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# Strategic Digest

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**Ukraine War Update, 01-15 Oct 2023**

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## Ukraine War Update, 01-15 Oct 2023

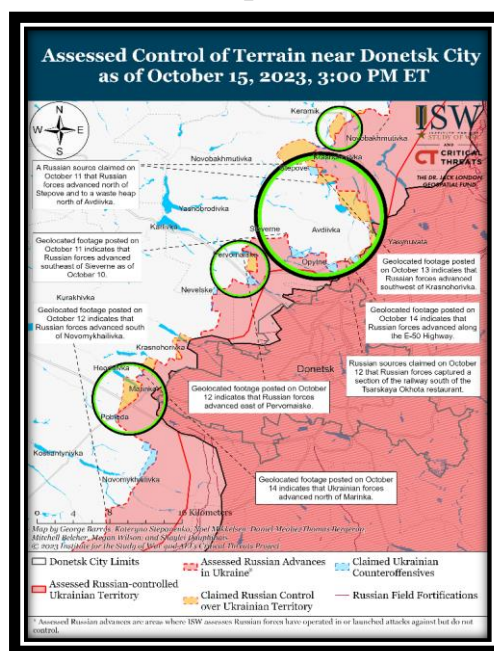
The war in Ukraine has constantly confounded expectations and it seems to be happening again. It was broadly expected that a Ukrainian counteroffensive equipped with modern Western weapons, which began in June, would be able to recapture significant territory before the onset of winter. Ukraine's dogged and slow-moving counteroffensive has struggled to push forward across the wide-open fields in the south due to extensive minefields and extensive fortification. Despite heroic efforts and breaches of Russian defences near Robotyne, Ukraine has liberated less than 0.25% of the territory that Russia occupied in June. The 1,000km front line has barely shifted.

While the Ukrainian counteroffensive has not measured up to the desired expectation, Russian forces have begun to exhibit an offensive posture. Since October 9th Russian forces have been carrying out a sustained attack of their own. This is centred on the eastern frontline town of Avdiivka, a heavily fortified Ukrainian-held area close to the Russian-held capital of Donetsk province. This offensive seems to be one of Russia's biggest pushes since last spring. The aim of this Russian offensive appears both to be an attempt to create a "cauldron" around the Ukrainian defenders and to change the narrative of the war to one in which the initiative shifts back towards Russia.

Whether it becomes the main thrust of a fresh Russian offensive is too soon to determine. It is not in doubt that Russia has committed substantial resources to its latest push. As per Ukrainian officials, Russia has committed up to three battalions supported by tanks, infantry fighting vehicles and close air support during this offensive.

Just as Ukraine throughout the summer has found breaking down well-prepared defences extremely tough, so too the Russians appear to be taking heavy punishment in their assault on Avdiivka. As per reports, Russia has lost about 50 tanks and 100-odd armoured vehicles in this offensive. Russian territorial gains are so far estimated at less than two square miles.

As of October 15, fierce fighting in Avdiivka on the eastern frontline has continued as Russia continued to deploy new forces in an attempt to surround the city. Ukrainian officials have admitted that fighting in the northeast had "significantly worsened". At the same time, Ukrainian forces have continued offensive operations near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhzhia Oblast and slightly advanced south of Bakhmut. In his regular address, President Zelensky said: "I thank everyone who is holding their positions and destroying Russian troops", citing Avdiivka, Maryinka and other key locations in the Donetsk region.



Notwithstanding the lack of substantial territorial gains by Ukraine in its ongoing counteroffensive, Ukraine has massively stepped up its strike on the Crimean peninsula and has begun to contest Russian Naval superiority in the Black Sea. Using a mix of new indigenous drones and foreign-supplied cruise missiles, it has hit military bases, air bases, and command-and-control centres in the last month. Since the sinking of Russia's flagship Moskva in April 2022, Ukraine has sunk or damaged at least 19 Russian ships. During the last fortnight, Ukraine's "Experimental" naval drones damaged two Russian military vessels — the Buyan missile carrier and the Pavel Derzhavin patrol boat.

As per reports, Russia has withdrawn the bulk of its Black Sea Fleet from its main base in occupied Crimea to the port of Novorossiysk in Russia's Krasnodar region. Russia has also signed a deal for a permanent naval base on the Black Sea coast of the breakaway Georgian region of Abkhazia. Aslan Bzhania, the self-styled president of Russian-backed Abkhazia, met President Putin on 12 October and said that an agreement had been signed for a permanent naval base in the Ochamchira region. Georgia's foreign ministry expressed concern over "the inclusion of the indivisible Abkhazia region of Georgia in the integration processes initiated by Russia". Such actions "represent a gross violation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia", it said.

### Hamas Attacks Israel

The Hamas launched an unprecedented land, air and sea incursion into Israel on 7 October 2023 involving thousands of fighters. The much-touted Israeli border fence was breached at multiple locations. Israeli army posts as well as civilian communities near the border were attacked, which led to the death of more than 1,400 Israeli citizens, an overwhelming majority of them being civilians. Israel



regained control of its borders within 48 hours and vowed to eliminate the terror organization. The Israeli government mobilized 360,000 reservists and is expected to launch a ground operation soon to negate the Hamas threat.

The fact that so many thousands of fighters could train and execute an audacious attack is being seen not only as a sign of massive intelligence failure on the part of the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) but also as a failure of assessment regarding the capabilities and intentions of Hamas. The IDF Spokesperson stated that this was Israel's 9/11 moment. The IDF believed that the current pre-occupation of the Palestinian terror group was primarily economic and that it was lying low to build up its capabilities, which took a hit in Israel's

most recent military operation directed against them, Operation Guardian of the Walls, in August 2021. The Hamas on its part blamed Israeli occupation since 1967 and its policies towards the territories as being responsible for the attack.

The massive loss of life led to all-round condemnation of the actions of Hamas, with President Joe Biden terming it ‘an act of sheer evil’, in a statement on October 10, 2023. Prime Minister Narendra Modi was one of the first world leaders to condemn the Hamas terrorist incident, on October 7 itself. Later, on October 10, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called up PM Modi to brief him on the situation.

International and regional responses have been on expected lines. Regional heavyweights like Egypt, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia have called on Israel to adhere to international law and exercise maximum restraint and also highlighted the need to renew efforts to work towards establishing a Palestinian state. The UAE and Bahrain – Israel’s Abraham Accord partners, have condemned Hama’s actions. Morocco, with whom Israel established diplomatic ties in December 2020, condemned attacks against civilians. Iran, meanwhile, has rejected charges that it was involved in the operation even as it welcomed the Hamas terrorist action.



The attacks brought into focus Israel’s security approach towards the Gaza Strip, termed by analysts (Efraim Inbar and Eitan Shamir) as a ‘mowing the grass’ strategy. This denoted occasional large-scale operations to have a temporary deterrent effect and create periods of quiet, given that Israel was facing protracted intractable conflict. The strategy did not countenance re-occupying the Gaza Strip, which Israel vacated in 2005. Israel did launch two brief ground invasions subsequently – in 2009 and 2014, to destroy Hamas tunnel infrastructure, among other war aims. With the massive IDF mobilization and the challenges of navigating the complexities of urban warfare, the IDF can be expected to sustain significantly more casualties than it did in 2014 (when 66 IDF soldiers were killed) or in 2009 (when 10 soldiers were killed).

The impending ground invasion, as well as the IDF bombing campaign which has already led to the death of over 2,000 Palestinians, has led to calls by the international community to respect the ‘laws of war’, as President Biden himself noted in his October 10 statement. The IDF has asked north Gaza residents, numbering more than 1 million, to move towards the south beyond the Gaza River. Israel has accused Hamas of preventing the movement of people in order to raise the number of civilian casualties and turn world public opinion against it. Israel charges that Hamas uses civilians as human shields and bears sole responsibility for the loss of Palestinian lives.

As Israel gets ready to launch a ground invasion, the fate of the more than 150 Israelis taken hostage by Hamas fighters remains uncertain. The US and the UK, meanwhile, are bolstering their force presence in the eastern Mediterranean, with the dispatch of nuclear-powered aircraft carrier battle groups, USS Gerald Ford and USS Eisenhower, along with augmenting their regional fighter aircraft strength. Analysts note that the increased presence is to ensure that regional countries like Iran or groups like the Hezbollah in Lebanon do not take advantage of the situation and launch attacks against Israeli or allied targets.

### Azerbaijan's recapture of Nagorno-Karabakh

On 28 September 2023, Samvel Shahramanyan, the president of the Nagorno Karabakh region, issued a decree stating that the territory would cease to exist after 1 January 2024. This step comes after a large-scale offensive took place on 19-20 September by Azeri forces. The recent military offensive by the Azeris has caused the region to secede into Azerbaijan and could be the first step to ending hostilities in the ever-conflicted territory.

This conflict has been a critical strand in the geopolitics of the Caucasus throughout the Soviet era and eventually spilt over into the post-soviet space. The conflict occurred after a transfer of an Armenian-populated Nagorno-Karabakh land under the Soviet leadership took place into the Turkic majoritarian Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic in 1921. Over time, protests occurred until the 1980s, during the final days of the Soviet Union, when the Armenian population took up the stance of independence from Azeri rule. What followed was the First Nagorno-Karabakh War, which ended in the post-soviet period in 1994, with the Karabakh Armenians victorious and the Azeris losing a grip on



the territory. Over time, the situation remained volatile, with minor skirmishes and cross-border attacks occurring until 2020, when Azeri forces launched an attack on the territory and ensured a recapture of its once-lost land.

On 19-20 September, Azerbaijan launched a military operation seeking the removal of Armenian soldiers within Nagorno-Karabakh in accordance with the peace treaty 2020. The Armenian leadership directly denied this and also stated that it would not be able to assist the Nagorno-Karabakh population in defending itself. The lack of support further emboldened the Azeri military to carry out its objectives.

The Azeri military offensive towards Nagorno Karabakh after months of blockade has ensured that the demands for independence from the population ended. After the offensive, more than 100,000 Armenians moved out of the region and shifted to Armenia for their safety and shelter. The leaders of Nagorno Karabakh, both past and present, have been arrested by the Azeri authorities, and the ones who remain in the territory have been asked to attain Azeri citizenship. The recent mass exodus of the population has ensured that the local populace was not ready to trust the Azeri leadership and chose to abandon their homes for safety.

Domestically, in Armenia, disappointment over Armenia's inability to defend Nagorno Karabakh erupted into protests against the leadership. The protesters were already upset with the leadership's past comments about ceding the territory of Artsakh (the Armenian name for Nagorno-Karabakh), further fuelling their displeasure towards the government. The protests, however, have been put on hold mainly due to the movement of Armenians from Artsakh into Armenia, with the population assisting them. In the short term, the main focus of the leadership in Armenia may be on rehabilitating the Armenians who have entered the country. In the long term, the government may focus on the movement of the existing Armenian population in Artsakh into Armenia and negotiate the safety and security of the people within Artsakh who now fall under Azeri leadership.

Regionally, the responses have been mixed; even major powers like Russia also stated they would not get involved in protecting the interests of the Nagorno Karabakh population and pushing the blame on Armenia. This was done mainly due to rising tensions between the Armenian and Russian leadership. The recent shifts in Armenian policy can be credited to its complementarism tendencies, which may not see a change to the West instead of Russia. Over the current events, the Russian peacekeepers have maintained their policy to protect the people and helped ensure the Armenian population's safe passage. The peacekeepers were, however, criticised for their inability to intervene during the military offensive.

Turkiye, which is Azerbaijan's closest ally, supported the offensive and hailed the successes of its Turkic brethren during President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's visit to the Azeri exclave Nakhichevan. Iran remains concerned about the situation and has always stressed that Azerbaijan should not instigate territorial changes within Armenia. Israel, known for importing arms to Azerbaijan due to the situation in Gaza, has been relatively silent on the current situation in the Caucasus. With Turkiye seeing Azerbaijan as the main gateway to increase its influence in the region, the recent events bode well for Turkiye, who already supports the idea of the Zangezur corridor, which came up after the Second War.

European Union and the United States have condemned the actions of Azerbaijan, and the United States even sent its USAID administrator to visit Armenia. Still, both did little about the attacks by Azerbaijan.