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Ukraine War – Tentative progress towards Truce

Upon returning from a whirlwind diplomatic mission that featured a public showdown at the White House and a warm embrace from European leaders, President Volodymyr Zelensky, on March 3, pledged to explore every diplomatic avenue to seek an end to the war in Ukraine with Russia. However, he recognized there was still “a long way to go.” However, the Ukrainian assurance fell short of US expectations and Washington decided to suspend the delivery of all military assistance to Ukraine on March 04 until Ukraine accepts the US proposal for a truce with Russia. Washington also paused all intelligence sharing with Ukraine alongside a military aid freeze.

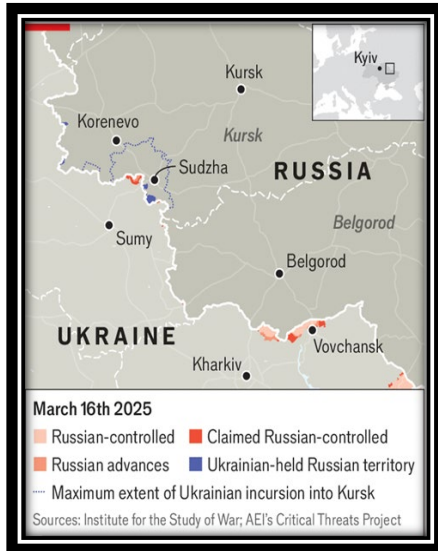
Concerned about the suspension of military aid to Ukraine, European leaders reaffirmed their support for Kyiv on Tuesday. They argued that Ukraine's NATO allies were not informed in advance about the suspension of U.S. aid. In response, Moscow praised Trump's decision to suspend military aid, calling it “the best possible step towards peace.”

Later on 04 March, Zelensky of Ukraine offered a course of action that he said could end the war, while trying to assure the Trump administration that his government was dedicated to peace. The Ukrainian leader said he was ready to release Russian prisoners of war, stop long-range drone and missile strikes aimed at Russian targets, and declare a truce at sea immediately — moves that he said would help establish a pathway to peace. His statement came as leaders in Kyiv assessed the political and military impact of the Trump administration’s decision to suspend aid, with military officials weighing how long Ukraine’s stockpiles would last before the situation led to critical gaps on the front.

There was no immediate reaction from the Kremlin to Mr. Zelensky’s proposal. Notwithstanding, a discussion with the US in Saudi Arabia in February, Moscow has thus far offered no hint of being willing to de-escalate the war before winning major concessions from the West and Ukraine — like ruling out Ukrainian NATO membership, reducing the alliance’s footprint in Europe, limiting the size of Ukraine’s military and giving Russia influence over Ukraine’s domestic politics.

On 06 March, European leaders gathered in Brussels to discuss how to bolster both Europe’s defences and its support for Ukraine amid enormously high stakes. Along with proposals to enhance military spending towards collective defence of Europe, European nations also reviewed what a peace plan for Ukraine might look like, as they contemplate how they can support it both financially and possibly with peacekeeping troops from European countries— a proposition Russia flatly rejected. Britain and France have indicated an openness to sending troops as a peacekeeping force if a deal is reached, and Prime Minister Keir Starmer of Britain has called for support from a “coalition of the willing.” The 26 countries who signed onto the statement of support for Ukraine pledged “regular and predictable” financial help at a time when the United States has taken a sharp turn toward Russia.

The US reacted sharply to the proposal for peacekeeping troops in Ukraine. Vice President Vance stated that the economic pact with Kyiv proposed by President



Trump provides a better security guarantee than "20,000 troops from some random country that hasn't fought a war in 30 or 40 years." His comments sparked backlash from politicians and veterans in the UK and France, prompting Vance to clarify that his criticism targeted the UK and France, both of which have backed US-led wars previously.

On 11 March, US and Ukrainian representatives met in Jeddah to discuss peace efforts. Ukraine agreed to a proposed 30-day ceasefire, extendable by mutual consent, pending Russia's acceptance. The US lifted its pause in intelligence sharing and resumed security assistance. Following Ukraine's willingness for a ceasefire, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio stated that the next move was up to Russia, indicating that a refusal would highlight the obstacles to peace.

US mediation efforts, aerial drone and missile attacks continued from both sides. Russian forces intensified attempts to encircle Ukrainian troops in the Kursk region. Following President Trump's freeze on military aid to Ukraine on March 3, Ukraine's control over the territory diminished significantly. By March 15, Ukrainian forces had retreated to a narrow strip of land along the border, covering only about 30 square miles, down from the 500 square miles of Russian territory they once occupied.

Jaffar Express train Hijack in Balochistan

The Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) under Bashir Zeb Baloch and the Baloch Liberation Front (BLF) under Dr Allah Nazar Baloch have been giving Pakistan's security establishment quite a tough time in Balochistan. Pakistan Security Report claims that the two front outfits were responsible for at least 171 incidents in the province resulting in 261 fatalities in 2024. The year 2025 appears to be no different as the Baloch armed groups associated with these two outfits have so far conducted six major attacks against the Pakistani State and its armed forces.

On March 11, 2025, Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) fighters hijacked the Jaffar Express, a train that connects Quetta to Peshawar and passes through key areas in Sindh, Punjab, and Islamabad. The Jaffar Express provided the people of Balochistan with an accessible means of transportation to other provinces in Pakistan. It was also a popular choice for off-duty personnel from the armed forces and police travelling to their homes and assignment locations. This made the train route a frequent target for Baloch armed groups. However, this incident

marked the first time the entire train was hijacked and all passengers held hostage. Approximately 450 passengers, including a considerable number of security personnel, were on board when BLA fighters attacked the train at 1 PM between the Paneer and Peshi railway stations in Balochistan.

The Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) issued a press release on the same day, claiming responsibility for the hijacking. The mission was reportedly led by its Fidayeen Unit, the Majeed Brigade, with full operational support from the Fateh Squad, Special Tactical Operations Squad (STOS), and its intelligence wing, Zirab. The statement indicated that six military personnel were killed during the resistance, while over 100 passengers, including active-duty members of the Pakistan military, police, Anti-Terrorism Force (ATS), and Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), were taken into custody.

A significant number of women, children, and Baloch passengers were soon released. This may have been done both to claim a moral high ground and to improve the BLA's image among the ordinary Baloch population. Additionally, the operational feasibility of holding such a large number of individuals hostage for an extended period could have influenced the decision to release them unharmed.

Another press release clarified that the BLA had taken 182 active-duty personnel hostage, while the remaining individuals were provided with a secure route to safety. On March 14, 2025, the figures were revised once again in a subsequent press release, which claimed that 214 hostages had been killed. An attack of this magnitude sent a shock-wave throughout the country prompting the Pakistan military to launch a high-level rescue operation to free the hostages. It took Pakistan's specialized forces 36 hours to free the hostages but not before significant casualties of active-duty personnel on board the train.

There is a complete mismatch of the casualty data officially provided by Pakistan and BLA. In a joint press conference by Director General Inter-Services Public Relations (DG ISPR) and Chief Minister Balochistan on 14 March 2025, instead of accepting their failure to address the internal security issues resorted to diversionary tactics by blaming outside forces, especially Afghanistan and India for the hijacking. The duo also claimed that a total of 354 hostages including 37 injured were rescued, whereas 26 got killed by BLA including 18 armed forces personnel.

DG ISPR Lt. Gen. Ahmed Sharif Chaudhry claimed that 33 BLA fighters were killed during the operation. This was strongly countered by a BLA press release issued on 14 March 2025. Contrary to the Pakistan Army's claim, the BLA press



release issued on 14 March 2025 categorically stated that it executed a total of 214 enemy personnel and lost 12 of its fighters including five Fidayeen belonging to Majeed Brigade.

Given the history, Balochistan is considered by many analysts as an information black hole due to which it is quite difficult to arrive at any definite number of casualties each side endured during the hijack and counter-operation by the Pakistan military. However, as per the interviews of a few hostages conducted by BBC Urdu, BLA's claim appears to be closer to reality compared to that of the Pakistan Army. One of the hostages who had fled along with others told BBC Urdu that as the darkness of night fell upon the area, BLA fighters started killing hostages in groups of 10, 15, 20, and three.

Irrespective of the casualty figures on either side, the hijacking of an entire train by BLA fighters in broad daylight indicates the changing nature of the internal security situation in Pakistan. This is happening at a time when a resurgent Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has upped the ante and the bilateral relations with Afghanistan have reached their lowest ebb.

Arrest of Former Philippine President Duterte by ICC

The former President of the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte was arrested on March 11, 2025, after the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued a warrant relating to his "war on drugs" on March 7. The populist Filipino leader was arrested at Manila's Ninoy Aquino International Airport after returning from Hong Kong, where he was campaigning among the city's large Filipino migrant population. Following the arrest, Duterte was flown out of the country to the Netherlands where he was transferred to the custody of the ICC. The ICC on March 12, stated that former President Duterte was "surrendered" to its custody, and a hearing would be scheduled in "due course".

The arrest warrant issued by the ICC states that Duterte is charged with crimes against humanity relating to events that happened from November 1, 2011, to March 16, 2019. This period covers not just when Duterte was the President but also includes the time when he was mayor of Davao City. As President of the Philippines (2016 to 2022), in 2019 Duterte, pulled the country out of the Rome Statute, the treaty that set up the ICC. However, given that the alleged crimes fell within their jurisdiction, as they were carried out before the Philippines withdrew from the ICC.

Before being elected president, Rodrigo Duterte was the mayor of Davao City for more than two decades. There, the "Davao Death Squad" had killed hundreds of drug users, street children, and other petty criminals. While denying involvement in the death squads, Duterte endorsed their killings as an effective way to combat crime. Even before announcing his candidacy for the May 2016 Presidential election, Duterte was already very clear about his intention to eliminate crime by

eliminating criminals. Duterte's outspoken vow to embark on a nationwide killing campaign against drug dealers and drug users was the foundation of his Presidential electoral platform. Following his election win in 2016, Duterte vowed to continue his "anti-drugs" campaign until his presidential term ends in 2022 and incorporated the "war on drugs" into the policy of the national police. According to police data, 6000 people were killed, however, as per human rights groups the death toll could range from 12,000 to as many as 30,000, killed in extrajudicial encounters with police. Most of these were drug users, but the victims of the drug war also included children and other innocents who were caught in the crossfire.

Following the arrest President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. held a press conference in which he explained that despite no longer being part of the Rome Treaty, the Philippines is committed to supporting the International Criminal Police Organization, or Interpol. And it was Interpol that asked Manila to enforce the warrant after receiving it from the ICC. The Philippine government views its cooperation on the arrest in line with its national interest since as a democratic nation it is expected to comply with international norms. Further, the need to cooperate with Interpol was also reciprocal since in the past it has helped the Philippines arrest fugitives.

President Marcos Jr. initially pledged to shield Duterte from international inquiry in order to protect the coalition between the two family dynasties. However, this coalition broke down rather quickly and with the ongoing feud with Vice President Sara Duterte the Marcos administration began allowing ICC investigators into the country. It is also important to note that the timely action by the Marco Jr administration has some strong political undertone. There is an important upcoming midterm election in May, and Marcos is keen to use it to consolidate his power.

Beyond the personality issues, there has been a divergence in policy between the Dutertes and Marcos. Notably, under Marcos Jr., the Philippines has pivoted back to the U.S. by allowing American troops back into the country and taking a more aggressive stance towards China in the South China Sea. This approach has been challenged by the Duterte family, which has been closer to China. In the first year of the Marcos administration, Rodrigo Duterte served as a sort of envoy to Beijing, although it became increasingly clear that this was more of an independent relationship between the former president and Chinese President Xi Jinping.

While the arrest represents a major victory for the ICC, it was made possible since Mr Duterte was out of office and politically weakened along with timely cooperation by the current political dispensation in Manila. The Philippines Senate has announced it will probe the arrest and handover of former President Rodrigo Duterte to the International Criminal Court (ICC) in order "to establish whether due process was followed" during the arrest.