



MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR
DEFENCE STUDIES AND ANALYSES
मनोहर पर्रिकर रक्षा अध्ययन एवं विश्लेषण संस्थान

Strategic Digest

Vol. 4 | No. 13 | 01 July 2022

Ukraine Conflict Update, 15-30 June 2022

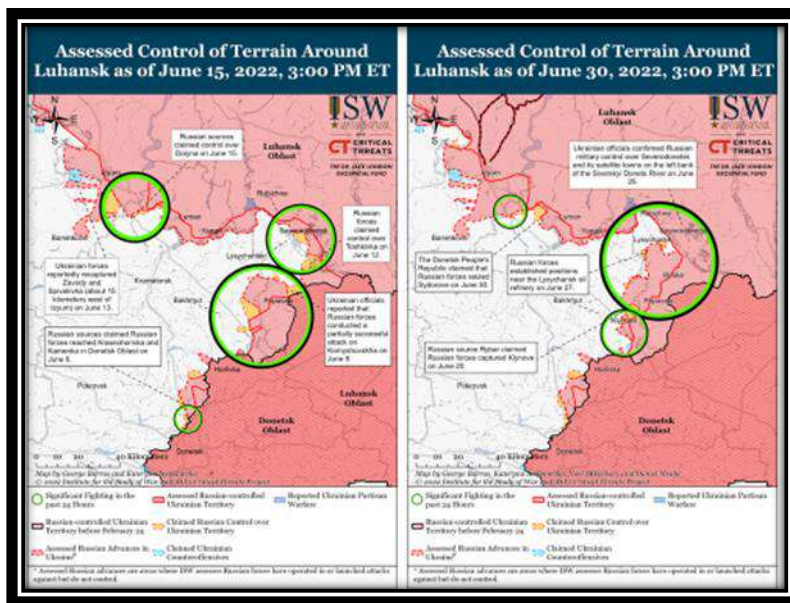
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Ukraine Conflict Update, 15-30 June 2022

The last fortnight has seen Russian Armed Forces maintain their operational momentum and make important gains in the Donbas while the Ukrainian Armed Forces continue to press their counteroffensive in the Kherson Oblast. The situation here remains tenuous for both sides with mounting heavy losses in men and equipment.

Amid relentless Ukrainian missile and strike attacks, Russian forces withdrew from ‘Snake Island’, a tiny but strategically located Ukrainian islet in the Black Sea on 30 June 2022. Russia was finding it difficult to hold the island due to sustained Ukrainian missile and artillery attacks. This sudden withdrawal was framed by the Russian defence ministry as ‘a gesture of goodwill’ in not impeding the UN efforts to facilitate grain exports from Ukraine.



During the last fortnight, Russian forces have managed to significantly enhance territory under their control in the Donbas region. Due to a sustained Russian offensive, Ukrainian forces withdrew from the key city of Severodonetsk and have pulled back from Lysychansk and Luhansk Oblast. It appears that Ukrainian forces may continue the withdrawal that began in

Severodonetsk to Ukrainian strongholds around Siversk, Kramatorsk, and Slovyansk. The pace and outcome of the next phase of the current campaign may depend in part on Russia’s ability to recoup combat power from the forces that participated in the Battle of Severodonetsk.

Along the Southern axis, Russian forces continued to prioritize defensive operations to protect Kherson and Zaporizhia Oblasts against Ukrainian counterattacks. Ukraine’s Southern Operational Command stated that Ukrainian forces have re-established control over Potemkyne (northwestern Kherson Oblast) and that Ukrainian troops are continuing to gradually advance and place pressure on Russian forces to maintain defensive lines.

Russian authorities continued measures to facilitate economic and financial integration of occupied territories. Russian authorities are preparing to re-open the Port of Mariupol and Russia has already exported 7,000 tons of Ukrainian grain through the Port of Berdyansk.

On 20 June, Lithuania attempted to impose EU sanctions on Russian goods in transit to Kaliningrad, a Russian exclave in the Baltic. Russia warned Lithuania of "serious" consequences after it banned the rail transfer of some goods to the Russian territory of Kaliningrad. Lithuania was then hit with country-wide cyber-attacks, days after Moscow threatened to retaliate. In a compromise backed by Germany, the EU has now decided to provide sanction exemptions to Kaliningrad to diffuse the situation.

After attending the G-7 summit, Indonesian President Joko Widodo travelled to Kyiv on 29 June 2022. President Jokowi is the chair of the Group of 20 nations and one of six leaders the United Nations has appointed as "champions" of a Global Crisis Response Group, formed to address the threat of hunger and destitution posed by the war in Ukraine. Widodo offered to deliver a message from Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to Russian leader Vladimir Putin to try to boost peace hopes. After he visits Ukraine, Jokowi is due to go to Moscow to meet Putin and has said he will urge the Russian president to agree to a ceasefire.

NATO's Madrid Summit: Key Outcomes

The NATO Summit in Madrid drew to a close on 30 June 2022. NATO leaders signed off on key decisions, which included strengthening the grouping's deterrence and defence, inviting Finland and Sweden to join NATO and pledging long-term support to Ukraine. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg affirmed that the Madrid decisions "will ensure that our Alliance continues to preserve peace, prevent conflict, and protect our people and our values."



Allied leaders agreed on a fundamental shift in NATO's deterrence and defence, with strengthened forward defences, enhanced battlegroups in the eastern part of the Alliance, and an increase in the number of high readiness forces – from 40,000 to over 300,000. Existing NATO defences on the alliance's eastern flank

will be increased to the size of a brigade – about 3,000 to 5,000 troops in addition to local forces.

It was also decided to increase common funding. Commitment for long-term economic and military support to Ukraine was reiterated to ensure that it prevails as an independent sovereign state in Europe. NATO would also assist Ukraine's transition from Soviet-era equipment to modern NATO standard equipment.

During the Summit, NATO's closest partners Finland and Sweden were invited to join the Alliance, a significant boost to Euro-Atlantic security. With Turkey having dropped its objections to the Nordic states' applications on June 28, the inclusion of the two formerly non-aligned nations would expand NATO's ranks from 30 member states to 32.

Setting out the Alliance's priorities, core tasks and approaches for the next decade, the summit approved a new Strategic Concept designed to respond to a newly resurgent and bellicose Moscow and to meet the global challenges posed by China. NATO's new strategic document marks a fundamental shift from the last iteration of the concept in 2010. Twelve years ago, the concept did not even consider China worth a mention and the alliance then stated that it would work towards "a true strategic partnership between NATO and Russia."

The new Strategic Concept defines Russia as the "most significant and direct threat" to the Allies' security, which aims to destabilise the European region through "coercion, subversion, aggression and annexation." The Concept commits to "strengthen deterrence and defence for all Allies" against Russian coercion. For the first time, the document also describes China as a direct challenge to NATO. The document states that China's "stated ambitions and coercive policies challenge our interests, security and values." It also accuses Beijing of seeking "to control key technological and industrial sectors, critical infrastructure, and strategic materials and supply chains." Cooperation among the 30 members is reiterated to counter the growing cooperation between China and Russia.

Notwithstanding its preoccupation with the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, Indo-Pacific continues to be a key area of engagement for NATO. Its Indo-Pacific partners – Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and the Republic of Korea, participated together in a NATO Summit for the first time. The new strategic concept considers the Indo-Pacific region "as important for NATO, given that developments in that region can directly affect Euro-Atlantic security." Strengthening dialogue and cooperation with new and existing partners in the Indo-Pacific is flagged as a key priority.

Middle East Air Defence Alliance: A New Normal in the Arab-Israeli Détente

On 20 June 2022, Israel confirmed the existence of a security cooperation framework with the US and Arab countries to combat threats from Iran. In a briefing to Israeli lawmakers, Israel's Defence Minister, Benny Gantz stated that the new initiative – the Middle East Air Defence Alliance (MEAD), is the US-led defence and security cooperation framework comprising Arab countries and Israel. Gantz described MEAD as



the “first element” of a shared vision “in the face of Iran's attempts to attack the region's countries using rockets, cruise missiles, and UAVs' unmanned aerial vehicles, as well as drones.” Gantz stated that the program has already conducted successful interceptions of Iranian attempts to attack Israel and other countries.

As per Reuters, partner countries in MEAD are synchronising their respective air defence systems through remote electronic communication, rather than using the same physical facilities. The members of the alliance have established a communication grid that allows each partner to warn the other in real-time about incoming drones/missiles from Iran and its proxies. A senior Israeli military official was cited as stating that the new air defence alliance shot down an Iranian drone that was fired from Iraq toward Israel.

This military partnership is considered to be one of the most consequential outcomes of a diplomatic détente that was sealed nearly two years ago between Israel and parts of the Arab world, ending decades of Israeli isolation. A report in the New York Times has argued that MEAD is a tangible outcome of the Negev Summit in March 2022 hosted by Israel, which saw the participation of US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and his counterparts from Bahrain, Egypt, Morocco, and the UAE. The air defence alliance highlights the speed at which some of those relationships have moved from symbolism to substance.

Few other instances of closer military cooperation between Israel and the Arab world have also already begun to emerge. The Israeli Defence Ministry recently signed preliminary agreements with its Bahraini and Moroccan counterparts, making it easier for the three countries to coordinate militarily. The Chief of the Emirati Air Force attended an Israeli-led air force exercise last October, highlighting growing ties between the two militaries. And Israel has stationed a military liaison in Bahrain, as part of a separate regional initiative to combat piracy.

The idea of a new defence alignment was underlined by Jordan's King Abdullah II on 24 June 2022. Abdullah told CNBC that he would “endorse a Middle East NATO” but with a “very, very clear” mission statement.

Other than the US and Israel, details of the other members of this new alliance have not been announced. Many observers believe that MEAD would likely include the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Egypt, and/or Jordan. More details about MEAD and the emerging contours of the Arab-Israeli détente are expected to be announced during President Joe Biden's visit to Israel and Saudi Arabia in July. Reuters quoted a Western diplomat in the Arabian Gulf region saying that Washington is still working on convincing Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states as a bloc to agree on joining the U.S.-Israeli integrated air defence system. It is pertinent to note that Saudi Arabia and Israel have not yet established formal diplomatic ties, though reports do note close discussions and cooperation on common issues of strategic concern.