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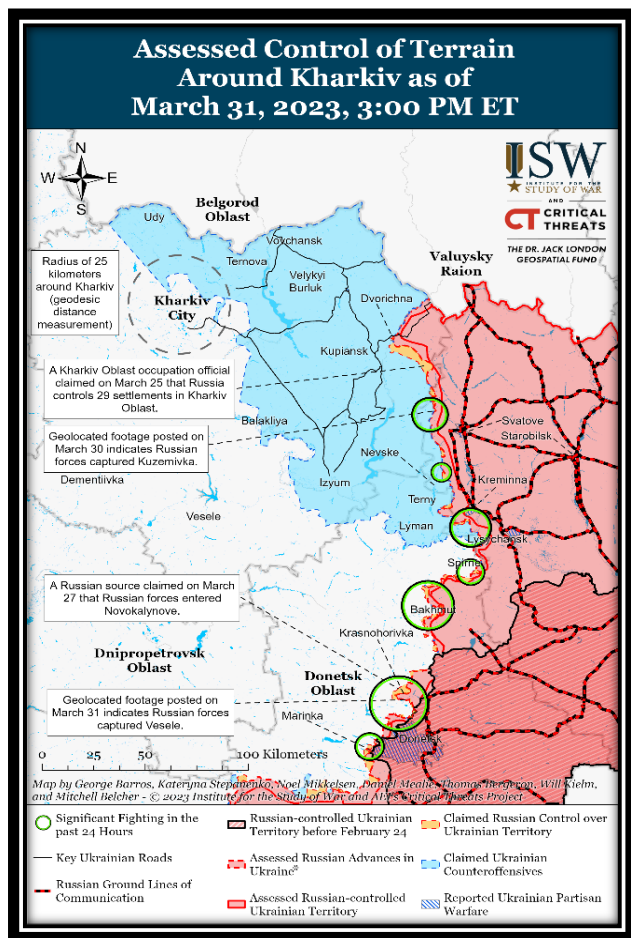
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Ukraine War Update 16-31 March 2023

In the first week of March 2023, it was widely speculated that the fierce battle over the Ukrainian city of Bakhmut could end with a Russian victory within days. Three weeks later, this prediction has yet to come true. Ukraine and Russia are still fighting for control of the city. As of 31 March 2023, Russian forces continued offensive operations in and around Bakhmut and have made gains within the city. As per reports, Russia's Wagner Group flag was seen on a building in the centre of Bakhmut within a few blocks of the city administration building. On the other hand, Ukrainian troops regained positions around Bakhmut, and Ukrainian officials continue to emphasize the importance of Ukraine's control over this area. The battle over the city has become yet another example of Ukraine defying the odds.



While the broader front remained largely unchanged, Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Avdiivka-Donetsk frontline with marginal gains. In Southern Ukraine, Russian concentration areas have been facing long-range artillery strikes by Ukraine.

On 19 March, Vladimir Putin made a surprise visit to Mariupol. This was his first trip to the Russian-occupied territories of eastern Ukraine's Donbas region since the start of the war. A day later, Putin visited a command post in the southern Russian city of Rostov-on-Don. Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, has visited frontline military positions near the besieged eastern city of Bakhmut.

President Putin announced his intentions to deploy tactical nuclear weapons on the territory of Belarus on 27 March 2023. Russia will retain control over any nuclear weapons deployed to Belarus, just like the U.S. controls its tactical nuclear weapons on the territory of its NATO allies. This is the first time since the mid-1990s that Moscow will base arms outside the country. In his televised statement, Putin also said Russia will have completed the construction of a storage facility for these weapons in Belarus by July, although he did not specify when the transfer of weapons would take place.

Putin said the immediate trigger for the deployment of Russia's tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus was the UK government's decision to provide Ukraine with armour-piercing shells containing depleted uranium. In response, the UK foreign secretary has said there is no "nuclear escalation" in the country's decision to supply Ukraine with shells made with depleted uranium. Ukraine accused Russia of destabilising Belarus and making its smaller neighbour into "a nuclear hostage".

The head of the UN nuclear watchdog, the IAEA, made a second visit to the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant in Ukraine on 27 March 2023 amid an escalation in the fighting around it. He has described the situation there as very dangerous. Mr Grossi's visit was part of IAEA efforts to avert the risk of an accident at the nuclear plant. Mr Grossi also met with President Volodymyr Zelenskiy during a working trip to the Zaporizhzhya region.

On 31 March 2023, IMF approved a \$15.6 billion loan program for Ukraine as part of a \$115 billion package to bolster its war-torn economy. The package includes the IMF loan, \$80 billion in pledges for grants and concessional loans from multilateral institutions and other countries, and \$20 billion worth of debt relief commitments. The loan program will span four years, and run in two phases. Ukraine must meet certain conditions over the next two years, including steps to boost tax revenue, maintain exchange rate stability, preserve central bank independence and strengthen anti-corruption efforts. Deeper reforms will be required in the second phase of the program to enhance stability.

After a winter of intense battles and heavy casualties in Ukraine's east, both Russia and Ukraine are taking steps to replenish their depleted forces. Russia has increased the conscription quota by 10% and aiming to draft about 147000 men during the planned spring offensive. Ukraine, also trying to replenish its ranks, said that it had received more than 35,000 applications for a new force it is forming, the Offensive Guard.

With Bakhmut stabilizing, the Russian winter offensive seems to have lost momentum. While Russian forces had made some marginal gains in its winter offensive along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna-Lyman line in western Donetsk Oblast, they failed to achieve the Kremlin's goals of seizing the Donetsk and Luhansk oblast administrative borders by March 31.

In the meanwhile, more deliveries of Western weapons are arriving in Ukraine, where officials say they will soon launch a counteroffensive to reclaim territory lost in the east and south. Oleksii Reznikov, Minister of Defence of Ukraine, indicated that the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine is planning to conduct a counter-offensive on several fronts at the "right moment", but it all depends on the weather conditions.

Taking Stock of President Xi Jinping's Visit to Russia

Chinese President Xi Jinping recently paid a three-day official visit to Russia, the first since 2019. Amidst the signing of a flurry of economic engagements and issuance of a joint statement on their shared global outlook, the visit underscored the massive strides in the “no-limits” Russia-China partnership, particularly against the backdrop of Moscow’s growing international isolation. While President Xi emphasised the need for peace in Ukraine, sceptics highlighted the increasing entente between Beijing and Moscow as being detrimental to finding a genuine peace plan that would balance the interests of the warring sides.

The visit saw the two countries sign the joint statement on “Deepening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination for the New Era” which sought to shun the Cold War-era-akin military-political alliances, reiterating that China-Russia relations “have the nature of no-alliance, no-confrontation,” and are “not targeting any third party.” Yet their common concerns vis-à-vis the US and its western allies came out very prominently. The joint statement expressed their concerns about AUKUS—the trilateral security partnership between Australia, the UK, and the US—and its nuclear submarine cooperation programmes. Besides, the two countries in their joint statement accused the US of carrying out “biological military activities both inside and outside the country,” undermining the security of other countries and “relevant regions.”



While the Russia-China partnership has acquired a qualitative strategic depth, Kremlin’s ongoing confrontation with the West appears to be a key determinant in pushing it closer to China. A robust partnership with Beijing is perceived as a strategic necessity for Moscow to tackle the Western pressure. This is evident in China occupying a central position in Russia’s economy with China emerging as Russia’s largest trading partner. It is also one of Russia’s key sources of investment, industrial equipment and technology, including 5G, even though evidence suggests China adopting a far more cautious approach than earlier imagined, perhaps in fear of retaliatory Western sanctions. Russia has also sought to tap China’s expertise in a few electronic components for which the Kremlin had earlier relied upon the West. As such, President Xi Jinping’s visit would have likely underscored President Putin’s assertion to the domestic audience that Russia cannot be isolated.

The growing convergence and mutual understanding between Russia and China is underpinned by their shared objective of diluting what they perceive as American hegemony. While both countries are providing support to each other’s core strategic concerns, they have also sought to co-opt countries like Iran, which

have had a precarious relationship with the US. Unsurprisingly, President Xi's visit met with a sharp riposte from the US.

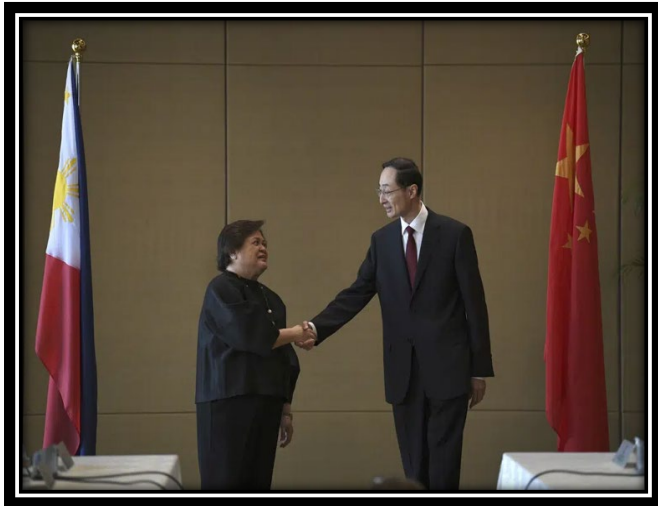
Meanwhile, as part of this growing entente, China not only gets to tap Russia's diplomatic heft and its military technologies, particularly air defence and aircraft engines but also its abundant natural resources. The latter could help dilute China's Malacca dilemma. Moreover, a secure 4,500 km long China-Russia border frees Beijing in tackling headlong the US challenge without distraction. Similarly, a West which remains preoccupied with the European theatre suits China well since it distracts the Western focus away from the Asia-Pacific.

However, a deep dive into the Russia-China entente indicates potential fissures. Russia remains apprehensive of the disequilibrium in their bilateral ties particularly its core strategic space of Central Asia, the Arctic and the Far East. Historically, Russia has been uncomfortable with being a junior partner in any relationship. Similarly, there appears to be some apprehension in Russia about China's cautious economic support in a time of acute crisis.

Meanwhile, a Russia-China tandem complicates India's geo-strategic outlook. With Russia increasingly batting for China at the global stage including Beijing's concerns about the Indo-Pacific, strategic relevance of Russia's traditional support to India has come under cloud.

Philippines and China Bilateral Consultation

Senior Chinese and Filipino diplomats met in Manilla for the 23rd Foreign Ministry Consultations on 23 March 2023 which was followed by the 7th Meeting of the Bilateral Consultation Mechanism on the South China Sea (BCM) on 24 March. It was the first face-to-face bilateral consultation between the two foreign ministries since the onset of COVID and had aimed to review the contours of bilateral relations amid thorny issues, including Beijing's concern over Philippine's decision to allow the US military to expand its presence close to the Taiwan Strait and escalating tensions in the disputed South China Sea.



Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Sun Weidong and Philippine Foreign Undersecretary Theresa Lazaro were leading the talks aimed at assessing overall relations. The back-to-back meetings were the first under President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., who took office in June last year. He met Chinese President Xi Jinping in a state visit to Beijing in January where both agreed to expand ties, pursue talks

on potential joint oil and gas explorations and manage territorial disputes amicably. However, messy territorial disputes aggravated by the assertive behaviour of Chinese maritime forces have remained a major irritant.

Under the current administration, the Philippines have issued 77 diplomatic demarches against China's increasingly assertive actions in the disputed waters. That included a Feb. 6 incident when a Chinese coast guard ship aimed a military-grade laser that briefly blinded some crew members of a Philippine patrol vessel off a disputed shoal. Marcos summoned the Chinese ambassador to Manila to express concern over the incident, but Beijing said the Philippine vessel intruded into Chinese territorial waters and its coast guard used a harmless laser gadget to monitor the vessel's movement. The recent intensification of the territorial and maritime disputes between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea can be attributed to the historic shift in the Philippines' approach regarding military cooperation with the US.

Since taking office in July, Marcos has rapidly advanced relations with the U.S., while promising not to cede "even one square inch" of Philippine territory "to any foreign power." In February, Manila agreed to allow the U.S. military access to four additional Philippine military bases under the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). Those are in addition to five local bases earlier designated under a 2014 defence pact between the longtime treaty allies. These new military sites would include areas in the northern Philippines providing the US forces a staging ground close to southern China and Taiwan.

As per the official communique, the two sides agreed to fully implement the consensus reached between the two presidents and reaffirmed their commitment to properly managing differences through friendly consultations and keeping to the main thrust and general direction of the China-Philippines friendship. However, as per reports, Chinese diplomats expressed their strong opposition to an expanded United States military presence in the Philippines in closed-door talks with their Filipino counterparts. Earlier, the Chinese embassy in Manila had stated that granting the United States greater access to Philippine military bases will drag the Philippines into "geopolitical strife."

According to Chinese Foreign Ministry sources, the 7th BCM focused "on the conduct of parties in the South China Sea (DOC), the acceleration of consultations on the code of conduct in the South China Sea (COC), and the shared commitment to upholding peace and stability in the South China sea. Etc. Chinese Embassy in Manila also indicated that the two sides will further explore modalities for joint exploration of hydrocarbon in the South China Sea.

In a recent dialogue at the World Economic Forum in Davos, the Philippine president stated, "I don't work for Beijing, I don't work for Washington D.C., I work for the Philippines. I promote the national interests". This approach seems to define the Philippines' strategic engagement. While the Philippines wants more enhanced military cooperation with the United States and its allies, Manila is treading carefully to avoid antagonizing China.