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# Strategic Digest

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## Ukraine War Update 16-28 Feb 2023

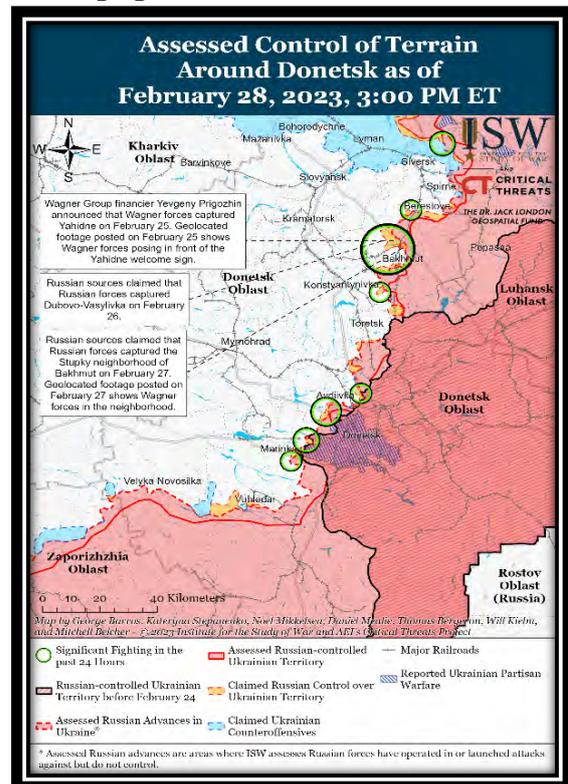
The war in Ukraine dragged into its second year on 24 Feb 2023 with no real signs of a way out of the conflict. While Russia and Ukraine both have vowed to fight on, both face daunting challenges in moving forward, with no clear sense of what an attainable victory might look like. Neither side appears primed for an outright military victory, while progress at the negotiating table seems just as unlikely.

Ahead of the one-year anniversary of the Ukraine war, Russian President Vladimir Putin presented the war in Ukraine as an existential struggle against the West and prepared Russia for a long war to be waged “step by step.” “The elites of the West do not hide their purpose. But they also cannot fail to realise that it is impossible to defeat Russia on the battlefield,” he told Russia's political and military elite on February 21, 2023. Alleging that the United States was turning the war into a global conflict, Putin said Russia was suspending participation in the New START treaty, its last major arms control treaty with Washington.

On the same day in Warsaw, Us President Biden reiterated the west “will not tire” in the quest to ensure a democratic Ukraine. Since the war began, the Biden administration and the U.S. Congress have directed nearly more than \$75 billion in assistance to Ukraine, which includes humanitarian, financial, and military support, according to the Kiel Institute for the World Economy. And in a news conference in Kyiv on February 24, 2023; President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine said he was “certain” his country would win, calling victory inevitable.

Declaring the resolve to fight on, however, is much easier than mustering the resources and support to do so. Ukraine, with a population less than a third that of Russia and an economy devastated by the invasion, is increasingly dependent on Western aid. Russia faces significant constraints due to the ever-expanding scope of sanctions and voluminous frontline casualties.

On the battlefield, Russia’s winter offensive has thus far been underwhelming. The Russian offensive consisted of about 5-6 axes of attack focused on the Donbas. Rather than a major push along one part of the front, it is instead a series of distributed battles running north-south from Luhansk, to Bakhmut, and southern Donetsk. Russian forces made marginal territorial gains around Bakhmut and Avdiivka and continued to conduct ground attacks across the Donetsk Oblast front line.



Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks northwest of Svatove and near Kreminna. Russian forces continue to struggle to conduct effective combat operations on the Zaporizhia Oblast front line. These marginal gains have come to Russia with significant casualties. However, Ukrainian forces have thus far maintained a tenuous hold on Bakhmut. The sides have battled over Bakhmut for months, and the city has taken on more of a symbolic than strategic value.

On 27 February, Russian officials accused Ukraine on Tuesday of deploying attack drones over Russian territory. A military drone attempted to strike a gas facility in the Moscow region, according to a senior Russian official, and photos of the wreckage suggested it was Ukrainian-made, indicating rarely attempted strikes hundreds of miles behind Russian lines. The alleged attack was one of several reports of successful or attempted unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) strikes in at least four regions of Russia. The strikes caused a nervous day in Russia, where airspace was closed over St Petersburg and hackers managed to broadcast a “missile strike threat” over several TV channels and radio stations in the Moscow and St Petersburg regions, as well as areas closer to the border with Ukraine, Voronezh and Belgorod. Dozens of flights were cancelled or turned back as St Petersburg’s Pulkovo airport was closed to arriving and departing flights. Some early reports said a drone had also been spotted near St Petersburg, but those have not been confirmed. Ukrainian officials have not claimed responsibility for any of the attacks, but they have similarly avoided directly acknowledging responsibility for previous strikes and sabotage.

### **Biden’s Ukraine Visit and G-7 Virtual Summit**

US president Joe Biden’s public itinerary said he’d be travelling to Poland on Feb 20 to express solidarity with Ukraine and to pledge continued financial and political support for Ukraine ahead of the one-year anniversary of the Russia-Ukraine war. Instead, he made a surprise appearance in central Kyiv to meet with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in a poignant display of solidarity.

The visit just days ahead of the one-year anniversary of the war has been highlighted as a major sign of U.S. support for Ukraine. Biden said in a statement he travelled to Kyiv to meet with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and "reaffirm our unwavering and unflagging commitment to Ukraine's democracy, sovereignty, and territorial integrity." Speaking from Kyiv, the U.S. president said: "One year later, Kyiv stands. And Ukraine stands. Democracy stands."



The visit came at a crucial moment: Biden is trying to keep allies unified in their support for Ukraine as the war is expected to intensify with spring offensives. Zelenskyy is pressing allies to speed up the delivery of promised weapon systems and calling on the West to provide fighter jets — something that Biden has declined to do.

In Kyiv, Biden announced an additional half-billion dollars in U.S. assistance — on top of the more than \$50 billion already provided — for shells for howitzers, anti-tank missiles, air surveillance radars and other aid but no new advanced weaponry. Biden's mission with his visit to Kyiv aimed to signal the resolve of the US to stick with Ukraine "as long as it takes".

After Kyiv, Biden proceeded to his prescheduled visit to Warsaw on his second trip to Poland since Russia invaded Ukraine. Speaking from Warsaw, Poland, Biden boasted of how the west had responded to the aggression from Moscow and said leaders must continue to stand up for freedom and democracy. The speech came just hours after Russian President Vladimir Putin's speech in Moscow — though the White House insisted the timing was coincidental.

In Warsaw, Biden signalled two key messages. The first was to reiterate unflinching US support for Ukraine in the fight against Russia for as long as necessary. The second was to unambiguously convey that attack on any NATO member's territory will be considered an attack on NATO as a whole, bringing all of the obligatory consequences of mutual defence along with it.

On 24 Feb 2023, President Biden participated in a virtual summit of G-7 leaders marking one year of the Ukraine War. Ahead of the G7 meeting, the US led the



way with an announcement of further military aid for Ukraine and sanctions against Russia and its supporters, including Chinese companies. The military assistance package will include several new drone and anti-drone systems the US has not previously made available, as well as equipment to help Ukraine counter Russian electronic warfare. The new drones include the Switchblade 600, a bigger

version of the loitering munition (or kamikaze drone) than has already been supplied, as well as the CyberLux K8, Altius-600, and the Jump 20, which can be used for surveillance or adapted to carry bombs.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy also joined the video gathering, the first summit presided over by Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida. G-7 leaders reaffirmed their "unwavering support" for Ukraine and its President

Volodymyr Zelenskyy and announced sweeping new sanctions against Russia. The leaders were critical of Putin's decision to suspend Russia's participation in New START, a strategic nuclear arms reduction treaty between the U.S. and Russia. They also warned of "severe consequences" in case Russia uses nuclear weapons.

The G-7 countries also affirmed their coordinated action to "further counter Russia's capacity to wage its illegal aggression" and pledged to prevent Russia from obtaining military equipment and technology. They also called on other countries to stop providing military support to Russia. In addition, G-7 countries have also decided to create a new tool to coordinate their enforcement of existing sanctions on Russia.

### Wang Yi's trip to Europe

2023 marks the 20th anniversary of the establishment of the China-EU comprehensive strategic partnership. Chinese State Councillor Wang Yi recently promoted as a top security advisor to Xi toured Europe to mend broken ties with the bloc.

China's ties with Europe are far from steady despite humongous trade volumes. Beijing's refusal to condemn Russia's actions in Ukraine and endorsing the Russian narrative of the West's aggression has only led to a trust deficit.

The first stop of his visit was France where he met with President Macron behind closed doors at the Elysee Palace. The two sides discussed the consequences of Russia's war in Ukraine on the world's most vulnerable nations regarding food security and financing capacities. Wang met French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna and also participated in a session of the French-Chinese strategic dialogue with Macron's top diplomatic adviser to discuss bilateral projects.

In Italy, Wang Yi met the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Antonio Tajani. Tajani is regarded as being highly sensitive to human rights and religious liberty issues. Therefore, not much progress could be made on the Memorandum of Understanding signed by China and Italy in March 2019.

Wang Yi then delivered a speech at the ongoing Munich Security Conference on 18 February 2023 where he publicized the common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security concept advocated by President Xi Jinping. He went on to clarify China's commitment to adhering to the path of peaceful development. Wang's engagement at Munich



triggered a widely speculated response from US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken when he gravely stated that China could be considering supplying lethal help to Russia, a claim China denied.

Hungary was the only east European country that was included in his itinerary because of the pro-China government of Victor Orban being in power there. Hungary was the first in the European Union to sign a Belt-and-Road memorandum with Beijing, which financed a Chinese-built rail line connecting the country to Serbia. In recent years, it has been the only East European country to actively deepen cooperation with China. While its other neighbours—Czech Republic, Lithuania, Poland—have turned more hawkish toward Beijing, concerned about Europe's economic vulnerability to an authoritarian state they see as aligned with Moscow.

China- Hungary bonhomie is interpreted by the west as a ploy by Beijing to drive a deeper wedge between Brussels and Budapest. The latter has been having a series of fallouts with the EU ever since the Covid pandemic.

Moscow was the last leg of Wang's Europe tour where he met President Putin in an unusually proximate setting in the Kremlin. Amid the show of solidarity with Russia, a friend with no limits; China outlined a 12-point peace plan to mediate the termination of the Ukraine war. Through the peace plan, China emphasized the importance of political settlement for the war.

The proposal mainly elaborates on long-held Chinese positions, including that all countries' "sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity be effectively guaranteed". The plan also called for an end to the "Cold War mentality", which is Beijing's standard term for what it regards as global dominance by the United States and its interference in other countries' affairs. It also stresses the safety of nuclear plants and averting humanitarian crises.

However, Chinese credibility is extremely low with Ukraine and the West and this limits its role as a self-professed mediator. In rather cautious remarks, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky welcomed the plan and expressed his desire to discuss the peace proposal with China's leader Xi Jinping. The Kremlin, however, threw cold water on China's peace plan for the Ukraine war, suggesting now is not the time to pursue such a proposal. The Russian Foreign Ministry thanked Beijing for the new proposal but underscored that any peace deal would need to recognize "new territorial realities" in Ukraine.

The success of Wang Yi's European tour remains a mixed bag because, despite limited progress, it failed to strike the right chord at EU wide level. China's neutral stand is seen as tacit support to Russia amidst reports of Beijing's alleged supplies of drones to Moscow.