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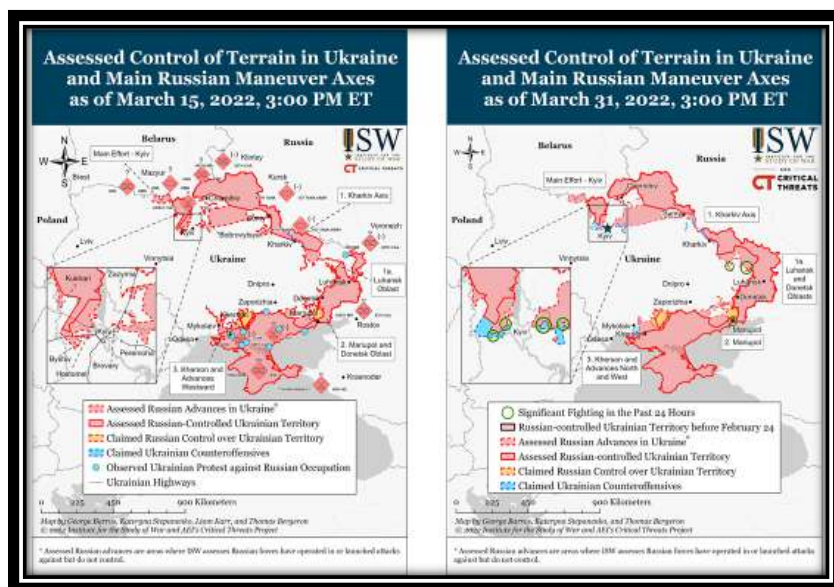
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Ukraine Conflict Update, 16- 31 March 2022

The last 15 days has not seen any significant change in the areas under control by Ukrainian and Russian forces. Russia has progressively consolidated its position in the South and the East along with redeployment of some of its forces in the North. Russian forces continued to make steady but costly progress in Mariupol. Despite relentless Russian attack, the besieged city continues to remain defiant. Russia announced 24 hours ceasefire on 31 March for humanitarian evacuation.



Russian forces did not conduct any significant offensive operations in north eastern Ukraine in the past 24 hours. Russia has withdrawn some elements of its forces around Kyiv into Belarus for possible redeployment to other sectors. While Russian forces around Kyiv held their forward positions, Ukrainian forces conducted several local counterattacks

around Kyiv, in north-eastern Ukraine, and toward Kherson. Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts witnessed heavy fighting.

During a press briefing on 25 March 2022, Russia's defence ministry claimed that "The main tasks of the first stage of the operation have been completed." They also claimed that capturing Kyiv was not their objective. It was attacked only to prevent Ukraine from reinforcing the Donbas region in the east and liberating Donbas was the main aim. On March 29th, when Russian and Ukrainian negotiators met in Turkey, Russia's deputy defence minister said that its forces would "drastically reduce" operations around Kyiv and Chernihiv, another northern city.

Despite these announcement, it remains doubtful whether Russia will truly "drastically" scale-back operations in Kyiv or Chernihiv. While Russian efforts may shift to the east, Russia is likely to maintain pressure by holding occupied territory and executing limited offensives as opportunity arise. Some Commentators have argued that Russia might see victory in Donbas as a consolation prize for its failure to secure regime change in Kyiv—and perhaps as an exit strategy.

Russia appears to have prioritised its offensives in the Donbas, and fighting there has intensified over the past week. Russian forces are attempting to move south from Izyum, a town 125km south-east of Kharkiv, at the same time as they advance north towards Zaporizhia, with the intention of encircling what the Ukrainians call the Joint Forces Operation (JFO)—the troops fighting around Donbas—and preventing them from retreating west over the Dnieper river. The progress of Russian Forces in these areas has been slow as Ukrainian forces are still mounting counter-attacks around Kharkiv and Izyum, among other places.

The city of Mariupol has been a strategic focus of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. By controlling Mariupol, Russia could potentially create a land bridge to Crimea and control the entire north shore of the Sea of Azov. During a phone call with French President Macron, Russian President Vladimir Putin has said that shelling of the besieged Ukrainian city will only end when Ukrainian troops surrender. The grit and tenacity displayed by Ukrainian in Mariupol has been a major source of inspiration to other Ukrainian. Till how long Mariupol can hold remains an open question.

Despite lack of any significant progress in the talks between Russian and Ukrainian negotiators in Turkey, Moscow has indicated that it would not refuse a direct meeting between its foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, and his Ukrainian counterpart, Dmytro Kuleba, but any talks between them would need to be substantive, the Russian foreign ministry has said.

While Russia threatened to cut off gas supply to Europe from 01 April unless payment was made in roubles, President Putin also signed a decree on 31 March authorising the state-controlled Gazprombank to open foreign currency and rouble accounts for gas purchases. The new deal would allow European buyers to continue to pay for gas in euros and dollars.

China's looming shadow of influence over the Solomon Island

In recent years, China's rise in the Pacific has brought the region, which seems far away from the epicenter of global politics, into the limelight. In the last fortnight, concern about China's security engagement with the Solomon Island has spurred alarm in Canberra and Wellington.



Speculation had began swirling on social media in Solomon Islands, on 17 February, about reported hush-hush landing of a number of crates containing sophisticated small arms into Honiara from China on a logging vessel. It was later clarified by the officials that the crates were part of a broader Chinese

government police assistance package which included a gift of helmets, batons, shields and other "non-lethal" anti-riot equipment for training of police personnel in riot control. The stated context of Chinese police training assistance and fake guns was civil unrest and riots in the Capital Honiara in November 2021.

The Solomon Island had established relation with China in 2019 after ending its 36-year-old relationship with Taiwan. Protesters unhappy with Beijing's secretive influence had attacked the prime minister's residence, burned businesses in the capital's Chinatown and left three people dead. Based on the request from the Solomon Government, Australia and New Zealand had provided

security assistance in controlling the riot. In Dec 2021, Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare announced Beijing's offer of assistance to strengthen its anti-riot policing capabilities. A team consisting nine officers from China Public Security Bureau arrived Honiara in February 2022 to to train local police to improve their "anti-riot capabilities".

While the controversy over replica weapons was still simmering, a draft framework agreement for security cooperation between Solomon Island and China emerged on social media on 24 March 2022. As per leaked document, the security cooperation would cover Chinese police, armed police and the military assisting the Solomon Islands on social order, disaster response and protecting the safety of Chinese personnel and major projects in the Solomon Islands. The Solomon Islands may, according to its own needs, request China to send security assistance in circumstances ranging from maintaining social order to unspecified "other tasks agreed upon by the Parties". The draft also provides for Chinese naval ships to carry out logistical replenishments in the Solomon Islands. Emphasising secrecy, the document also notes, "Neither party shall disclose the cooperation information to a third party."

In its first comments on the matter, the Solomon Islands government confirmed it was "diversifying the country's security partnership including with China". Opposition leaders in the Solomon Islands apprehend that the agreement, if approved, would allow Sogavare government to request security assistance from Beijing for protection his government in case of adverse electoral mandate. China on the other hand will get a strategic base to enhance its naval presence on Australia's doorstep.

The draft security agreement has accentuated Australia's longstanding anxieties about potentially hostile powers establishing a presence in its neighbourhood. Australia's Defence Minister, Peter Dutton stated that Peter Dutton, stating "we would be concerned clearly about any military base being established" less than 2,000km off the coast. New Zealand's PM Arden said "we see such acts as a potential militarisation of the region".

In a fiery speech to the parliament, Mr. Sogavare not only confirmed the security agreement was "ready for signing" but also blasted those who had leaked the draft deal as "lunatics" and "agents of foreign interference." He also criticized stated concerns from Australia and New Zealand as "insulting".

Negev Summit-Emerging dynamics of a new Regional Partnership

On 27 March 2022, the US Secretary of State Tony Blinken and the foreign ministers of Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, Morocco and the United Arab Emirates assembled for a two days summit in Sde Boker, a small town in the Negev desert. The Negev Summit was the first Israel summit in history with four Arab country representatives, symbolizing an immense geopolitical shift in the MENA region. While it was not explicitly stated, the summit in the Negev desert was another means of strengthening regional cooperation against Iran and increasing engagement with the Biden administration amid concerns of a U.S. retreat from the region.

In late 2020, Israel signed peace and normalization agreements with the UAE, Bahrain and Morocco as part of the Abraham Accords, brokered by the Trump administration. The Negev summit came after a flurry of closed-door talks this year about creating a new regional security partnership in the region that includes Israel, the U.A.E., Bahrain and Egypt, with hopes of eventually including Saudi Arabia.

During the joint press conference, the ministers said they discussed new security alliances, especially against perceived threats from Iran and its proxies. Blinken said such a meeting would have been unimaginable just a few years ago. He pledged to encourage other countries to strengthen their relations with Israel.



Mr Lapid, Israel's Foreign Minister said the parties had decided to turn the Negev summit into an annual forum that will rotate between the countries and form six working groups to focus on security issues, energy, tourism, health, education and food and water security. The foreign ministers also discussed establishing a regional framework for cooperation against ballistic missiles, drones and piracy in the Red Sea. "This new architecture, the shared capabilities we are building, intimidates and deters our common enemies—first and foremost Iran and its proxies. They certainly have something to fear," said Mr Lapid.

Naming Iran directly, the foreign minister of Bahrain, Abdullatif bin Rashid Al Zayani, said the summit became urgent because of the Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the threat from Hezbollah and the Iranian nuclear program. Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry said his country thinks the new normalization agreements are positive and that they represent a continuation of the path Egypt started on four decades ago when it made peace with Israel. Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita announced Morocco's plan to upgrade its diplomatic representation with Israel. UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah Bin Zayed called the summit historic. "We are trying to change the narrative and create a better future for the region," he said.

While the summit was ongoing in the Negev, two Israeli police officers were killed in an attack by two Israeli Arab gunmen in the northern Israeli city of Hadera. The attack was a reminder of how Israel's acceptance by some Arab states has done little to resolve its primary challenge: the conflict with Palestinians. While ministers condemned the terrorist attack, Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry stressed the need to avoid unilateral measures that can lead to an escalation. Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita said the participation of four Arab foreign ministers in the summit was the best answer to terror attacks in Israel. Blinken also raised the Palestinian issue and how to strengthen the Palestinian Authority. A notable absence from the summit was Jordan. The country's King Abdullah instead visited the Israeli-occupied West Bank in solidarity with the Palestinians.