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# Strategic Digest

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## Ukraine War Update, 1-31 August 2024

After two and a half years of fighting a war on their own soil, Ukrainian Forces took the battle to Russian territory in early August in a surprise invasion of the Kursk region. Beginning early on Aug. 6, Ukraine quickly broke through thinly manned border defenses which was initially reported as a raid and was later confirmed as a full-fledged invasion.



Ukraine's incursion into Kursk brought about one of the largest territorial changes since the first month of the war when Russia rapidly advanced toward major Ukrainian cities. The head of Ukraine's armed forces, Gen. Oleksandr Syrsky, has claimed that Ukraine controls about 490 square miles of Russian territory. However, after nearly four weeks of intense fighting, the progress of Ukraine's landmark cross-border offensive has slowed considerably.

While the Ukrainian military is gaining ground in Russia, it is losing it back home. The Russian offensive in eastern Ukraine is building momentum. Russian troops are less than 10 miles from Pokrovsk, putting them in artillery range of the city, which had a population of about 40,000 before the war began and is a key transport hub.

According to Gen Syrskyi, the Ukraine military Chief, "One of the objectives of the offensive operation in the Kursk direction was to divert significant enemy forces from other directions, primarily from the Pokrovsk and Kurakhove directions." But the Kursk operation has failed to achieve its big aim of distracting Russian forces from their push towards Pokrovsk, a vital logistical hub for Ukrainian troops. Russia has moved some troops from the Kherson region in the south, and from the Chasiv Yar and Siversk lines in the east. The Kremlin has resisted the redeployment of its forces from Donbas. Instead, it has brought in reinforcements in Kursk mainly from elsewhere in Russia, prioritizing its military objectives in Ukraine over a rapid response to the foreign incursion.

Even after four weeks of the Kursk invasion by Ukraine, Russia has thus far maintained a steady push to conquer the entire Donbas industrial region with Pokrovsk being its key objective which would open up Russian advances towards the big cities of Dnipro and Zaporizhia. On 31 Aug, Ukraine's top commander Oleksandr Syrskyi said, the situation was "difficult" around Russia's main attack, which is focused in eastern Ukraine, but that all the necessary decisions were being taken.

In addition to taking land battles to Russian territory, Ukraine has also intensified deep aerial strikes inside Russia and has particularly targeted energy infrastructure along with military targets. On 31 August, Ukraine launched one of its biggest-ever drone attacks on Russia over the weekend, hitting a refinery

and power station deep inside the country. The Russian Defense Ministry acknowledged the size of the Ukrainian attack but downplayed its effectiveness, saying Sunday that 158 Ukrainian UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles) “were destroyed and intercepted by on-duty air defence” overnight in 15 regions, including over the capital. Moscow Mayor Sergey Sobyenin said two drones were shot down in the area of the Moscow Oil Refinery. During the month, Russia has also repeatedly targeted Ukraine’s energy infrastructure with missile and drone attacks

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said the most recent drone assaults deep inside Russia were justified by Moscow’s repeated attacks on his country. “This includes decisions to carry out long-range strikes on Russia’s missile launch sites, destroy Russian military logistics, and conduct joint efforts to shoot down missiles and drones,” Zelensky said. Ukrainian Defense Minister Rustem Umerov told CNN in the last week of August that he has presented the Biden administration with a list of targets inside Russia that Kyiv wants to hit with US-supplied long-range weapons, including the Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS).

Ukraine received the first batch of much-awaited F-16 aircraft on 4 August marking a crucial milestone in boosting the capabilities of Ukraine's air force. One of Ukraine's F-16 fighter jets crashed while repelling a major Russian attack on 26 August. President Volodymyr Zelensky, on 30 August, dismissed the head of the country’s Air Force after the crash of an F-16 warplane. Mr. Zelensky gave no specific reason for the decision, which came one day after the Air Force had announced the loss of the F-16, but said that it was necessary to strengthen military leadership. “We need to get stronger,” he said. “And we need to take care of people. Take care of the personnel. Take care of all our soldiers.” As per the New York Times, there were “indications” that friendly fire from a Patriot missile battery might have brought down the jet, though mechanical failure and pilot error have not been ruled out.

### **Balochistan Liberation Army’s Operation Herof Targets Pakistan Forces**

Baloch ethno-nationalists in Balochistan have been fighting for their right to self-determination ever since the annexation of Kalat by Pakistan after the partition of the Indian subcontinent in August 1947. Despite the use of brutal force by the politico-security elites of Pakistan and occasional co-option of one or the other tribal Sardar, the struggle for an independent Balochistan has continued over the last more than seven decades. Some of the nationalist groups have been following democratic ways to advance their goal of final independence, while some others have resorted to armed resistance.

The Baloch, at present, are particularly worried about Pakistan joining hands with China to extract precious natural resources and use the strategic location and other infrastructure, especially Gwadar port, of the province while completely ignoring the indigenous Baloch people and depriving them of their rightful share. Of late,

to inflict heavy damage to the Pakistani security forces and deter deeper Chinese involvement, some of the groups have even adopted the tactic of suicide bombing.

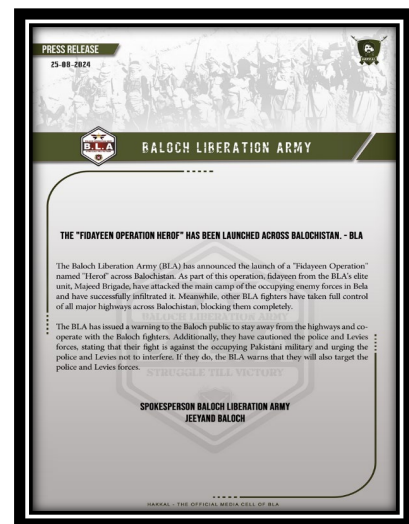
At a time when Pakistan has been struggling to deal with a plethora of issues and challenges at home, the ethno-nationalists in Balochistan opened a new front with the launch of Operation Herof (a Baloch word meaning a strong gush of wind coming from all sides) on 25 August 2024. The operation was executed by the dreaded Fidayeen Unit of the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) known as the Majeed Brigade (named after the two Majeeds who had sacrificed their lives for the Baloch cause), which came up in 2011. It was one of the worst attacks against the security forces in Pakistan in recent history which reportedly resulted in 130 casualties.

The press release of BLA categorically claimed that the two fidayeen of Majeed Brigade took control of the Bela camp of the Frontier Corps of Pakistan, whereas BLA's Special Tactical Operations Squad (STOS) and Fatah Squad set up roadblocks on central highways throughout the province. It also claimed that they were able to maintain control over the Bela camp for about 20 hours and killed 68 'enemy personnel.' The Fatah Squad and STOS maintained control over all crucial highways in the province for about 12 hours during which 62 'military personnel' were killed.

Later, the BLA also released photographs of two suicide bombers—Rizwan Baloch and Mahal Baloch (a lady)— and a video of about seven minutes by Hakkal Media on social media. The video purportedly shows some of the armed Baloch fighters capturing a police station at a highway, putting their flags, setting vehicles on fire, and shouting slogans of Azad Balochistan (Independent Balochistan). A few cars and two trucks carrying LPG tanks were seen being stopped in the middle of the highway.

The mainstream media in Pakistan has somewhat downplayed the incidents of BLA fighters maintaining control over the Bela camp and crucial highways for a significant duration of time ranging from 12 to 20 hours. Instead, the media focused primarily on the killing of 23 people in Musakhail who belonged to different parts of Punjab and were travelling inside Balochistan on their own. It carried the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) version which claimed to have killed 21 terrorists during the clearance operations. Contrary to BLA's claims, the ISPR version accepted the martyrdom of 10 security forces and four personnel from the Law Enforcement Agencies (LEAs).

The state of Pakistan, especially at its periphery, appears to be quite vulnerable these days. Be it Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan or the illegally occupied Jammu and Kashmir including Gilgit-Baltistan, the discontent against Pakistan has been on the rise. The recent attacks were highly precise and well-coordinated



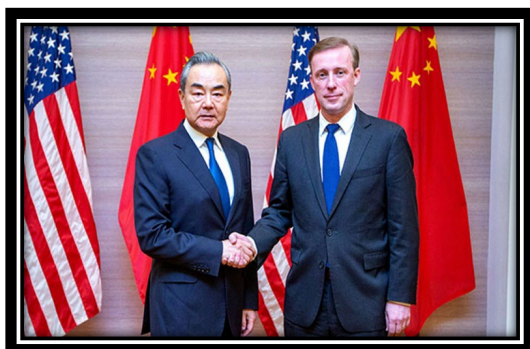
to the extent that it rattled the politico-security establishment in Islamabad and Rawalpindi from within. The timing of the attack is also crucial, as it marked the 18th death anniversary of Nawab Akbar Shahbaz Khan Bugti who was killed in a military operation launched during Gen. Pervez Musharraf's tenure. The violent surge and coordinated attacks in the province indicate the growing capacity of the Baloch fighters on the one hand and the failure of the security establishment on the other.

Given the history of Baloch resistance and Pakistan's way of dealing with it, there are no signs of either side blinking so soon. Baloch ethno-nationalists are determined to continue their struggle against the Pakistani state apparatus. The politico-security elites too appear to have not taken any lessons, as they tend to repeat the same old tactic of militarized response. Continued use of force has not deterred the Baloch fighters earlier, it is unlikely to do so now.

### **The US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan's visit to China**

The US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan visited China from 27 to 29 August at the invitation of Wang Yi, member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and Director of the Office of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs. The purpose of the visit was to enhance strategic communication between the two countries and also make preparations for a third summit between President Biden and President Xi.

During his three-day visit, Jake Sullivan held meetings with top Chinese leaders and military officials, including Wang Yi and Zhang Youxia, to discuss strategies to mitigate diplomatic and military escalation over Sino-US differences on the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait.



Notably, the two sides did not issue any joint statements and the separate press briefings also highlighted the divergences in bilateral ties. According to the Chinese Foreign Ministry's press statement, Wang Yi and Jake Sullivan held six meetings over two days, discussing China-US relations and international issues including Ukraine, the Middle East, and the Korean Peninsula.

Wang highlighted five key principles to sustain Sino-US ties. First, the direction of China-U.S. relations should be guided by the two presidents; Second, the two countries should adhere to the three joint communique to avoid conflict and confrontation; Third, they should treat each other as equals to facilitate smooth interactions; Fourth, they should strengthen the popular foundation of their bilateral ties; Finally, they should develop a mutual understanding to achieve peaceful coexistence. Reportedly, Wang also warned the US against supporting the Philippines in the South China Sea dispute, stating that the US must not use bilateral treaties to undermine China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, nor



should it support or condone the Philippines's actions of infringement. Regarding Taiwan, he noted that Taiwan belongs to China and will be unified. Wang Yi also urged the US not to support Taiwan independence or arm Taiwan.

Conversely, the US press statement underscored the American viewpoint. According to the readout, Sullivan addressed the issue of illicit synthetic drugs flowing from China to the US and discussed measures with Wang Yi to curb this flow. He also advocated for cooperation between the two nations to address the climate crisis and welcomed further discussions during Senior Advisor to the President for International Climate Policy John Podesta's upcoming visit to China.

Mr Sullivan stressed that the United States will continue to take necessary actions to prevent advanced U.S. technologies from being used to undermine national security. He also voiced concerns about China's unfair trade practices and non-market economic behaviours, underscoring the importance of maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. Additionally, he expressed worries about the PRC's support for Russia's defence industrial base and its implications for European and transatlantic security. Mr. Sullivan reaffirmed the United States' commitment to defending its Indo-Pacific allies and expressed apprehension regarding the PRC's destabilizing actions against lawful Philippine maritime operations in the South China Sea.

Although the two sides did not reach any new agreement over the South China Sea and the contentious trade issues, the two sides agreed that the US Indo-Pacific Command leaders would soon speak by phone with PLA's military officials in China's Southern Theatre Command.

The US National Security Advisor also held talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping. According to media reports, President Xi emphasized that the primary issue for China and the United States, as major global powers, is to establish a clear strategic perspective on whether they are rivals or partners. President Xi expressed hope that the US will adopt a positive view of China's development, recognize it as an opportunity, and work with China to find a peaceful and mutually beneficial path for coexistence and improved bilateral relations.

Unlike the detailed press statement that followed the meeting with Wang Yi, the press statement on Jake Sullivan's meeting with President Xi offered a brief overview of the talks from the American side. The two sides, reportedly, reviewed the implementation of commitments made by President Biden and President Xi at the November 2023 Woodside Summit, focusing on counternarcotics, military communications, and AI safety. The meeting also addressed cross-Strait issues, Russia's war against Ukraine, and the South China Sea and both parties welcomed the continuation of opening communication channels between the two countries.

Observers have pointed out that the US NSA's visit to China during election season, along with President Xi Jinping's meeting with Sullivan, underscores the intention of both countries to maintain stable relations despite rising tensions. This indicates that both China and the US recognize the need to avoid confrontation and will have to keep engaging in dialogue to address their differences.