi said, adding that “as a family, we will have an in-depth and frank discussion on the implementation of the five-point consensus.” ASEAN chair Indonesia has vowed not to be “held hostage” by the Myanmar issue. But just a few days after the junta announced an extension of the emergency rule.

One of the main highlights of the meeting was the discussion on regional security and stability. This meeting emphasised boosting maritime security cooperation in our immediate region and beyond while maintaining ASEAN Centrality. They emphasized the importance of maintaining peace, stability and security in the region, and encouraged the parties concerned to engage in constructive dialogue to peacefully resolve disputes.

The ministers expressed their concern over the increasing tensions in the South China Sea and the need for all parties to exercise self-restraint and respect the principles of international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The meeting highlighted the need to find new strategies/approaches to speed up the process of the Code of Conduct (COC) negotiation which has not seen much progress in the last three years. In this regard, Indonesia will host rounds of COC negotiation, the first of which will be in March 2023.

The ministerial meeting highlighted the issue of the Indo-Pacific within ASEAN-Led Mechanisms and noted the concept Note on the ASEAN Roadmap for Promoting ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific with the emphasis on strengthening a rules-based framework, transparency, inclusivity, and non-intervention. In addition to this, ministers expressed their concern on the issue of the South China Sea, especially the issue of land reclamations because this issue has eroded trust and confidence, and increased tensions. The joint press statement expressed the exercise of self-restraint to pursue peaceful resolution of disputes under the universally recognized principles of international law.

Another key issue discussed at the meeting was the advancement of economic integration in the region. The ministers acknowledged the significant progress made towards achieving the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) blueprint and stressed the need for continued efforts to fully implement its commitments. They also discussed measures to enhance connectivity and facilitate cross-border trade and investment, to further strengthen the region's economic competitiveness.

In the context of the incident of burning and desecrating the Holy Quran last month, a joint press statement by the chair of the 32nd ASEAN Coordinating Council (ACC) Meeting has emphasised and condemned the acts by extremist, far-right politicians. Statement retreated from the act which has hurt and tarnished religious tolerance.

The ministers also addressed the challenge of climate change and its impact on the region. They emphasized the importance of continued cooperation and coordination among ASEAN member states to effectively respond to the challenge and to support the implementation of the Paris Agreement.