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# Strategic Digest

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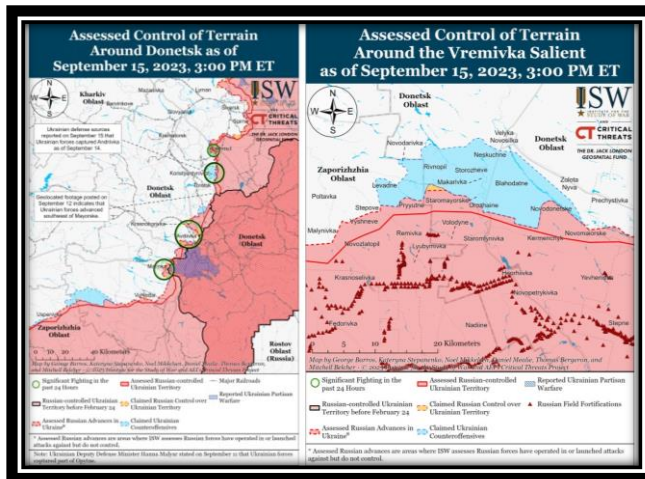
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## Ukraine War Update 01-15 Sep 2023

On 15 September, Ukraine's military said that it had retaken Andriivka, a small eastern farming hamlet that has been repeatedly attacked in recent months. Andriivka is a small farming hamlet about seven miles south of Bakhmut. Since the capture of Bakhmut by Russian Forces in May, Ukrainian forces have been engaged in some of the bloodiest campaigns to drive Moscow's troops from areas to the north and south of the city. The taking of the village of Andriivka, 10 kilometres (6 miles) south of the Russian-occupied city of Bakhmut, underscores just how difficult Ukraine's multipronged counteroffensive is shaping up to be.



In the east and the south, Ukraine is reporting minimal territorial gains after months of intense fighting and heavy losses. Ukrainian forces have not been able to exploit limited gains South after the capture of Robotyne in August. Despite being bolstered by NATO-standard weapons worth billions of dollars, Ukrainian military officials have said there are no quick solutions to puncture Russian defensive lines.

Ukraine's strategy appears to be to spread Russian forces thin across multiple directions along the front line, from vast agricultural tracts in the east to the Dnieper River, which marks the line of contact in the south, in hopes that Ukrainian troops can exploit their opponents' vulnerabilities. However, this strategy has invited criticism as this has prevented Ukraine from concentrating its forces on the main axis of attack in the south, towards the Sea of Azov.

Three months into Ukraine's inching counteroffensive, Russian occupying forces have largely been able to hold their positions, often by learning from past mistakes. They have reconstituted decimated units, swapped in new ones and turned from sweeping attacks to the defence of heavily fortified front lines, showing that despite heavy losses, Moscow is willing to dig in for the long haul and wait for the resolve of Ukraine's Western backers to diminish. The relatively well-ordered defence marks a return to long-standing Russian military doctrine and a shift from the early days of the war when Russia overextended its forces in lumbering advances.

As Ukrainian soldiers struggle to make headway against entrenched Russian troops, the counteroffensive is taking on a new urgency as summer gives way to shorter days, drenching rain and then snow. However, Ukrainian intelligence chief Kyrylo Budanov has asserted that Ukraine's counteroffensive against Russian forces will continue in the coming months, regardless of inclement weather when fighting would be harder to conduct. To counter growing concern over the lack of progress in the Ukrainian counter-offensive, Nato chief Jens Stoltenberg has warned there will be no swift end to the Ukraine war.

On September 3rd President Volodymyr Zelensky said he would replace his defence minister, Oleksii Reznikov, following months of corruption scandals at his department. Reznikov's removal comes after months of speculation that he would be ousted. Although Reznikov has not been charged personally in ongoing corruption investigations and Zelensky did not cite malfeasance in his announcement, several high-profile allegations of graft have plagued the Defense Ministry. Mr Rustem Umerov, a former telecommunications executive, was named as the next minister of defence. Mr. Umerov, 41, a member of the Crimean Tatar ethnic group is Ukraine's first Muslim government minister. Though a member of an opposition political party, he was the chief Ukrainian negotiator of the Black Sea grain deal and a prominent negotiator on prisoner exchanges.

In his first speech as a minister, Umerov announced an audit of the defence ministry and said his operational priority was to prepare the infrastructure for the deployment of dozens of F-16 jets Western partners have donated to Ukraine, seen as crucial for successfully challenging Russia's air superiority. "There will be zero tolerance for corruption in the Ukrainian defence ministry," Umerov stated.

On 13 September, Ukraine struck Russian naval targets and port infrastructure in the Crimean city of Sevastopol, in the biggest attack of the war on the home of the Russian navy's Black Sea fleet. As per Ukrainian intelligence sources, the landing ship Minsk and the submarine Rostov-on-Don had been destroyed in the attack. Both had been undergoing repairs at the time. On 14 September, Ukrainian forces in the Crimean city of Yevpatoria destroyed a Russian air defence complex in an overnight attack using cruise missiles and drones.

In the last few weeks, Ukraine has focused its efforts on Crimea which is a strategically vital logistics hub for Russia's war effort due to its location on the Black Sea. The shift in focus to Crimea also came after Russia allowed the Black Sea Grain Initiative to lapse in July.

### Growing Warmth in Russia-North Korea Ties

In a landmark development, Russian President Vladimir Putin held summit-level talks with his North Korean counterpart Kim Jong-Un at Vostochny in Russia's Far East on 13 September. The event was conspicuous by the apparent bonhomie between the two leaders and their statements affirming an understanding of each other's core concerns amidst their hostile geopolitical environment. This included Kim supporting Russia's ongoing "scared struggle" with Putin reciprocating Kim's overtures by equating bilateral ties with the proverb of "an old friend being better than two new ones". The summit, inevitably, signals a qualitative improvement in the bilateral relationship.



Notably, the wheels of motion for improving ties appear to have been set last year against the backdrop of Russia and North Korea's growing confrontation with the West. It included Russia vetoing US attempts at imposing new sanctions on North Korea at the UNSC amidst Pyongyang recognising the independence of breakaway Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, now under Russian control. This was followed by the visit of Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu to North Korea in July 2023 and the subsequent exchange of letters between the two heads of state. The letters sought to "build a longstanding strategic relationship in conformity with demand of new era".

It would appear that both tactical and strategic calculations are at play. Inevitably, the ongoing geopolitical pressure by the West on Moscow and Pyongyang seems to be the trigger that has led the two Cold War-era legacy partners to seek new bilateral equations.

For Russia, it would appear that its immediate wish list is the large stockpile of Soviet-designed and, therefore, compatible North Korean munitions to replenish its own being expended in the war in Ukraine. Similarly, Korean industrial manpower could be tapped to make up for the massive conscription that Russia has undertaken. Also, North Korean know-how in circumventing sanctions could be useful amidst Russia's growing Western economic boycott.

Meanwhile, it would be in Russia's interest to distract the US from its commitment to Ukraine. And the Kremlin's support, military or economic, to North Korea, could set the proverbial cat among the pigeons. Russia's support could also be a signal to South Korea and Japan to back down from militarily aiding Kyiv.

For North Korea, Russian support could be vital to prevent the UNSC from taking action against Pyongyang upping the ante in its neighbourhood. Similarly, Russian hard currency, by virtue of North Korean weapons exports, as well as aid in the form of food, energy and machinery could alleviate Pyongyang's economic pain. Crucially, Russian military expertise could help overcome the recent setbacks faced by North Korea in its missile and satellite programme. Kim's visit to Russia's Vostochny spaceport as well as Komsomolsk-on-Amur where a majority of Russia's high-tech Military Industrial Complex (MIC) is located is highly symbolic of the North Korean calculus.

Meanwhile, being courted by Russia puts the limelight firmly on a North Korean leader who has been largely shunned globally. It would also enable Kim to boost his domestic popularity by projecting himself as a statesman.

A robust Russia-North Korea partnership could have an impact on both the European and North East Asian security theatres, highlighting the indivisibility of global security. North Korean ammunition could boost Russia's firepower in Ukraine, thereby helping sustain the ongoing war. Similarly, Russian support could not only embolden Kim but also strengthen the potency of Pyongyang's arsenal. This would, inevitably, heighten the insecurity of both South Korea and Japan, who depend on the US nuclear umbrella, leading to Seoul and Tokyo seeking counter-measures.

As always, the devil lies in the details. And there appear to be certain limits to the partnership. These include the overhang of UNSC sanctions on North Korea which prohibit arms trade as well as reputational damage to Russia in engaging a regime with a history of weapons proliferation. Similarly, Russia would likely be wary of Kim seeking to strike a hard bargain, particularly weapons, which may alter the regional balance of power. This would inevitably pull in China which has in the past appeared to have prioritised strategic stability in the region. And Beijing may not prefer the change in status quo, particularly in the context of any dilution of its unique partnership with Pyongyang.

While all bets are off on the prospects of further deepening of bilateral ties, it would appear that shared convergence as well as caution are likely to drive the relationship.

### The 43rd ASEAN Summit and other Related Summits

Under the Chairmanship of Indonesia, the 43rd ASEAN Summit and other related meetings were held in Jakarta from 4 to 7 September. The Jakarta Declaration on ASEAN Matters: Epicentrum of Growth (ASEAN Concord IV) was adopted at the ASEAN Leaders' Summit which aimed at charting the directions for strengthening



the ASEAN community and making the bloc the focal point of growth. The theme for this year's Summit is aimed at ensuring the continued relevance and centrality of the ASEAN in the evolving regional architecture and the growing divide within the bloc.

The ASEAN Summit reviewed the ongoing implementation of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 under the three pillars of security, economy, and culture-society. Under this, some of the key highlight was the launch of the negotiations and the accompanying endorsement of the Framework for Negotiating Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA). The DEFA along with the ASEAN Blue Economy Framework would propel ASEAN's future economic growth. Other key outcomes of the Summit also include declarations on human rights, gender equality, strengthening food security and nutrition in response to crisis, childhood care and education, and sustainable resilience.

On advancing the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP), outcomes included ASEAN and China committing towards advancing cooperation in the priority areas identified under the AOIP. Further, there were joint statements of the US, and South Korea with ASEAN on the AOIP. This enables the AOIP to become a key platform in promoting the bloc's central role. To add further direction to the

AOIP, Indonesia as Chair organized the ASEAN-Indo-Pacific Forum (AIPF), on 5-6 September, as a side event of the ASEAN-related Summit Meetings. The aim of the AIPF provide a platform for constructive dialogue and identify tangible projects to cooperate between ASEAN countries and the Indo-Pacific.

The ASEAN Summit and other related meetings took place amid an increasingly complex regional and global environment. No major breakthrough was achieved concerning the ongoing political crisis in Myanmar apart from the bloc's commitment to the five-point plan for restoring peace and stability in Myanmar. The bloc also decided that Myanmar won't take over the rotating Chairmanship in 2026, which would now be handed over to the Philippines. The heightened tensions in the South China Sea (SCS) following China's Ministry of Natural Resources publication of a new map on August 28 based on its illegal 9 Dash Lines while also adding new claims along the Indian border sparked sharp reactions from India, Nepal, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Taiwan. The ASEAN Summit Leaders' Declaration reiterated the need towards achieving an effective and substantive Code of Conduct in the South China Sea that follows international law, including the 1982 UNCLOS.

The 18th EAS held on September 7, witnessed the gathering of leaders and representatives from ASEAN Member States, Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, Russia, and the US, alongside the Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste as an Observer. The Summit witnessed the adoption of the Leaders' Declaration on ASEAN as an Epicentrum of Growth that emphasized ASEAN Centrality and Unity as well as the mainstreaming of AOIP. The EAS countries collectively reaffirmed their commitment towards strengthening the EAS as a forum for dialogue and cooperation on a wide spectrum of strategic, political, and economic matters of common interest and concern. The Indian Prime Minister at the EAS highlighted the importance of ASEAN centrality and reaffirmed India's full support for the AOIP. PM Modi emphasized the pivotal role of the EAS in implementing the "Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative" and noted the complementary nature of the QUAD's positive agenda with ASEAN's various mechanisms.

The various summits held between ASEAN and its dialogue partners witnessed the establishment of a Strategic Partnership with Canada and a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with Japan. Morocco became a new Sectoral Dialogue Partner and the Netherlands as a Development Partner of ASEAN. At the 20th ASEAN-India Summit held on September 7, the Indian Prime Minister presented a 12-point proposal for strengthening cooperation. This broadly covered connectivity, digital transformation, trade and economic engagement, addressing contemporary challenges, people-to-people contacts and deepening strategic engagement. Two Joint Statements, one on Maritime Cooperation, and the other on Food Security were adopted at the Summit. Both sides held extensive discussions on further strengthening the ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and charting its future course while also agreeing to complete the review of the ASEAN-India FTA (AITIGA) in a time-bound manner.