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Ukraine War Update, 16-31 Aug 2023

While Ukraine's counteroffensive, in its third month, has not lived up to the heightened expectations it inspired, there are signs that things could be speeding up. There has been some notable progress on the Southern front. The thrust of Ukraine's attack now appears to be focused south of the city of Zaporizhzhia. On 28 August, Ukraine's military said on Monday that its forces had retaken the southern village of Robotyne. The capture of Robotyne, a small village along the main axis of attack, is not a grand prize itself, but it means that Ukrainian troops have at last reached the so-called Surovikin line, the first layer of minefields, tank traps, trenches and bunkers installed by the Russians. The ultimate target of the thrust to Robotyne is the city of Melitopol, about 45 miles farther south, and more layers of Russian defences lie in the way. The Ukrainians appear to be on the verge of a breakthrough since beyond this point Russia's defences are expected to be shallower.

As of 31 Aug, Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations near Bakhmut in Donetsk Oblast and in western Zaporizhzhia Oblast. Ukrainian Authorities reported that its forces have achieved unspecified success in the direction of Novodanylivka-Novoprokopivka (5km to 13km south of Orikhiv) in western Zaporizhzhia Oblast and the Bakhmut direction.

Since early August, Ukraine has increased the bombardment of Russian forces with its high-precision weapons prioritizing attacks on command-and-control centres, aircraft and logistic hubs. The latest push has compelled Ukraine to commit some of its reserves i.e. equipment, men and munitions. However, whether the Ukrainian slow slog could pave the way to a sudden surge remains an open question.

On 18 Aug 2023, The United States approved the transfer of F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine from Denmark and the Netherlands as soon as pilot training gets completed. Kyiv has actively sought the US-made F-16 fighter jets to help it counter Russian air superiority. Training had begun for Ukrainians to operate US F-16 fighter jets but it would take at least six months and possibly longer. Officials hope pilots will be ready by early 2024.

Ukraine has also begun discussing with Sweden the possibility of receiving Gripen jets to boost its air defences, President Zelenskiy said on 19 Aug after meeting Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson. Zelenskiy also said that Ukrainian pilots had already begun training on the planes. The two leaders announced that the two countries agreed to strengthen cooperation on the production, training and servicing of Swedish CV-90 infantry fighting vehicles.

On 23 Aug, Yevgeny Prigozhin and nine other key figures in the Wagner group died in a plane crash near Moscow exactly two months after he led a mutiny against the Russian state. While the death of Prigozhin was widely perceived as



retribution, the Kremlin spokesperson vehemently denied such speculation, calling Western intelligence assessments “an absolute lie”.

Earlier on 23 August, General Sergei Surovikin, who had served as commander of Russian forces in Ukraine until demotion in January, was relieved as commander of Russia’s air and space forces. General Surovikin was closely associated with Mr. Prigozhin and had come under suspicion of aiding the mutiny or having foreknowledge of it. The general was reported to have been under house arrest after the Wagner mutiny.

The cause of the crash is not yet known and is being investigated by Russian authorities. On 29 Aug, Russia informed Brazil's aircraft investigation authority that it will not probe the crash of the Brazilian-made Embraer jet under international rules "at the moment". According to experts, Mr Prigozhin’s death is not likely to have any significant effect on the front lines in Ukraine.

On August 30th Ukraine launched what appeared to be its most extensive drone assault on Russian territory yet, with attacks on six regions. In the western city of Pskov, drones reportedly hit an airport, damaging four IL-76 transport planes. Earlier on 25 Aug, Ukraine attacked a Russian military base deep in Crimea with a swarm of drones.

During the last fortnight, Ukrainian drones and missiles have repeatedly targeted Russian fuel depots, logistics, ammunition dumps and delivery routes often deep in Russian territory. In retaliation, Russia has also intensified aerial strikes on Ukraine's territory targeting key infrastructure.

Ukrainian officials say their military is now using a long-range missile that was designed and manufactured domestically and can reach targets inside Russia — a potentially crucial capability because the United States and other Western supporters have imposed restrictions on using weapons they donate to strike Russian territory. If confirmed, however, a domestically produced long-range missile would be a threshold development for the Ukrainian military, which has been denied similar weapons by Western backers for fear of provoking Russia.

US-Japan-ROK Camp David trilateral

On the weekend of 17 to 19 August 2023, President Joseph R. Biden Jr. of the United States President Yoon Suk-Yeol of the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, attended a trilateral meeting at the US President’s private retreat in Camp David, Virginia, marking the high point of a long drawn out process of rapprochement between the three powers that began in late 2022 after President Yoon’s election to the office of President.

The groundwork for this meeting was laid earlier in the month when US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met his counterparts in Tokyo and Seoul via virtual means to discuss the modalities of the leaders’ summit, which was initially proposed during the G7 Hiroshima meet. There Blinken talked up the tripartite meeting as heralding a “new era” of the United States’ ties with its two “core

allies” in the East Asian region and signalled a readiness to take trilateral cooperation to a higher level beyond the confinements of a focus on North Korea’s provocations. The subsequent leaders’ summit is seen among policy circles as a step forward, given the fact that China has been quick to issue sharp denunciations of the meeting as the germ of an “Asian NATO”, a label it chooses to apply on all groupings in which the US, but not it, is included.



The meeting itself comprised an hour-long summit between the three leaders, followed by a working lunch. The three leaders then conducted a joint press conference where they declared a “new era of trilateral partnership” in order to maintain the free and open international order based on the rule of law. They agreed to enhance strategic coordination between each other on issues such as North Korean nuclear provocations, unilateral attempts to change the status quo elsewhere in the world, economic security, critical and emerging technologies and supply chain resilience.

The three sides agreed to a “multi-layered and stable” enhancement of the trilateral relationship, starting with annual leaders’ summits as well as an operationalisation of the frameworks put in place in the three outcome documents issued by the leaders: The “Camp David Principles”, which is arguably the foundational document for the trilateral; the “Japan-US-ROK Joint Leaders’ Statement”; and the “Commitment to Consult among Japan, the Republic of Korea and the United States”.

A substantial amount of time was devoted to the US President’s assurances to his counterparts that the US extended nuclear deterrence “umbrella” would continue to remain unfurled in an “ironclad” way, and that joint deterrence and response capabilities would be a key focus. Even as they opened the path of dialogue with North Korea, the three continued to hew closely to their consistent stance of complete denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula.

The outcomes of the summit are somewhat significant, in that they represent tangible goals towards which the three allies can work. With Yoon’s rapprochement with Japan as recent as it is, the summit was an opportunity for Biden to get the US allies working with each other again on issues where cooperation is low-cost, such as North Korea and economic security issues. At the same time, there exists a noticeable gap between the strategic communication issued from Washington and the eventual outcome documents. While the US initially pushed for a “hotline” between the three powers to be set up for use in case of a “contingency” such as in Taiwan, such commitments remained absent from the final text, with officials in Seoul expressing their reservations about explicit commitments to aid US forces in the event of a military intervention. Tokyo too expressed some reservations on the language US officials were using to describe the summit, indicating their disapproval of it being seen as a security alliance in the making.

Several commentators in the West have pointed to the strategic significance of the trilateral summit in an environment where China's aggressiveness, coupled with Russia's actions in Ukraine and North Korea's constant provocation, worsens the security dilemma in Eurasia. In addition, it is difficult to say with any certainty whether the new framework will prove to be long-lasting.

It is far from certain whether President Yoon's entente with Japan will endure given deep-rooted hostility towards Japan in South Korea. On the Japanese side, a conservative future prime minister from the late Shinzo Abe's faction may anger Koreans by visiting Yasukuni Shrine or threatening to repudiate official statements of apology made by previous Japanese administrations. A future president along the lines of Donald Trump may abandon all security commitments to the region.

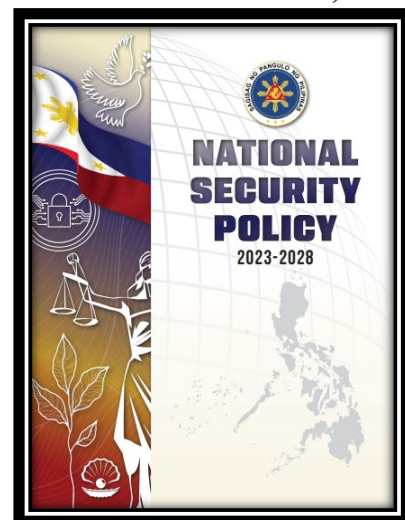
The Philippines' National Security Policy (NSP) 2023-2028

On 10 August, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. approved a fresh five-year national policy which his administration said would help address security challenges by aligning all related strategies. Executive Order (EO) No. 37, signed by Marcos on Thursday and released on Saturday, states that the National Security Policy 2023-2028 (NSP 2023-2028) would "provide guidance and a comprehensive approach to improving security sector governance." NSP 2023-2028 was crafted by the National Security Council (NSC) of the Philippines and aims to provide the guidelines for addressing Manila's national security needs and concerns in the next five years highlighting the crucial connection between security and development".

Modelled on the US National Security Strategy for the US President's term, NSP 2023-2028 is the Philippines' third national security policy document. President Aquino has launched the Philippines' first national security policy titled 'Securing Gains of Democracy' for the period 2011-2016. President Duterte had promulgated the second National Security Policy for the period 2017-2022.

The NSP 2023-2028 contains the strategic policy goals and objectives of the administration to ensure the well-being of Filipinos, as well as protect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Philippines. The NSP aims to complement the medium-term Philippine Development Plan 2023-2028, as well as contribute to the realization of the long-term national dream of a "Matatag, Maginhawa, at Panatag na Buhay" (strong, prosperous and peaceful life) for every Filipino by the year 2040.

The NSP 2023-2028 has identified the following as the country's national security interests: national sovereignty and territorial integrity; political stability, peace, and public safety; economic strength and solidarity; ecological balance and climate change resiliency; national identity, harmony, and culture of excellence; cyber, information, and cognitive security; and regional and international peace



and solidarity. It also identified the following as the country's 15-point National Security Agenda.

The 48-page National Security Policy document highlighted "sharpening strategic competition between the United States and China" and "heightened rivalries among the major powers" as contributing to a "more tense geopolitical landscape". The document also added, "Any military conflict in the Taiwan Strait would inevitably affect the Philippines given the geographic proximity of Taiwan to the Philippine archipelago and the presence of over 150,000 Filipinos in Taiwan."

Such expressions of concern are not new. Earlier in July 2023, Philippine Defense Chief Gilbert Teodoro Jr. stated that the Philippine government is closely monitoring the threat of an invasion of Taiwan by China and preparing for possible contingencies. Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. has also spoken about the Taiwan issue. In an interview with Nikkei Asia in Feb 2023, he said that it would be difficult for the Philippines to avoid getting involved in a potential conflict in the Taiwan Strait, considering its geographical location.

China has sought to deter the Philippines from getting involved in the Taiwan issue. From the Chinese perspective, the Philippines' focus on the Taiwan issue is an attempt to attract more U.S. military assistance and consolidate its tough position toward the South China Sea disputes. As National Security Policy 2023 to 2028 noted, to achieve a credible defence capability, the Philippines will strengthen the mutual defence treaty with the United States.

The NSP also covered government food and energy security priorities and noted that the South China Sea "remains a primary national interest". "The divergences of claims ... claimants' methods of asserting their positions, continue to pose strategic challenges" that endanger territorial integrity and people's rights, said the Philippines, which is in dispute with China over parts of the sea.

NSP proclaims that The Philippines shall stand by its cherished values as a sovereign nation that subscribes to multilateralism and rules-based international order. Regarding South China Sea disputes, NSP argues that the Philippines shall remain steadfast in its commitment to UNCLOS and in upholding the final and binding South China Sea Arbitration Award of 12 July 2016. In addition, the Philippines shall sustain efforts in safeguarding the Philippine maritime zones, especially in the West Philippine Sea and Philippine Rise. This stance is in sharp contrast with the previous NSP 2017-2022 which had argued that "the Philippines will tread prudence on this complex issue and will carefully calibrate its moves to avert costly consequences".

During the last month, bilateral tension has intensified between Manilla and Beijing. The latest dispute happened after the Philippine military accused Chinese coast guard ships of interfering with its supply vessels and spraying Philippine ships with water cannons. To safeguard its maritime interests and push back against China's pressure campaign, Manila announced a series of possible countermeasures last week, including holding joint maritime patrols with the United States by the end of 2023 and providing additional fleets of vessels to escort resupply missions.