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On 30 Jul, three drones struck the Russian capital and damaged the facades of two office buildings in a business district. Russian officials blamed Ukraine for the drone assault while Ukrainian officials did not claim responsibility. A few days earlier, Moscow claimed shooting down two Ukrainian missiles over southwestern Russia including one that fell and exploded in a city centre of Taganrog - about 80 miles southeast of the nearest front lines —rare instances of Ukraine using such powerful weapons to attack targets inside Russia. As Ukraine has begun to step up its counter-offensive, the missile attacks deep inside Russian Territory could signal a more aggressive Ukrainian intent.



The progress of the Ukrainian counter-offensive, which began Jun 23, has been modest thus far raising concerns about Ukraine's ability to make a breakthrough against entrenched Russian defences. However, during the last fortnight, there have been reports that the Ukrainian counter-offensive is gaining momentum and suggestions of breakthroughs on at least three sectors of the front. As on 31 Jul, Ukrainian forces continued attacking northwest and southwest of Bakhmut, in the western Donetsk–eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and western Zaporizhia Oblast. Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar reported that over the past week, Ukrainian forces liberated an additional 2 square

kilometres of territory in the Bakhmut area and 12.6 square kilometres in the Berdyansk (western Donetsk–eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area) and Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) directions.

While Russian forces remained primarily focused on maintaining the integrity of their defence line, they also have been probing for Ukrainian weaknesses along the 1,000km-long front. For their part, the Russians still have hopes of regaining Ukrainian territory they have annexed but do not control in the Kherson, Donetsk and Luhansk regions. They have found Ukrainian weak points in the north and the east around Vovchansk, Kreminna and Avdiivka.

For now, the front line is a bloody shoving match, with both sides making small advances and retreats. While Ukrainian troops remain upbeat with these modest gains, The jury is still out on Ukraine's big push south.

Ukraine has also stepped up efforts to disrupt Russia's supply line to the front with attacks on logistics depots with long-range artillery and missiles. On 17 Jul, the Kerch bridge linking the occupied Crimean Peninsula to mainland Russia was

attacked reportedly by Ukrainian maritime drones briefly disrupting a major supply line to Russian troops. The blasts were the second time the Kerch Strait Bridge has been hit in 10 months. And though these inflicted far less damage than an explosives-laden truck that blew up last October, they exposed the vulnerability of the bridge. On 31 Jul, the Chongar Strait railway bridge linking occupied Crimea with Kherson Oblast was damaged in a Ukrainian strike. The attack could delay rail traffic causing a significant logistic problem for Russia in defending against the Ukrainian counter-offensive.

On 18 Jul, Russia withdrew from a wartime agreement- Black Sea Grain Initiative which was agreed upon a year ago- to allow grain exports from Ukraine through the Black Sea until its demands to loosen sanctions on its agricultural exports were met, upending a deal that has helped stabilize global food prices and alleviate shortages in parts of Africa and the Middle East. Russia's Defence Ministry said on 19 Jul it would deem all ships travelling to Ukrainian ports to be potential carriers of military cargo and their flag countries to be parties to the conflict on the Ukrainian side. Russia also declared southeastern and northwestern parts of the Black Sea's international waters to be temporarily unsafe for navigation without giving details about the parts of the sea which would be affected. In addition to the blockade in the Black Sea, Russia also intensified attacks on Port infrastructure, export hubs and grain storage facilities in Ukraine.

Ukraine has been readying a backup plan to get its grain shipments out without the deal. This hinges in part on a \$500 million guarantee fund to cover any damages or expenses incurred by ships moving through the Black Sea and in part on shipping more grain out through Europe's Danube River. Before the war, a few hundred thousand tons per month were exported via this route. Over the last year, this has increased to 2 million, and there is potential to double this figure, according to the Ukrainian Grain Association.

Macron's South Pacific Tour

French President Emmanuel Macron recently concluded a historic visit to the South Pacific from 24- 28 July 2023. Coming after five years since his last trip, this move has been seen as bolstering France's larger Indo-Pacific strategy. The South Pacific is a key region of France's interests being the only European country having a territory, people and the bulk of its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the Indo-Pacific. It is also the first time for a French president to travel not only to French territories like New Caledonia but also to independent countries like Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea.

The tour's significance increases after France's recent setbacks in bolstering ties with former French colonies in Francophone Africa.

France has four territories in both the sub theatres of the Indo-Pacific ---New Caledonia, French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna in the Pacific sub-theatre;

and the Reunion Island in the Indian Ocean region sub-theatre. The five-day visit began with Macron visiting the French archipelago of New Caledonia, followed by Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea.

Retaining French prominence and sovereignty over New Caledonia was undoubtedly the most important objective of Macron's visit. The future of the region remains uncertain after three failed independence referendums. The divide between the white settlers and the indigenous people is far from settled even if the current wave of referendums has turned out in France's favour.



For the time being, this indeed is Paris's victory as the pro-independence groups in the region, unhappy with France, had recently boycotted a third referendum on whether or not to remain with France. The official results showed an overwhelming desire to remain with Paris. For France, however, it remains a tightrope balance because the turnout for the referendum was quite low.

At just over 40%, the low voter turnout signifies that the majority of the indigenous sections of New Caledonia still wish to seek independence. Being severely affected by the Covid 19 pandemic, high casualties among those groups have kept them in traditional mourning, which in turn kept them away from participating in these elections. This was looked upon as an opportunity by France to go ahead with the referendum to numerically win support for pro – France groups. Paris indeed is nervously mindful of the referendum results in the recent past when the pro-independence voting rose from 43% in 2018 to 47% in 2020 when the participation rate was 85% and above.

In clear contrast, enthusiastic polling was observed in the white and relatively wealthier regions of its capital Noumea. The narrow escape is an opportunity for France to reinstate lost faith and confidence in French sovereignty that has eroded in recent decades.

The rather vulnerable situation and ongoing campaigns of self-determination have pushed Emmanuel Macron to come out with timely negotiations on the territory's future status. Macron's pitch, reminiscent of his approach in Africa, has been to build a common project based on recognising and respecting everyone's dignity was a far cry from France's earlier patronising stance. Macron announced that the Noumea agreement which has been the fulcrum of France-New Caledonia relations has to be re-set.

Macron's next visit was to Vanuatu which was historic not only because it was the first visit by a serving French president to an independent Pacific country since the 1960s but also because Macron was forthcoming in taking responsibility

for France's brutal colonial past in the region. Vanuatu was a British –French Condominium before it gained independence in 1980.

Macron, in a widely followed speech, denounced a “new imperialism” in the Pacific. Rooted in strategic autonomy that encapsulates a rather independent foreign policy world outlook by France, this came as a rebuttal to both the United States and China which have been competing for influence in the region. Without taking names, but clearly aiming for China, Macron called out against the economic policy of “loans with leonine conditions” that have strangled the fragile economies of the region. Beijing has in recent years emerged as the major lender for infrastructure projects. Its economic dominance of the region also comes with the pursuit of dominance in the nearby South China Sea region.

The last leg of Macron's South Pacific tour ended with a visit to Papua New Guinea, a region rich in minerals and other natural resources. Its proximity to key maritime routes also makes the region an important player in France's Indo-Pacific strategy. France's strategy with Papua New Guinea is to transcend a military competition with either China or the US by emphasising the environment which also forms an important leg of France's Indo-Pacific Strategy.

Overall, Macron's Pacific tour was aimed at strengthening France's strategic posturing in the region along with an increased overall European involvement.

Cambodia's 7th National Assembly Election



Cambodia held its 7th National Assembly elections on July 23, 2023, which saw a voter turnout of 84.6 percent which is higher than the 83 percent in 2018. While the official results are not expected for days the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) is set to win a landslide majority in the 125-seat National Assembly. According to the results of the unofficial distribution of seats obtained from all provincial governors across the country, the CPP won a majority of 120 seats, while the National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC) won five seats in Phnom Penh, Kampong Cham, Kampong Thom, Kandal and Prey Veng. For the 7th National Assembly elections, there was a delegation of more than 400 international observers from 65-70 countries and institutions.

Days after the CPP swept the general election, PM Hun Sen who has been in power for 38 years, in a nationally televised address on July 26, 2023, announced that he will be resigning and will hand over power to his son Hun Manet. Hun Sen's eldest son Hun Manet is a Western-educated and four-star general in

Cambodian Army. He would be appointed by the King on August 10 followed by a confirmation through a vote in the Parliament on August 22. While Hun Sen will stay on as head of the ruling party and a member of the National Assembly, his departure marks a significant shift in the politics of Cambodia.

The result of the elections indicates the continuing dominance of the CPP under Prime Minister Hun Sen. It has been little over thirty years since the Paris Peace Accord was signed on October 23, 1991, between the leaders of the four Cambodian factions – Khmer Rouge, Buddhist Liberal Democratic Party (BLDP), Cambodian People’s Party (CPP), and FUNCINPEC – and the permanent five members of the UN Security Council joined by Australia, Japan, and ASEAN. Before this between 1985 and 1991 saw continued civil war in Cambodia, led by the Khmer Rouge. The Peace Accord also provided for the establishment of a United National Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC). The UNTAC was entrusted with the task of demobilising, disarming, and supervising the armed troops of the four factions, enforcing the ceasefire and arms embargo, administering key aspects of government (defence, foreign affairs, public security, finance and information) until the holding of elections in 1993 and ensuring the observance of human rights.

The CPP has kept gaining more seats at successive elections moving Cambodia towards a hegemonic party system. In the last general elections held in July 2018, the CPP won all 125 seats in the National Assembly, as a consequence of the only viable opposition party the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), being disbanded by an arbitrary Supreme Court ruling. In the current elections as well the Candlelight Party was disqualified in May 2023, by the National Election Committee (NEC) on account of failure to submit proper registration documents. This action undertaken on the bases of technicality has been raised by human rights groups that see it as a tactic to disqualify any political party seen to be a threat to the CPP’s dominance.

Hun Sen’s continuing consolidation could also be attributed to his successes in overseeing the economic transformation within Cambodia. As a rising capitalist economic naga (dragon), Cambodia under Hun Sen has been promoting economic diversification which includes expansion of agriculture combined with greatly accelerated industrialization. Hun Sen envisaged transforming Cambodia into the economic heartland of the Greater Mekong Sub-region by integrating it economically with its neighbours and China and connecting it to the markets beyond.

The comprehensive and strategic cooperation between Cambodia and China has witnessed Chinese aid and investment projects in garments, land, oil, hydroelectric dams, and infrastructure. Apart from the Chinese investment and aid, Cambodia’s growth is being accompanied by increasing Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese and other Southeast Asian, and Western business activities. Amongst the ASEAN countries today Cambodia remains a strong performer with its economic growth forecast to accelerate to 5.5 percent in 2023.