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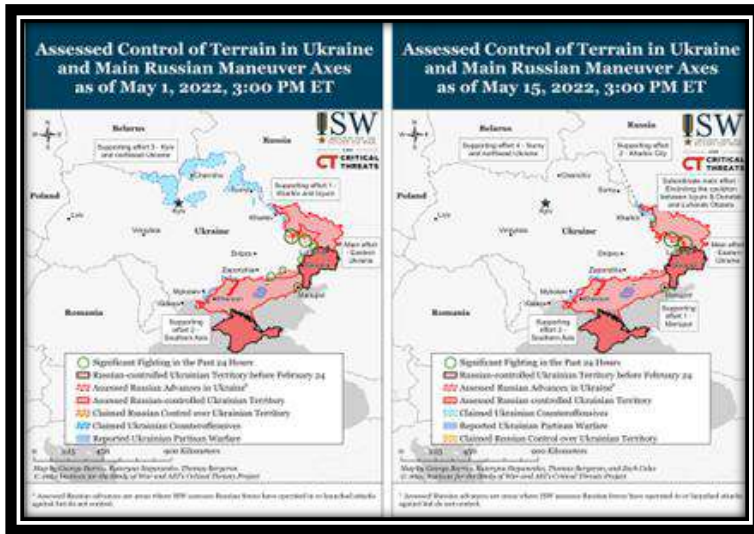
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Ukraine Conflict Update, 01 -15 May 2022

The conflict in Ukraine overshadowed Russia’s annual Victory Day Parade on 08 May commemorating the celebration of the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany.



While Putin defended the decision to launch the military operation stating that this was the "only right decision" as the West was "preparing for an invasion of Russia", he did not announce any escalation of military action along with a general or partial mobilization of soldiers.

The Ukraine conflict itself appeared to be turning into an entrenched war of

attrition. The last fortnight saw limited change in the fiercely contested frontline in the eastern Donbas region. While Russia made some advances in Donetsk Oblast and the Ukrainian military waged a counteroffensive near the strategic Russian-held city of Izyum, a city in the Kharkiv region just northwest of the Donbas.

Despite the Russians recently reorienting their operational design on eastern Ukraine as its main effort, they have yet to make significant gains. Russian forces appeared to have abandoned the objective of completing a large-scale encirclement of Ukrainian units from Donetsk City to Izyum in favour of completing the seizure of Luhansk Oblast. In eastern Donetsk Oblast, Russian forces are continuing a coordinated effort to seize Severodonetsk from the north and the south, which would result in a shallower encirclement of Ukrainian troops than originally expected.

Ukrainians have repelled multiple attempts by the Russians to cross a strategically significant river in the Donbas. The failed Russian attempts to cross the Siverskyi Donets River near Kreminna may shift Russian encirclement operations further east, closer to Severodonetsk via Rubizhne, rather than conducting a wider encirclement along multiple axes. Ukrainian forces have also driven Russia from the second-largest city of Kharkiv in their fastest advance since Kremlin troops pulled away from Kyiv.

In Southern Ukraine, Russian forces continued to fortify their positions in Mykolaiv and Kherson Oblasts to establish and defend permanent control over the occupied areas. The Battle of Mariupol, apparently and surprisingly, continues with Azovstal Steel Plant continued to be struck by artillery, air, and naval strikes.

Ukraine’s inclination to join the EU and be a member of NATO has been argued to be the casus belli of the conflict. Russia has relatedly argued that the alliance’s

expansion into Central and Eastern Europe after the cold war somehow made Russia's position intolerable. Overcoming their long history of military non-alignment, Finland and Sweden have formally applied for membership in NATO during the last week. As the direct result of the Ukraine conflict, the two countries seem to have assessed that the risk of antagonising their neighbour is outweighed by the extra security they will gain from joining an alliance dedicated to resisting Russian aggression. Russia's decision to forestall NATO's expansion through military operation in Ukraine appeared to have the opposite effect and brought the Western military alliance to Russia's doorstep. Membership of Finland and Sweden will more than double the length of the alliance's border with Russia.



NATO summit scheduled in June 2022 is expected to decide on the application submitted by Finland and Sweden. Despite Turkey's reticence towards Scandinavian countries, their admission is likely to be a formality.

Philippines Election 2022: Marcos Jr at the Helm

The presidential elections in the Philippines on 9 May 2022 saw Ferdinand Marcos Jr. emerging as the victorious candidate. He is the son of the late dictator of the Philippines Ferdinand Marcos, and his prime opponent in the elections was Vice president Leni Robredo. Marcos Jr. has had the support of powerful political families in the country like the Arroyos, the Estradas, and the Dutertes. Interestingly, President Duterte's daughter Sara Duterte ran for Vice president alongside Marcos Jr. Some see the win of Marcos Jr. as a reinforcement of family politics in the Philippines.



There were few hints on the campaign trail of Marcos Jr's overarching policy platform, including foreign policy. But he has said he wanted to pursue closer ties with China, describing the outgoing president's policy of diplomatic engagement with Beijing as "really our only option". Meanwhile, Marcos Jr's relationship with the US – the Philippines' former colonial master – has been complicated by a contempt-of-court order for his

refusal to cooperate with the District Court of Hawaii, which in 1995 ordered the Marcos family to pay \$2bn of plundered wealth to victims of Marcos Sr's rule. The incoming leader has not visited the US for 15 years, fearful of the consequences of the rulings.

The Philippines is an important country in Southeast Asia from a geopolitical perspective. Manila is also considered a fulcrum of the geopolitical rivalry between the U.S. and China, with its maritime territory encompassing part of the South China Sea, a strategic and resource-rich waterway over which China also claims sovereignty. It has also been one of the most vocal claimants of disputed island territories in the South China Sea. The Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague had ruled in favour of the Philippines in 2016 on the dispute but president Duterte chose not to pursue it further to appease China for economic projects for the Philippines. However, realising that it would not happen he pivoted back to the alliance with the US.

Commentators have argued that Marcos Jr. would likely recognise the delicate play of power in the region as the US and China compete for influence. Therefore, he will try to get along with China without losing the support of the United States. Some experts have also highlighted institutional constraints to radical foreign policy change that can be exercised by the incumbent president.

Many analysts believe Marcos Jr. has a political alignment with President Rodrigo Duterte but unlike him, he has not openly challenged the relationship between the United States and the Philippines. It is predicted that he will attempt to balance relations between the US and China and carve out a middle path for Filipino foreign policy in the next six years of his presidential term.

Marcos Jr. will inherit a troubled Filipino economy from his predecessor. Even though it was one of the fastest growing economies a few years ago, the COVID-19 pandemic has taken a huge toll on the Philippines' economic growth. Expectantly, the new administration's focus will be on infrastructure development in the country. The sourcing of capital for large projects, however, remains unclear. Marcos Jr. may encourage FDI to meet such requirements. In matters of trade, some analysts believe that free trade agreement deliberations between the US and the Philippines could achieve progress.

Annual Update of U.S. Marine Corps Force Design Initiative: Force Design 2030

On 09 May 2022, the United States Marine Corps (USMC) released an annual update of its major force design initiative "Force Design 2030." This initiative, launched in March 2020, aims to redesign the US Marine Corps for future naval expeditionary warfare focussed on littoral Operations in a contested battlespace against a strategic peer competitor i.e China and Russia. Reducing the Marines by 12,000 personnel by 2030 and adding more sensor capability to smaller units are part of a wide swath of adjustments being pursued in the latest iteration of modernization.



In pursuance of this transformation initiative, USMC has removed all main battle tanks and heavy bridging equipment from the inventory and progressively eliminated most towed cannon artillery and significant numbers of manned rotary and fixed winged aircraft. Using the savings from divestments, Marines are fielding long-endurance unmanned aerial vehicles with payloads for airborne communication, reconnaissance, and electronic warfare.

The III Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) of USMC based in Okinawa, Japan is the focal point of the force design initiative. The MEF is being reorganised into three Marine Littoral Regiments (MLRs) being trained and equipped to accomplish sea denial and control within contested maritime spaces. MLR would be augmented by three globally deployable Marine Expeditionary Units (MEUs) possessing both traditional and Expeditionary Advanced Base capabilities.

A major investment for the service will include more sensors controlled by Marines instead of relying solely on non-organic joint tools for targeting awareness for the Marine Littoral Regiments. The annual update highlights that the service's Ground/Air Task Oriented Radar (G/ATOR) and the future sensor payloads on its emerging fleet of unmanned aerial and surface vehicles will be part of a larger targeting net that will work with the Navy-Marine Expeditionary Ship Interdiction System (NMESIS), a converted Joint Light Tactical Vehicle chassis that carries a battery of anti-shipping and land attack missile along with other networked weapons. As part of the ongoing Force Design testing, "with the Strategic Capabilities Office and the Navy, we also conducted a ground launch of a Tomahawk Land Attack Missile mounted on a remotely operated mobile launcher," reads the report.

Along with the efforts to reduce the end strength of marines, the Force Design update also highlights major changes in its personnel policy. While the USMC has managed to reduce its end-strength by approximately 7,000 Marines in the last two years, there has been a parallel drive to retain Marines for a longer duration. At present, the service only retains about 25 percent of the 38,000 Marines it recruits annually past their first term of service. The USMC is planning to change its 'recruit and replace' paradigm to an 'invest and retain' model by incentivizing Marines to stay longer on active duty.

The reform initiative has drawn criticism from strategic commentators who have argued that ongoing reforms cut too much heavier equipment too quickly in this modernization overhaul and that the Marine Corps is placing too much emphasis on countering China. Addressing these concerns, the update argues that the USMC "does not have the luxury of focusing on a single threat, to the exclusion of all others, and basing our design on such a narrow point of view. We are building a force capable of executing our concepts, not a force exclusively tailored to them."