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# Strategic Digest

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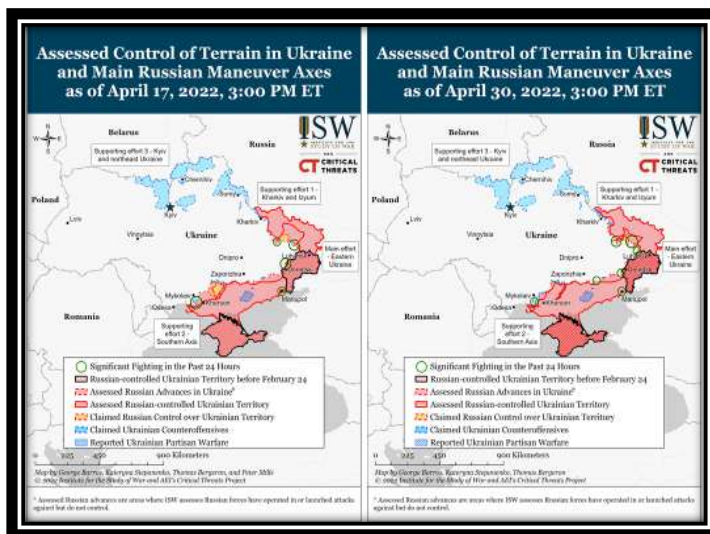
**Ukraine Conflict Update, 17 -30 April 2022**

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## Ukraine Conflict Update, 17 -30 April 2022

The last fortnight in the Ukraine conflict saw the unveiling of Russia's recalibrated military strategy in Eastern Ukraine. On 18 April 2022, Russian forces launched a new, large-scale offensive in east Ukraine to take full control of the Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts. However, the planned offensive could only take minor advances in eastern Ukraine, including around Izyum and made limited gains around Popasna, Marinka and Severdonetsk. While concentrated artillery appeared to enable limited Russian advances in eastern Ukraine, Russian forces continue to struggle to break through prepared Ukrainian defences.



As per reports, Russia is redeploying some units from Belgorod to the Izyum front to support likely degraded Russian units attempting to advance south of the city. Russian forces in Kherson also appeared to have paused major offensive operations to improve their tactical positions and regroup to prepare for a renewed offensive to complete its occupation of Kherson.

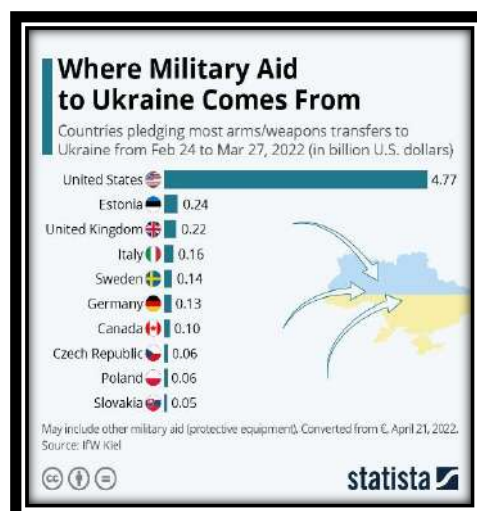
The last week saw limited counterattacks by Ukrainian forces around Kharkiv city. While limited Ukrainian counterattacks around Kharkiv city have not led to territorial gain but may force Russian forces to redeploy units intended for the Izyum axis to hold these positions. It is too early to confirm whether these limited counterattacks indicate a shift from a defensive strategy to an offensive one by Ukraine.

In the South, Ukrainian defenders in Mariupol's Azovstal Steel Plant continue to hold out against heavy Russian artillery and aerial bombardment. It is not clear whether Russian forces will be able to starve out the remaining defenders by May 9, a possible self-imposed deadline to complete the capture of Mariupol. Russian forces likely intend to leave a minimal force in Mariupol necessary to block Ukrainian positions and prevent partisan actions and are deploying as much combat power as possible to support offensive operations elsewhere.

The US has significantly enhanced its support to Ukraine. The US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin were in Kyiv late on 24 April 2022, to demonstrate directly our strong support for Ukraine. The US President has asked Congress to give immediate approval for a \$33bn package of military and economic aid to Ukraine. The total of \$33bn is more than twice the last supplemental request approved by Congress in March and is larger than the entire defence budget of many other countries.

Not including the latest announcement by the US, almost \$4.8 billion in military aid has already been pledged, according to the Ukraine Support Tracker by the Kiel Institute for the World Economy. In addition, the US Congress agreed to update the 1941 lend-lease legislation with which Franklin D Roosevelt sought to help Britain and other allies fight Nazi Germany. The updated law is intended to make it easier for the US to provide military equipment to Ukraine.

As the U.S. and Europe boost military aid to Ukraine, Russian authorities have escalated warnings and criticism. Reacting to an appeal by British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss for Western countries to "double down" on their military support for the government in Kyiv., Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov told reporters on 24 April 2022, "The tendency to pump weapons, including heavy weapons into Ukraine and other countries, these are the actions that threaten the security of the continent, provoke instability." It was the latest in a series of statements from Moscow that the conflict in Ukraine risks spilling into a wider conflict with the West.



### Resetting Turkish-Saudi Ties

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's two-day visit to Saudi Arabia (28-29 April 2022), his first to the kingdom since July 2017, underlines an ongoing effort at resetting the Turkish-Saudi ties. Turkey and Saudi Arabia have been working on a rapprochement for months. The warm embrace between Erdogan and MBS appears to signal that the previous cold relationship between the two countries is now over.



There are geopolitical compulsions for the reset as the regional countries look to adjust to the changing regional and global realities of shifting the US focus to the Indo-Pacific. While geopolitics is important, at the core of the regional rapprochement is geo-economics. For Turkey, this is the driving factor in its regional outreach as the country has struggled to overcome the economic slump, worsened by the COVID-19. In November 2021, during the visit of Mohammed bin Zayed, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and de facto ruler of UAE, the two countries signed a deal for US\$10 billion in Emirati investments in

the Turkish economy. Ankara's outreach to Israel and Egypt is also focused on economic cooperation. President Erdogan is facing a tough election year in 2023 and wants the economic situation to improve before going to the electorate.

The outreach to Saudi Arabia too should be seen within these contexts. There exist the immense potential for trade, business, and investments in sectors such as entertainment, construction, tourism, and the discussions during Erdogan's visit were focused on economic cooperation. Notably, Turkey and Saudi Arabia are both members of the G20 and two of the largest economies in MENA. Before his departure, Erdogan said "My visit reflects our joint will to start a new era of cooperation as the two brotherly countries. We will be making efforts to start a new era of enhanced relations between our two countries in all respects including politics, military, economy and culture."

With the visit to Saudi Arabia, Erdogan wants to leave behind the strains that marked the Turkish-Saudi relations over the past decade. Geopolitical competitions in the wake of Arab Spring, differences over the Muslim Brotherhood and its role in the region, and disagreement during the GCC crisis, but above all the diplomatic row over the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, were the major contributing factors to the deterioration of bilateral ties. Signs of efforts at reconciliation between Riyadh and Ankara began to emerge in 2021 with the signing of the Al-Ula Declaration in January and the visit of Turkish foreign minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, to Riyadh in May. The Turkish decision in April 2022 to transfer the Khashoggi trial to Saudi Arabia ended all hurdles to the diplomatic engagement. During the visit, Erdogan held meetings with King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, discussed improving trade and economic cooperation, and exchanged views on regional and international matters. He also visited Mecca to perform umrah and offer prayers at Islam's holiest site, important for the "pious" image Erdogan has built for his supporters.

While the efforts at reset are significant, these are still early days to suggest a rapprochement given the gravity of differences over a variety of regional and international issues including the counter-claims against the leadership of the Sunni Islamic world.

### **Xi Jinping's Global Security Initiative**

President Xi Jinping announced a Global Security Initiative at the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2022, on April 21, 2022. The stated objective of the initiative "is to promote security for all in the world." In the six-point Global Security Initiative, he propounded six commitments that are staying committed "to the vision of common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security... to respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries, uphold non-interference in internal affairs, and respect the independent choices of development paths and social systems... abiding by the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, reject the Cold War mentality, oppose unilateralism, and say no to group politics and bloc confrontation... to taking the legitimate security concerns of all countries seriously, uphold the principle of indivisible security,

build a balanced, effective and sustainable security architecture...to peacefully resolving differences and disputes between countries through dialogue and consultation, support all efforts conducive to the peaceful settlement of crises, reject double standards, and oppose the wanton use of unilateral sanctions and long-arm jurisdiction... [and finally] to maintaining security in both traditional and non-traditional domains.”

Foreign Minister Wang Yi has underlined the initiative as “Chinese wisdom to addressing the peace deficit of humanity and coping with global security challenges.”



However, despite its advertisement as “absolutely a breath of fresh air”, the Global Security Initiative offers little novelty at the level of substance. The commitments it champions have been long-standing formulations in Chinese foreign policy discourse. In recent years, at the fourth summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) in 2014 in Shanghai, Xi Jinping himself offered his concept of “common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security”, which included all the elements that his Global Security Initiative espouses. Since then, Chinese white papers such as the 2017 white paper China’s Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation and the 2019 white paper China’s National Defence in the New Era have elaborated on Chinese concepts on these lines only. Xi’s concept of “building of a community with a shared future for mankind” emphasises ‘universal security and common prosperity’ too.

However, the timing of propagating this initiative may be notable. Wang Yi has emphasised that this initiative “responds to the urgent demand of the international community for upholding world peace and preventing conflicts and wars, and it contributes.” This otherwise general statement assumes some significance in the backdrop of the ongoing crisis in Ukraine. In the backdrop of the crisis that China considers as the outcome of the US cold war mentality, China has advocated talks as the right way for resolving the crisis. It has evoked all the aforementioned elements in the Global Security Initiative in its appeals for the peaceful resolution of the Ukrainian crisis. Also, in the backdrop of the crisis, it has appeared repositioning and rebranding itself in the European space where its image had taken a hit in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak and over the Hong Kong issue, thus, leveraging the opportunity that the crisis has offered. Finally, one can perhaps argue that while the previous formulations and concepts appeared to have a focus on nearby regions, this initiative with the term “global” in the nomenclature of the concept intends to convey a larger and global role for China in the geopolitical flux in the world. Also, this formulation may indicate that China would perhaps more aggressively denounce and counter groupings such as Quad and AUKUS.