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After months of preparation and bolstered by hundreds of Western-donated tanks, armoured vehicles and howitzers, Ukrainian forces launched, on 04 Jun 2023, what Russia's defence ministry called a "large-scale" assault on five axes in the south-east of Donetsk province, in eastern Ukraine. Moscow claimed it successfully fended off a Ukrainian counter-offensive, while Kiyv asserted that it has made meaningful gains.

The first indications of a new phase in the offensive came on June 4th and 5th, when Ukrainian units advanced towards Velyka Novosilka and into Novodonetske, southwest of Donetsk city, which is held by Russia. Elsewhere in the south, Ukraine has also been ratcheting up rocket and missile strikes on Russian positions behind the front lines. These have included attacks on Mykhailivka, Melitopol and Tokmak in central Zaporizhia province, which offers another potential route south to the Sea of Azov.



At the same time, Ukraine has begun probing across the entirety of a front that spans more than 1,000km from Kherson in the South to Luhansk in the northeast. Moreover, Russia is increasingly distracted by raids even farther to the north of the established front lines.

Ukraine-backed militias have conducted brazen raids into Russia's Belgorod province in recent weeks, forcing Russia to devote resources and attention to a part of the border that was previously quiet. Elements of these rebel militia conducted another limited raid into Belgorod Oblast on June 4.

At the other end, in the south, on the Russian left flank, the most dramatic development came on June 6th when the Kakhovka dam collapsed, causing massive flooding across Kherson province. It was not immediately clear who was responsible for the destruction of the dam and electric plant, which lies along the Dnipro River and is held by Russian forces.

Ukrainian officials blamed Russia for the failure, noting that Moscow's military forces — which have repeatedly struck Ukrainian infrastructure since invading last year — controlled the dam spanning the Dnipro River, putting them in a position to detonate explosives from within. Russian officials, in turn, blamed Ukraine but did not elaborate on how that might have been done. As per Oleksandr Prokudin, the governor of the Kherson region, 600km² of the Kherson region has been flooded, out of which 32% is on the Ukrainian-controlled right

bank and 68% on the Russian-occupied left bank. The flooding has destroyed many Russian first-line field fortifications that the Russian military intended to use to defend against Ukrainian attacks.

According to Ukrainian and UN experts. There seems to be no immediate safety threat to the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant 200km downstream from the dam. Water from the reservoir affected by the destruction of the dam is used to supply the plant's cooling systems.

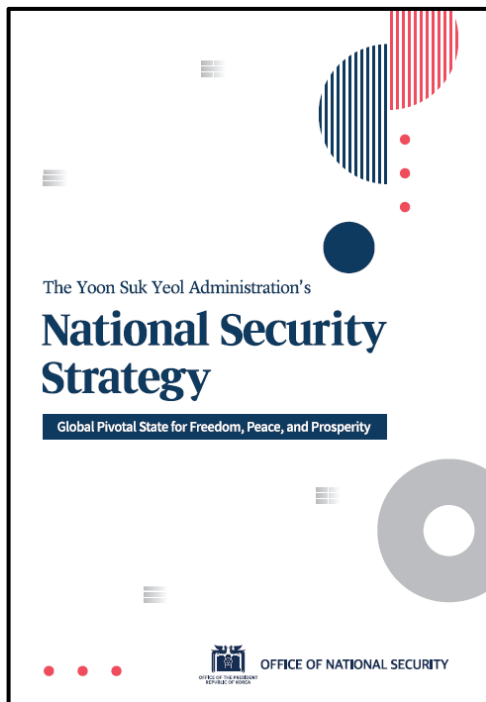
On 10 Jun, Russian President Vladimir Putin acknowledged the Ukrainian counteroffensive against Russian troops but argued that efforts “so far have failed” after Moscow said it repelled several Ukrainian assaults. However, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskiy made no formal announcement of specific developments on the battlefield, but praised the “heroism” of his country's soldiers fighting “tough battles”.

Now into its second week, the contours of the counteroffensive are gradually becoming clearer. One long-standing axis points east, at the area around the bloodily contested town of Bakhmut and in Luhansk province. A new one aims south and southeast from Velyka Novosilka and Vuhledar in Donetsk province. And a third has opened in the south. The thrust in Donetsk appears so far to have been the most successful. Ukraine used seven brigades near Velyka Novosilka to liberate around 60 sq km of territory. That progress contrasts with less encouraging news from another counter-offensive operation taking place farther south and west, in the Zaporizhzhia region. Full-frontal fighting along the Orikhiv-Tokmak axis there has been hard going, a military source conceded, with Ukraine taking significant losses of armour and personnel. As per experts, Kyiv's advances in the Donetsk and Zaporizhzhia regions are better measured in yards than miles. However, these are still early days. Both Russia and Ukraine have not yet committed their reserves and the most important fighting may not occur for another week or so.

On the eve of the NATO defence ministers meeting in Brussels on 15 Jun 2023, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said that financial and military aid is making a difference on the battlefield as Ukraine's highly anticipated counteroffensive begins. During the meeting, NATO members committed to providing additional military equipment to Ukraine.

Seoul's New National Security Strategy

The Yoon Suk-yeol administration released its official National Security Strategy (NSS) on Jun 08, 2023. In line with Seoul's Indo-Pacific Strategy promulgated in December 2022, NSS identifies the Republic of Korea as a “Global Pivotal State Contributing to Freedom, Peace, and Prosperity”. The newly released National Security Strategy (NSS) takes the Indo-Pacific Strategy forward and strives to provide a normative roadmap that a global pivotal state would require. According to the NSS document, the three main objectives include enhancing the



safety of South Korean citizens, establishing peace on the peninsula, and laying the foundation for East Asia’s prosperity.

The document to some extent echoes the NSS issued by the conservative Lee Myung-bak administration almost 15 years ago, which was titled ‘Global Korea’. While the 2009 NSS was much slimmer at 39 pages than this year’s 107-page treatise, the previous NSS had acted as a guidebook for Korea to assume a more influential role on the international stage.

The NSS identifies North Korean nuclear threats as the top security challenge. “The most pressing [security challenge] is North Korea’s continued advancement of its nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction capabilities,” the new National Security Strategy states, referring

to Pyongyang’s focus on “operational deployment of tactical nuclear weapons and even the possibility of pre-emptive nuclear strikes.”

The assessment of the security environment in Section 2 deviates from the standard practice of starting with the situation on the Korean peninsula and leaves it to the last. The section instead begins with an assessment of the global security environment, noting that ‘crises that would typically occur over centuries are unfolding simultaneously’. Recognising the eroding distinction between the global and local and the increasing connections between security and prosperity, it cites as key challenges external trends like the US-China rivalry, supply-chain disruptions—akin to national survival for a trading nation like South Korea—and non-traditional security threats.

Sections 3, 4 and 5 outline how Seoul plans to address these challenges: by strengthening its alliance with the United States and its strategic partnerships, stepping up its contributions to strengthening the international order, and improving its military capabilities. Section 6 addresses the inter-Korean relationship covers enhanced military deterrence measures and strengthened human rights advocacy for the North Korean people including attempts at pragmatic engagement with the North.

The coping strategies draw on related policy documents including the December 2022 *Strategy for a Free, peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific region* and the 2022 defence white paper.

The strategy places particular emphasis on enhancing cooperation with the United States and Japan, the two partners Yoon has placed the most value on since coming to power last year. For example, one of the core defence tenets cited in the document is to “establish a comprehensive defence posture grounded in the solid ROK-US alliance”, using the official Republic of Korea nomenclature.

Regarding Japan, the document explains that “as trilateral security cooperation among Korea, Japan, and the United States grows increasingly important to counter North Korean nuclear and missile threats, there is a compelling need to transform the deteriorated Korea–Japan relationship into a forward-looking, cooperative partnership.” The strategy does make mention, albeit briefly, of increasing cooperation with partners in the Middle East, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the European Union and Africa.

There exists manifest tension in Seoul’s posture towards China and Russia. The NSS states that South Korea aims to “cultivate a healthier and more mature relationship built on mutual respect and reciprocity” with China. However, relations with China under Yoon have been tense, plumbing a new low in April when the South Korean president referred to Taiwan as a “global issue” comparable to North Korea. Similarly, Korea ‘resolutely condemns’ Russia’s invasion of Ukraine while also wanting to ‘maintain stable relations’ with Moscow. Seoul sees Moscow and Beijing as forming a bloc with Pyongyang.

Overall, the Yoon administration’s NSS has set out an ambitious vision for Korea’s place in the world that tries to look beyond its immediate surroundings.

China backs Iran in forming a joint naval force with Saudi Arabia, UAE and Oman

On 3 June 2023, Iranian navy commander Shahram Irani said that Iran and Saudi Arabia, along with six other countries — namely the UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, Iraq, Pakistan and India — plan to form a naval coalition in the northern Indian Ocean. “The countries of the region have today realized that only cooperation with each other brings security to the area,” Irani added. However, the Iranian navy commander did not elaborate on the shape of this prospective joint naval force, which he claimed would be formed soon.

It is noteworthy that none of the other countries reportedly named by Iran as being part of the upcoming “naval force” have issued any official response in this regard yet. China’s foreign minister’s spokesman Wang Wenbin, when asked to give a reaction to the US terming Tehran’s proposed naval alliance involving India and Pakistan as ‘defying reason’, stated that China “supports regional countries in resolving disputes and cultivating good-neighbourliness and friendship through dialogue and consultation. We also support regional countries in seeking development through solidarity and keeping their future firmly in their own hands”.



West Asia figures prominently in China's Global Security Initiative concept paper released in February this year which calls for the establishment of a "new security framework" for West Asia. It reaffirmed Chinese President Xi Jinping's invitation to Gulf States to join his country's Global Security Initiative (GSI) during the China-Gulf Cooperation Council summit in December 2022, where he said "China will continue to firmly support GCC countries in safeguarding their security, and support the efforts by regional countries to resolve differences through dialogue and consultation and to build a Gulf collective security architecture".

Earlier in March 2023, Beijing successfully mediated talks between Tehran and Riyadh that led to the Persian Gulf littoral states' signing of a deal enabling the restoration of their diplomatic ties. Commentators have argued that the Persian Gulf states' consent to Beijing's mediation in such sensitive matters serves to indicate China's growing influence in the region as opposed to Washington's waning clout.

It is curious to note that Iran's bold claim came soon after the UAE foreign ministry declared on its website on 31 May 2023 that it has withdrawn from the US-led Combined Maritime Forces of 34 nations, which currently operates in Gulf waters and the Red Sea. It noted that "as a result of our ongoing evaluation of effective security cooperation with all partners, the UAE withdrew its participation in the Combined Maritime Forces two months ago." A U.S. Navy spokesperson indicated that the UAE had withdrawn "their participation for the moment in the task forces but not their overall membership".

The UAE's withdrawal from the US-led naval alliance comes amid renewed concerns about Iran threatening maritime traffic in the Strait of Hormuz. In the last two months, Iran's IRGC Navy seized two oil tankers, one of them was bound for Fujairah in the UAE. Iran is widely seen to be retaliating against the US seizure of Suez Rajan, which had been under scrutiny since last year following claims that it took on board a cargo of Iranian oil, then intended for China, from another ship near Singapore. The UAE's withdrawal from the CMF therefore, is aimed at ensuring that the UAE is not in the crossfire of the escalating shadow tanker war between Iran and the US.