

# Strategic Digest

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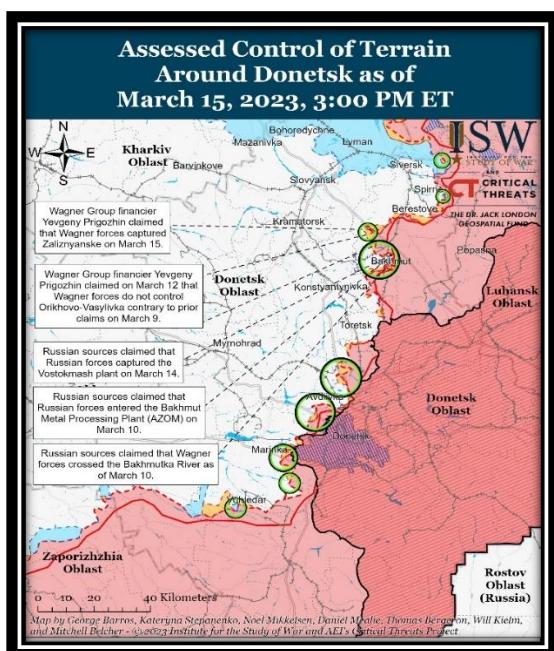
**Ukraine War Update 01-15 March 2023**

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## Ukraine War Update 01-15 March 2023

During the last fortnight, there was not any significant change in the 600-mile-long front line of the Ukraine war. While Russia made incremental gains around Bakhmut, a relentless and intense battle of attrition continued. After nearly eight months of trench warfare Ukrainian forces are surrounded on three sides, Kyiv's supply lines are fraying, and Moscow is in control of just under half of Bakhmut. Still, Ukraine has pledged to double down on the city's defence even as both sides take heavy casualties. On March 14, 2023, President Zelenskyy said that Ukraine's future depends on the outcome of the battle raging around Bakhmut and other key cities and towns in the country's east. Despite the Ukrainian military's assertion that it was holding on in Bakhmut, its grip on the city remained tenuous with Russian forces making new gains.



Although Bakhmut's strategic value is debatable, the wider implication of its fall into the Russian hand remains uncertain. Some experts have argued that it might make sense for Ukrainian forces to fall back to a new fortified defensive line, but Kyiv shows no sign of doing that for now. However, President Zelenskiy has portrayed "Fortress Bakhmut" as a symbol of defiance which is bleeding the Russian military dry. For Moscow, the fall of the city it calls by its Soviet-era name of Artyomovsk, would be its first major capture since mid-2022 and a boost in its wider war against Ukraine. It also claims to be decimating Ukrainian forces.

On March 09, 2023; Russia unleashed its biggest aerial strike with a complex barrage of weapons, including its newest hypersonic missiles hitting Kyiv and other major cities in Ukraine. Russia claimed that the attack was retaliation for an incursion last week by a pro-Ukrainian armed group in the Bryansk region of Russia. The strikes included six of the new 'Kinjal' hypersonic. As per Ukrainian Sources, Russia has fired a total of 81 missiles and 47 missiles managed to hit targets. Moscow's higher success rate was made possible due to the use of Kinjal missiles and a higher than typical number of ballistic rather than cruise missiles. While the massive attack on critical infrastructure tested the tenacity of Ukraine's energy planners, most of the electricity grid was swiftly brought back online.

In an incident of potentially profound significance, an American MQ-9 drone crashed into the Black Sea after colliding with a Russian Su-27 aircraft on March 14, 2023. As per US officials, the US drone was conducting "routine operations

in international airspace” when a Russian military jet struck its propeller causing its loss in international waters. Russia denied that there had been a collision, saying the drone’s own manoeuvres caused it to crash. The Russian defence ministry claimed that the U.S. drone was flying with its transponders turned off and its air defence forces attempted to identify the aircraft, after which the MQ-9 “went into uncontrolled flight with a loss of altitude.”

The Black sea long been a theatre of has long been a theatre of international competition between the United States and its European allies on one side and Russia and its sphere of influence on the other, a dynamic that has been supercharged by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. While the drone incident is the first known physical contact between the US and Russian military assets, the event highlights the region’s potential to become a flash point, accidentally or otherwise.

Russia agreed to extend the Black Sea grain deal that aims to prevent a global food crisis by letting Ukraine export vital food sources from its southern coast, “but only for 60 days”. That is half the length of the previous renewal of 120 days, agreed to in November. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov described the extension as a “goodwill gesture”.

Earlier in March 2023, Chancellor Olaf Scholz said Thursday that Germany and its allies were in talks with Kyiv over future security guarantees in preparation for sustainable peace for Ukraine. A negotiated end to this protracted war has gained momentum due to the assessment that it may not be possible for Ukraine to retake all its territory from Russian occupation. The quality of Ukraine’s military force, once considered a substantial advantage over Russia, has been degraded by a year of casualties that have taken many of the most experienced fighters off the battlefield, leading some Ukrainian officials to question Kyiv’s readiness to mount a much-anticipated spring offensive.

## AUKUS Leaders’ Summit 2023

On March 13, 2023, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese of Australia, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak of the United Kingdom, and President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. of the United States announced an arrangement for Australia to acquire a conventionally-armed, nuclear-powered submarine (SSN) capability through the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) enhanced security partnership.

The AUKUS trilateral security partnership was announced on September 15, 2013, with the key



objective of enabling Australia to acquire eight SSNs along with the development of other advanced military technology. AUKUS pact envisaged an eighteen-month consultative period for envisioning an optimal pathway for constructing these SSNs.

Later, on 22 November 2021, the three countries signed a legal framework known as the Exchange of Naval Nuclear Propulsion Information Agreement (ENNPIA) for governing the sharing of the coveted nuclear propulsion technology with Australia. The announcement made by the three AUKUS leaders on 13 March 2023 in San Diego signalled the end of the eighteen-month consultative period and revealed the way forward for the trilateral security pact.

The AUKUS has adopted a three-phased approach. The first phase spanning the current decade focuses on the development of Australia's domestic submarine industrial base and the acceleration of the training of the Royal Australia Navy's (RAN) personnel to independently operate SSNs. Towards this end, both the US and the UK have committed to increasing the port visits of their respective SSNs to Australia. RAN's personnel are slated to receive operational training by being deployed alongside the US and UK naval crew of the Virginia and Astute class SSNs. In order to enhance deterrence in the Indo-Pacific through SSN patrol, US Navy (USN) and Royal Navy(RN) will establish a Submarine Rotational Force West (SBF-West) comprising SSNs of the two navies as early as 2027.

The second phase, beginning early 2030s, seeks to fill the capability gap of RAN due to the envisaged decommissioning of its ageing Collin-Class Submarines. The US intends to sell Australia three Virginia Class SSNs with provisions to sell two more on requirement subjected to approval by the US Congress.

During the third phase in the late 2030s, the first SSNs built under the AUKUS pact are likely to be delivered to Australia. It has been confirmed that Australia would be opting for an entirely new class of SSNs instead of the existing Virginia and Astute Class of the USN and RN respectively. This new class of submarines has been named SSN-AUKUS and would leverage upon the UK's ongoing submarine development programme known as SSNR. The SSN-AUKUS has now officially subsumed the SSNR and would be a joint submarine development programme between Australia and UK. The first submarine of SSN-AUKUS class would be built in the UK and is slated to be delivered to Australia by the late 2030s. The subsequent submarines under this class are to be constructed within Australia and are expected to be delivered to RAN in the early 2040s.

Overall, this latest iteration of the AUKUS leaders' summit puts to rest a range of speculations that were circulating among the global strategic community since the announcement of the trilateral pact in 2021. The first phase of the optimal pathway does indicate a practical near-term plan for preparing the men and material required for empowering Australia to construct and operate the SSNs. The second phase of the plan seems to have been shaped by the need to make a stop-gap arrangement to bridge the inevitable capability gap that the RAN would

face in the early 2030s. The final phase of the plan envisages an ambitious undertaking to jointly develop an entirely new class of submarines by Australia and UK by the late 2030s.

Although much of the speculations on AUKUS have been addressed for now, apprehensions linger among observers regarding the proliferation concerns, bureaucratic complexities and geopolitical repercussions that the trilateral pact is bound to create.

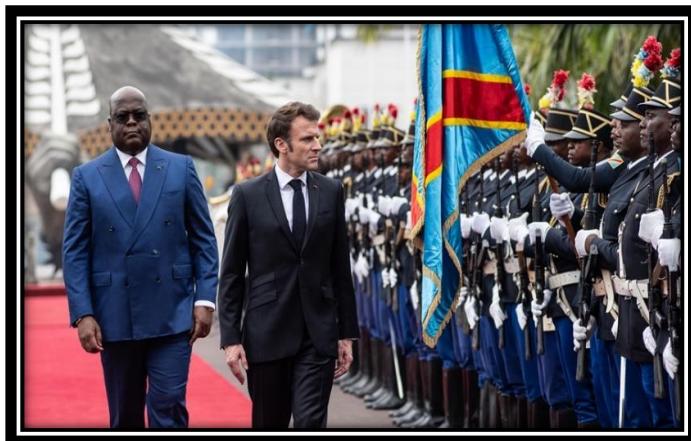
As expected, China reacted sharply to the AUKUS development. Terming AUKUS cooperation on nuclear submarines as a typical Cold War mentality, the Chinese Foreign Ministry stated that the three countries “have totally disregarded the concerns of the international community and gone further down the wrong and dangerous path.”

### **French President Emmanuel Macron's Four-Nation Visit to Africa**

French President Emmanuel Macron completed a Four-Nation visit to Africa from 02-05 March 2023 which included Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo and two former French colonies Gabon and the Republic of Congo; with an agenda that steered clear of military and political spheres. The visit focused on expanding engagement with African countries to areas of climate change issues, agriculture and education among others. This was his second tour to the African continent in less than a year; the last was to Cameroon, Benin and Guinea-Bissau in July 2022.

His visit assumes significance against the backdrop of the increasing support for closer ties with Russia, a growing anti-French sentiment which saw the withdrawal of French troops from Mali and Burkina Faso and deepening engagement with Africa by major powers amidst the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Before embarking on his multi-leg trip, on 27 February 2023, he delivered a speech at Elysée Palace signalling a revamp of France's approach to Africa. Reiterating his pledge to break from colonial policies of transactional profit-driven approach things of the past, President Macron announced a “shift from an assistance approach to a social investment and partnership-based approach” and commercial and other interests pursued with respect and humility. He said that for this model to be successful, France will focus on building a “new military partnership model” which it has worked out in consultation with its African partners. Accordingly, the military footprint will reduce and bases would be co-run with host nations as a training institutions. France's new approach comes amid a deepening security crisis in West Africa's Sahel region that has fuelled anti-French protests and brought juntas to power in Burkina Faso and Mali which have rejected long-standing military ties.



On 2 March 2023, President Macron arrived in Gabon where he attended the ‘One Forest Summit’ with the leaders of Central African countries and promised 50 million euros (\$52.9 million) as part of a joint 100 million-euro commitment to initiate a ‘mechanism that aims to reward countries which are scientifically proven to have

protected their forests or restored them.’ Later, in his remarks to the French community, President Macron remarked that “the age of Francafrique is well over” referring to France’s post-colonisation strategy of propping up dictators in its former colonies in exchange for access to resources and military bases. Despite France having no intention of meddling in sovereign affairs, Mr Macron lamented that people ascribe intentions to France that it doesn’t have.

On 3 March 2023, President Macron visited Luanda, Angola where he met President Joa Lourenço. The two leaders acknowledged the strengthening of ties, particularly in training, and discussed the digital revolution at work in Africa. President Macron described Angola as a ‘strategic partner’ and appreciated Angola’s diplomatic efforts in dealing with the ongoing conflict in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.

On the same day, he visited Brazzaville, Republic of Congo where he met with President Denis Sassou-Nguesso before travelling to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) for the final leg of his tour. At DRC, President Macron held a news conference with his counterpart Felix Tshisekedi, where he reiterated France’s ‘unfailing support’ to Kinshasa, pledged 34 million euros (\$36.2 million) to the conflict-hit country and also expressed support for the EU’s proposal for building a humanitarian air bridge in Goma.

During the news conference at his last destination, Macron argued with the president of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Felix Tshisekedi, when the latter reminded Macron about his country’s involvement in the 1994 genocide. He said that Congo is "faced with a history whose number of victims is equivalent to that of the world wars we have lived through, France does not claim, I do not claim, to have a solution on its own. The solution lies in a collective awakening." and called for the war to stop.

With the shifting political landscape in Africa, Paris is attempting to move beyond its military engagement and traditional partners. The shift in France’s African policy was well-reflected in the agenda of President Macron’s four-nation tour, which was accompanied by a large business delegation. Macron made it evident that France’s new strategy includes decreased military presence, improved economic ties and increased holistic engagement.