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Ukraine War Update, 01-15 May 2023

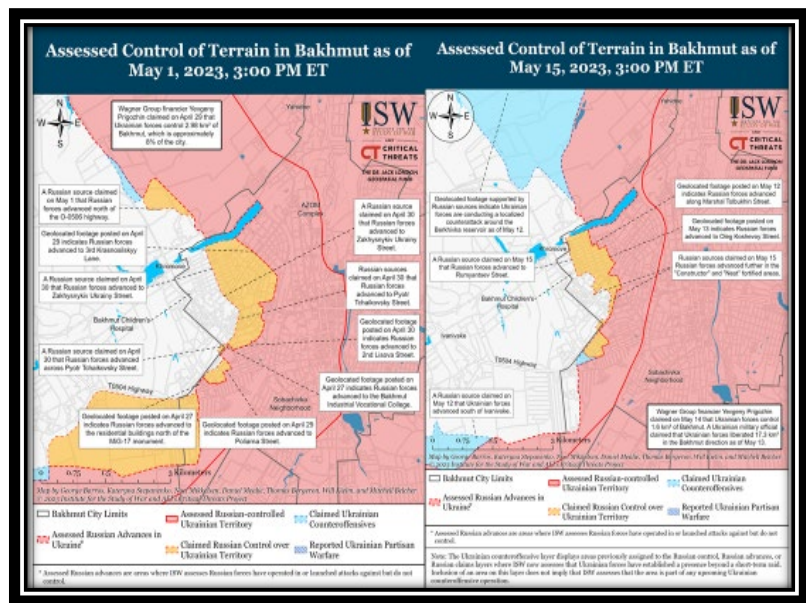
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Ukraine War Update, 1-15 May 2023

On May 03, 2023, two drones were seen exploding over Kremlin. Russia accused Ukraine of trying to assassinate President Vladimir V. Putin with a drone attack, but Kyiv denied any involvement in an incident. While the provenance of the two drones remained unclear, The Kremlin made a deliberate choice to quickly make the incident public. In retaliation, Russia launched multiple waves of missile and drone strikes on various cities in Ukraine including Kyiv. While Russia has claimed that it has targeted Ukrainian military facilities, Kyiv accused Moscow of indiscriminate targeting of civilian facilities.

During the last fortnight, Ukrainian forces have begun to claw back the outlying of the embattled city of Bakhmut from Russian control. The renewed fighting, which began on May 6th, has already seen Ukraine retake several square kilometres of territory, making it the most significant gain since seven months ago.



On May 12th the Russian defence ministry indirectly admitted to a major reversal on Bakhmut’s northern flank: its forces had withdrawn to what it called a “more favourable” frontier near the Berkhivka reservoir, some 3km east of previous positions. In addition, Ukrainian commanders have been claiming ongoing, if limited, battlefield successes such as Ukrainian armoured groups closing in on nearby Soledar; an attack on Mayorsk to the south of Bakhmut; and a Ukrainian advance in the direction of Belgorod, a Russian city. There have also been accounts of renewed Ukrainian drone attacks on Russian logistics hubs behind the lines.

It is still not clear whether a much anticipated Ukrainian counter-offensive has already begun. President Volodymyr Zelensky said, as reported by BBC on May 11, that Ukraine needed "a bit more time" to launch its much-anticipated counteroffensive as the country is waiting for the delivery of pledged military aid. On May 12, 2023, citing a senior U.S. military official and a top Western official, CNN claimed that Ukraine's Armed Forces have begun "shaping operations" ahead of the long-awaited counteroffensive. According to the U.S. military official, these shaping operations could last for days before the main part of any

planned Ukrainian offensive. An increasingly regular series of Russian drone and missile strikes seems to be a part of a new Russian air campaign in Ukraine aimed at degrading Ukrainian abilities to conduct counteroffensive operations in the near term.

President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine has been promised billions of dollars in new military aid during a whirlwind tour of European allies. He visited four countries-- Germany, Britain, France, and Italy. Mr Zelensky's four-country tour began in Italy on May 13, 2023, and ended in Britain on May 15, with Prime Minister Rishi Sunak pledging to provide a major package of air-defence missiles and attack drones. That was in addition to Britain's recent delivery of Storm Shadow long-range missiles. And it followed Germany's pledge to give Ukraine a nearly \$3 billion package of weapons, as well as less concrete promises of additional weapons from France and Italy. Earlier during the month, President Zelensky had visited Finland and made an unannounced visit to the Netherlands.

Europe's show of support for Ukraine underscores that the war is in a pivotal phase. The new long-range missiles, attack drones and tanks and other armoured vehicles secured from allies during the visit will fulfil many, but not all, of the demands for weapons that Ukraine has said it needs for a counteroffensive. Western commentators have argued that Europe's increased pledges, analysts said, reflect growing confidence in Ukraine's ability to make decisive breakthroughs with its counter-offensive.

The U.N. aid chief said on May 15, 2023, that efforts will continue in the coming days to extend a deal allowing the safe Black Sea export of Ukraine grain, a pact Russia has threatened to quit on May 18 over obstacles to its grain and fertilizer exports. Two days of talks in Istanbul between Turkish, Russian, Ukrainian and U.N. delegations on rolling over the Black Sea grain deal had ended on 11 May 2023 without any agreement. Russia has issued a list of demands regarding its own agricultural exports that it wants to be met before it agrees to an extension of the deal.

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida visits Seoul

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida visited South Korea on 7 May 2023 for a summit meeting with South Korean President Yoon Suk-Yeol, marking the culmination of a 52-day whirlwind rapprochement, when the South Korean president visited Tokyo and the two leaders agreed to restart building their frayed relationship. This set in motion a host of meetings at the ministerial level, where Japanese ministers of finance, defence and economy met their counterparts either bilaterally or on the sidelines of multilateral forums. The two countries also embarked on a gradual process of withdrawing punitive provisions each had set



up against the other, such as the restoration of Most Favored Nation status, as well as the removal of other export controls in place since 2018.

The so-called ‘shuttle diplomacy’ between the two Asian neighbours had been suspended since Yoshihiko Noda met Lee Myung-Bak in 2011. The primary cause for this is the festering historical issue of Japan’s annexation of (then-

united) Korea from 1910 to 1945 and the implications thereof, particularly in this case the decision by the South Korean Supreme Court in 2018 to grant the petition of several people who had been forced labourers during Japan’s occupation who sued companies such as Mitsubishi Heavy Industry and Nippon Steel for the abusive conditions under which they were allegedly made to work. Taking umbrage at the perceived violation by the Koreans of the 1965 Japan-South Korea Normalization Agreement (which restored ties between the two countries), which they claimed settled all ‘historical issues once and for all’, the Japanese government of Shinzo Abe removed Korea from the list of countries exempted from export controls, leading to a tit-for-tat escalation that stopped just short of cutting off diplomatic ties. The shadow of this long-held historical animosity hovered over the present summit as well.

For his part, Kishida stuck to his script, spoke mostly of the future of bilateral ties and expressed during a joint press conference on 8 May the ‘heart-wrenching pain’ he felt for those who had suffered under Japanese rule. He expressed his ‘trust’ in President Yoon at a meeting with a bipartisan delegation of parliamentarians, welcomed further cooperation on security issues (especially those concerning North Korea and China), agreed to the establishment of a joint supply chain for semiconductors, and promised to visit with President Yoon the Korean Victims of the Atomic Bomb Memorial within the Hiroshima Peace Park on the occasion of the G-7 meeting to be held in the city. He also supported the decision of the South Korean government to set up a foundation which would pay damages to the plaintiffs in the 2018 case, and agreed to host a South Korean fact-finding mission at the crippled Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant; the Japanese government’s decision to release the water used to cool down the dysfunctional reactor since 2011 into the Pacific Ocean has been the latest in a long line of irritants between Japan and its neighbours. In return, Yoon clearly enunciated his desire to de-link historical grievances from overall bilateral ties and indicated his willingness to include Japan in efforts to contain the nuclear threat posed by North Korea.

The summit meeting between the two heads of government thus marks a fragile but positive step forward in their diplomatic history, especially welcome given that Japan and South Korea are both close partners of India. Japan and South Korea's rapprochement must continue to progress, even as outstanding bilateral issues persist, as Asian security depends on the outcome. To be sure, both leaders face an uphill task of convincing their domestic constituencies that closer ties are necessary and mutually beneficial, especially given the ill will many in South Korea and Japan have against each other. Nevertheless, by de-linking the historical friction points from broader cooperation in politics, economy and security domains, the two leaders have made a fresh start on dealing with the issues of the future.

The Re-Admission of Syria to the Arab League

The sand dunes of the Arab world are known to shift suddenly. After a 12-year-long-expulsion, Syria has been readmitted into the Arab League through a vote by representatives of the groupings' member states in Cairo on 7 May. Syria has been invited to attend the next meeting of the regional cooperation organization the Arab League, to be held in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, on May 19. Notably, Egypt, which has close ties with Russia, has been more concerned about Turkish presence and actions in northern Syria and has been a votary of Syria's return to the Arab League.

Some political commentators have also linked this development to the recent China-brokered agreement between Saudi Arabia and Syria's long-time ally Iran in late March this year. Since then, Russia has mediated several meetings between Saudi and Syrian officials held in both Moscow and Riyadh. Their talks centred on mutual security concerns as Saudi Arabia wants help with detainees who joined jihadists in the Syrian civil war, while Syria would like to see Riyadh cut off funding and recruitment of factions fighting in Syria.

The UAE and Jordan, which had previously backed rebel groups in Syria, had recalibrated their approach towards the Assad regime after the Syrian government's forces recaptured the southwestern provinces of Daraa and al-Suwayda following two military pushes in 2018 and 2021,



respectively. The UAE, which reopened its embassy in Damascus in late 2018, has been at the forefront of bringing Syria back into the Arab regional fold. Emirati Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed was the first high official from the Arab world to have met President Assad in Damascus in November 2021. Syria, for its part, looks at trade and economic cooperation with the UAE as necessary to carry out reconstruction as it struggles under crippling Western sanctions.

Russia, which together with Iran has played a key role in the survival of the Assad government, has also engaged regional countries on Syria. At a time the Syrian government was preparing for the offensive in the south, Russia led the efforts to give guarantees that only Syrian army troops should be on the country's southern border with Jordan and Israel.

Amid persisting concerns in Amman about the presence of Iranian-backed militias and a steady increase in Captagon smuggling (an addictive stimulant mass-produced in Syria and smuggled to other countries in the region), Jordan has preferred dialogue with both Tehran and Damascus. After the devastating earthquake that hit Turkey and Syria in February 2023, Arab states responded with humanitarian assistance, a process that gave a new fillip to further regional diplomatic engagement with Damascus. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi called his Syrian counterpart a day after the quake, the first such communication between the leaders. Jordan's Foreign Minister, Ayman Safadi visited Damascus for, the first time since the beginning of the Syrian conflict.

In March 2023, Assad paid visited the UAE, which had pledged \$100 million in assistance to Syria. In April, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin-Farhan received his Syrian counterpart Faisal Mekdad and also paid a visit to Syria, where he met President Assad. Subsequently, Saudi Arabia and Jordan have hosted meetings of envoys from GCC States, Iraq, Egypt and Syria to reach what they have described as an 'Arab-led political path' to solve Syria's humanitarian, political and security problems.

Iran has welcomed Syria's reinstatement to the Arab League as it marks the end of the regional isolation of its key ally. Together with Russia, it has been playing a key role in resolving differences between Syria and Turkey. As the geopolitical dust settles on Syria's more than a decade-long conflict, the geo-economic priorities of key players such as Iran, and the GCC states will also determine how they engage Syria. It was therefore not surprising that during his first visit to Syria, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi focused on expanding economic cooperation, in sectors ranging from oil, and trade to infrastructure.