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# Strategic Digest

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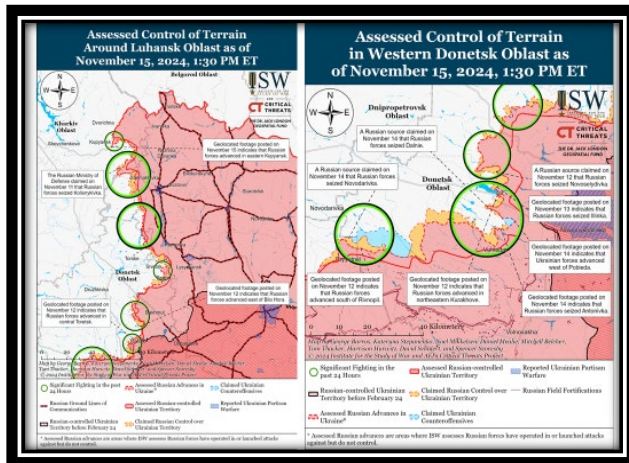
**Ukraine War @1000 Days**

**Deciphering PM Ishiba's Struggle for Survival**

**Myanmar's Junta Chief Visits China: Why It Matters?**

## Ukraine War @1000 Days

Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, which began on February 24, 2022, was initially expected to be short and swift. Given the disparity in military power and the apparent superiority of the Russian military, most analysts concluded that the Ukrainian military would struggle to resist in a conventional war. However, this narrative quickly fell apart. The Ukrainian army demonstrated its ability to slow the advance of Russian forces, and with sufficient support from the West, it managed to forestall defeat, even if it could not completely drive them out.



Despite numerous fluctuations in the conflict, the war in Ukraine has remained stalemated in a protracted war of attrition. As the conflict approaches 1,000 days, the outlook for Ukraine appears grim. Russia is expending vast amounts of weaponry and human resources to make small but steady territorial gains in the nearly one-fifth of Ukraine that it already controls. Meanwhile,

Ukraine is struggling to minimize losses, maintain morale, and convince its allies that with increased military aid, it can turn the tide.

Over the past month, Russian forces have seized more than 160 square miles of land in Ukraine’s eastern Donbas region, the main theatre of the war today. That has allowed them to take control of strategic towns that anchored Ukrainian defences in the area, beginning with Vuhledar in early October. During the last fortnight, Russia advanced roughly six miles north of Vuhledar — an unusually swift pace compared with previous gains.

Ukraine has weakened its positions in the Donbas by redeploying seasoned units for a surprise cross-border offensive in Russia’s Kursk region on August 24. The troops have often been replaced by less experienced units struggling to fend off Russian assaults. Even though Ukraine claims to have tied down about 50000 Russian troops in Kursk, it did not affect the Russian offensive design in Donbas.

As Russia continues to break through Ukrainian defences on various parts of the battlefield, Ukraine is struggling to hold its ground rather than seeking victory. Ukrainian forces have barely managed to maintain control over Pokrovsk, a contested town in the eastern Donbas region. However, across the front lines, Russia is making significant gains.

In Kupiansk in the north, Russian troops have divided Ukrainian formations at the Oskil River. In Chasiv Yar in the east, they have finally crossed the main Siverskyi Donets Canal after six months of attempts. Further south, Russian forces have

captured high ground in and around Vuhledar and are advancing on Kurakhove from two directions. Meanwhile, in Kursk, inside Russia, Ukraine has lost approximately half the territory it had seized earlier this year.

The main issue is not just the limited loss of territory for Russia but the declining size and effectiveness of Ukraine's military. Ukrainian forces are undermanned and overstretched, struggling with high casualties and shortages of essential equipment like air defence interceptors and artillery shells. A new mobilization law has failed to meet recruitment targets, reaching only two-thirds.

In contrast, Russia is successfully replenishing its troops by offering lucrative recruitment contracts, avoiding mass mobilization. However, Russia faces its own challenges, such as enlisting North Korean troops for the Kursk front and planning to allocate one-third of its national budget to defence, which may hurt its civilian economy. With inflation likely exceeding the official rate of over 8%, Russia's defence industry is also relying on dwindling Soviet-era stockpiles for critical resources. Despite these issues, Russia's production capabilities continue to outpace those of Western nations.

Donald Trump's return to the White House has increased uncertainty regarding the situation in Ukraine. During his election campaign, Trump promised to end the war within 24 hours; however, he has not provided much clarity about the specifics of his proposed peace plan. A complete sell-out of Ukraine by Trump seems unlikely, especially considering the opinions within his Republican base. Currently, Ukraine still has enough weapons to withstand the Russian assault and enough territory to retreat if necessary. Furthermore, additional Western weapons are on the way to support Ukraine. However, it appears that Ukraine may soon begin to feel the pressure, potentially within the next six months.

### Deciphering PM Ishiba's Struggle for Survival

On 11 November 2024, Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba of the Liberal Democratic Party was reappointed as the 103rd Prime Minister of Japan by the two houses of the Japanese Diet. The circumstances were fraught, to say the least, as it marked the end of almost a decade of relative calm. The future of Japan under Ishiba looks uncertain at best, due to the circumstances discussed below.



Ishiba's path to the highest elected office has been anything but smooth. The unprecedented announcement by former Prime Minister Fumio Kishida in August that he would not seek re-election as the leader of the LDP, and thus as Prime Minister, opened up the doors to the public airing of

long-festering internal dissent in the long-ruling party. In an unusually bruising party leadership contest held on 30 September, nine senior party officials jockeyed for influence so as to be elected as the leader of the party - and by extension, the government. In the final election, for the first time in the party's history, the results went down to the wire, with Ishiba being staunchly opposed by former Shinzo Abe protege Sanae Takaichi until the final runoff. It was only the pooling of votes from moderates and centre-right candidates that clinched the victory for Ishiba.

In his first press conference after his victory, Ishiba delivered another shock. He announced that he would hold elections on 27 October 2024, barely a month after his assumption of office on 1 October. This meant that he gave his own party only a few days to get its election campaign together, even as he forced opposition parties to do the same. He also staked his premiership on continuing to push for his pet projects of creating an 'Asian NATO' which would include members of the Quad among other Asian countries (despite opposition from both the US and India), revising the US-Japan Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) of 1960 to enable the deployment of the Japanese Self-Defence Forces (JSDF) abroad (despite a majority of constitutional scholars stressing that this would clearly violate Article 9 of the Constitution) and encouraging the return of the US nuclear deterrent to the Japanese mainland.

It is not clear what Ishiba intended to achieve with his shock-and-awe tactics, but the Japanese public clearly did not appreciate them. In the polls for the lower house, the House of Representatives, voters delivered the LDP and its ally the Clean Government Party (公明党, Komeito) a punishing defeat seen only twice before in postwar history. The ruling combine failed to reach even the halfway point of 233 needed to secure a majority in the House, while opposition parties gained their largest vote share yet. Even more interestingly, parties across the ideological divide gained votes, with both the far-left Reiwa Shinsengumi (れいわ新選組) and the far-right Conservative Party of Japan (保守党, Hoshuto) and Sanseito (参政党) gaining seats in the Diet. Several stalwarts of the ruling combine, including serving Cabinet members, lost their seats, as did the Komeito's new leader Keiichi Ishii. In an indication of Ishiba's personal popularity, he retained his seat by a wide margin.

As it stands, Prime Minister Ishiba now stands atop a minority coalition government which desperately needs outside support or, at minimum, the consent of opposition parties to pass key pieces of legislation such as the Budget and finance bills. Though his party currently controls the House of Councillors, the upper house, that body is also slated to undergo re-election in 2025. An electoral upset there would effectively put an end to Ishiba's tenure.

Opposition parties such as the right-of-centre Democratic Party for the People (国民民主党, Kokumin Minshuto) have meanwhile emerged as kingmakers. Though Ishiba has survived the confirmation vote (which in itself was a historic one, with

a runoff deciding the victor for the first time in thirty years and only the fifth time in Japan's entire parliamentary history), the next few weeks will undoubtedly see his negotiation skills tested in backroom talks with the DPFP. The latter is adamant about raising the minimum bar for income tax to 1.78 million yen from 1.03 million yen, which it says will relieve the burden on people in the lowest tax bracket, but will also, as the LDP argues, drastically reduce tax revenue for Tokyo and the prefectural governments by approximately 4 to 6 trillion yen. The outcome of this negotiation will portend the policy direction Japan takes in the months to come.

### Myanmar's Junta Chief Visits China: Why It Matters?



Myanmar's military leader, Min Aung Hlaing, made his first official visit to China since the 2021 coup on 5 November 2024, in Kunming. This event marks a notable shift in China-Myanmar relations, with Beijing signalling a recalibrated approach to Myanmar's military leadership amid the country's

prolonged civil conflict. The choice of Kunming, a provincial capital, rather than Beijing, reflects a carefully calculated diplomatic strategy: engaging with the junta while refraining from fully legitimizing it. Importantly, Min Aung Hlaing's visit was for participation in multilateral forums—the Greater Mekong Sub-region and Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy summits—rather than a formal bilateral engagement with Chinese officials. China's response to Myanmar's 2021 coup has been a measured one, shaped by its complex economic and regional security concerns. The China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), a critical component of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), highlights Myanmar's strategic importance to Beijing. This infrastructure project, which links China's Yunnan Province to Myanmar's Bay of Bengal coast, provides an alternative trade route that bypasses the vulnerable Strait of Malacca. However, escalating resistance from ethnic armed groups and the People's Defense Forces (PDF) against Myanmar's military government poses substantial risks to both regional stability and Chinese investments in the area.

Kunming, rather than Beijing, as the meeting location underscores China's pragmatic approach to engaging the junta. While Beijing seeks to protect its investments and maintain regional stability, it remains hesitant to fully endorse the junta's authority. Nevertheless, this engagement demonstrates China's recognition of the military government's role in safeguarding Chinese infrastructure projects, indicating a prioritization of practical outcomes over ideological commitments.

Myanmar's geography grants it substantial value within China's broader regional strategy, linking it directly to the Indian Ocean. However, Beijing's support for

Myanmar's junta entails notable risks that extend beyond diplomacy. Several ethnic armed groups, historically maintaining ties with China and operating along the China-Myanmar border, now oppose the junta. Should China appear overly aligned with the junta, it risks compromising its influence with these groups, potentially undermining border stability and jeopardizing its objectives of regional security.

The evolving relationship between China and Myanmar's military regime has raised significant concerns among pro-democracy advocates and ethnic minorities within Myanmar, who perceive China's support as an implicit endorsement of the junta's repressive measures, including human rights violations and the suppression of democratic movements. This sentiment has incited anti-Chinese attitudes within Myanmar, potentially threatening Chinese assets and personnel in the region. Additionally, China's engagement with the junta may alienate the National Unity Government (NUG) and other opposition groups committed to restoring democratic governance, possibly undermining China's long-term interests in Myanmar. China's approach to the junta also reverberates across Southeast Asia, impacting its regional image. By engaging with authoritarian regimes, China draws criticism from pro-democracy supporters throughout the region, endangering its soft power initiatives. Nonetheless, Beijing's stance demonstrates its intent to position itself as a central regional power broker, particularly as ASEAN struggles to address Myanmar's political crisis effectively. In this light, China's strategy contrasts sharply with Western policies isolating the Myanmar military regime, though it involves significant reputational risks.

During the Kunming meeting, Premier Li Qiang underscored the need for political reconciliation while reaffirming China's commitment to securing its investments and protecting its citizens in Myanmar. This statement reflects China's delicate balancing act: offering the junta conditional support to protect its interests while minimizing the diplomatic repercussions of aligning with an unpopular regime. The focus on reconciliation also signals China's awareness of the need for a stable political environment to secure its long-term interests in Myanmar.

These developments underscore China's pragmatic foreign policy amid complex regional challenges. While Beijing prioritizes border stability and economic security, it must also navigate the intricate network of ethnic conflicts, democratic aspirations, and international scrutiny. The decision to engage with Min Aung Hlaing, despite the inherent risks, reflects China's prioritization of strategic and economic objectives in Myanmar. This evolving China-Myanmar relationship represents a crucial development in regional geopolitics. As the situation unfolds, the international community will closely observe the impact of China's support for the junta on Myanmar's internal conflict, regional stability, and the broader geopolitical landscape in Southeast Asia. This diplomatic engagement could have lasting implications for China's influence in the region and its capacity to balance competing interests within its foreign policy framework.