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Ukraine War Update, 16-30 Sep 2023

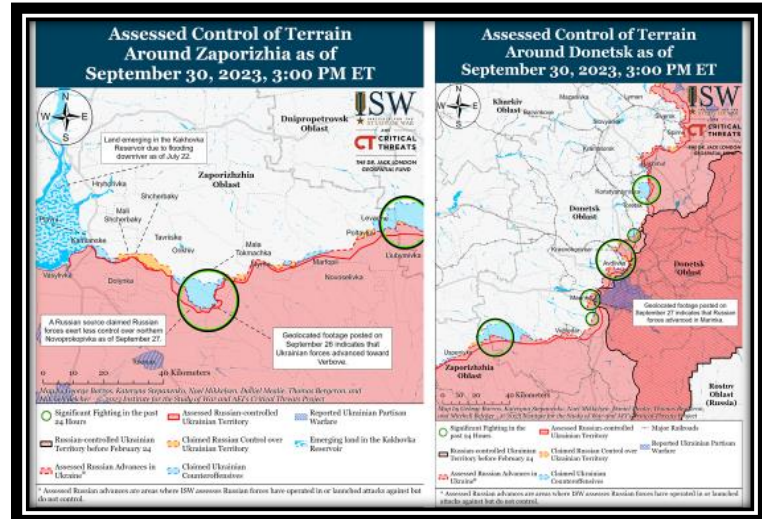
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Ukraine War Update, 16-30 Sep 2023

After the capture of Robotyne, the Ukrainian offensive maintained its offensive momentum. On 23 September, Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Commander Brigadier General Oleksandr Tarnavskiy stated in an interview with CNN published on September 23 that Ukrainian forces achieved a “breakthrough” on the left flank near Verbove and that Ukrainian forces continued advancing. However, the tactical situation in Verbove remained unclear amid continued Ukrainian offensive operations in western Zaporizhzhia Oblast. Despite continuous offensive, Ukrainian forces gained limited ground in the Bakhmut area. Ukrainian forces marginally advanced near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhzhia Oblast on September 27.

As of 30 Sep 2023, Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in western Zaporizhzhia Oblast and near Bakhmut. On the other hand, Russian forces conducted offensive operations near Kupyansk, Kreminna, Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, and in the Donetsk-Zaporizhzhia Oblast border area and marginally advanced along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.



With winter approaching and just a few weeks of fighting left in the current season, the Ukrainian counteroffensive has stalled. Russian defence has proven to be rather resilient in fending off Ukrainian attacks. Ukraine has gained only 32 square kilometres in the south over the two weeks.

With the ground offensive all but stalled, Ukraine has opened up another front in Crimea through drone and missile attacks. On September 13th a strike on the Sevmorzavod dry dock in Sevastopol took out an amphibious landing ship and one of just six kilo-class submarines capable of launching cruise missiles near the Ukrainian shore. A day later drones and Ukrainian cruise missiles destroyed the Russian S-400 air-defence system. On September 23rd, a day after the strike on the headquarters, another salvo of cruise missiles hit a pier in Sevastopol. Slowly, and methodically, Ukraine is chipping away at Russia’s Crimean firepower. The attack on Crimea aims to undermine Russian logistics support in the Zaporizhzhia region to the northeast of Crimea. In addition, with the Russian Black Sea fleet in disarray, Ukraine aims to protect its vital shipping lane in the Black Sea.

Russia has been responding in kind, launching several waves of overnight drone attacks during the last fortnight. The tit-for-tat of deep drone strikes and missile attacks is likely to continue into the winter, as the ground war bogs down.

During his maiden in-person speech at UNGA on 19 Sep 2023, President Zelensky unveiled a plan to end the nearly seven-month war between Russia and Ukraine. The five-point plan urged world powers to punish Russia and surge military aid to Kyiv in an effort to force Moscow forces out of occupied areas of Ukraine. The remarks were an implicit rebuke of non-Western and developing countries who called on Ukraine and Russia to immediately engage in a negotiated end to the conflict. Zelensky said Ukraine would regain its territory but that it would take time and require military force. He renewed his demands for nations to send military aid to Ukraine so that it could repel Russia's better-equipped forces.

In sharp contrast to Hero's welcome which President Zelensky had received, the mood in Washington was a little sombre amid a slow-moving and so far inconclusive counteroffensive on which many hopes in the war had been pinned. President Biden announced another \$325 million in military assistance to Ukraine during the meeting and assured Zelensky that the U.S. would "continue to stand" with his country as the war with Russia continues. Ukraine had sought far more aid than was announced during Biden Zelensky's meet on 21 September.

On 30 September, Vladimir Putin signed a decree setting out the routine autumn conscription campaign, calling up 130,000 citizens for statutory military service. Separately, Putin reportedly met Andrei Troshev, formerly a top Wagner mercenary commander, to discuss how voluntary fighting units are used in the war in Ukraine, the Kremlin said on Friday. The meeting underscored the Kremlin's attempt to show that the state had now gained control over the mercenary group after a failed June mutiny by Wagner chief Yevgeny Prigozhin, who was killed in a plane crash in August. Earlier during the week, Russia announced its plan to raise defence spending by almost 70% next year, funnelling massive resources into its Ukraine offensive to fight what it calls a "hybrid war" unleashed by the West.

2nd US-Pacific Island Leaders Forum- Washington pledges to prioritise Pacific Islands Needs



President Joe Biden hosted the second Pacific Island Leaders summit in Washington DC, announcing a new diplomatic presence in the Cook Islands and Niue. DC has doubled down on increasing engagement in this strategic geography, pledging to "help islanders fend off" China's "economic coercion". The joint declaration from the dialogue resolved to build on the opening summit declaration to strengthen the partnership and a shared vision for a region where "democracy

will be able to flourish.” Both sides have also agreed to hold another summit in 2025 and political engagements every two years thereafter.

Importantly, Biden has pledged to work with Congress to provide \$200 million more in funding for projects in the region aimed at mitigating the effects of climate change, spurring economic growth, countering illegal fishing and improving public health- all of which have been highlighted by the region as existential crises. The White House in 2022 said the U.S. would invest more than \$810 million in expanded programs to aid the Pacific islands however media has reported that Congress had yet to approve most of the funding pledges made last year.

Remember President Biden hosted an inaugural summit of 14 Pacific island nations a year ago and was to meet them again in Papua New Guinea in May. However, that meeting was scrapped when a U.S. debt-ceiling crisis forced Biden to cut short an Asia trip. However since then, many senior US govt representatives including Secretary Blinken have made trips to the Pacific Island Countries, negotiating diplomatic presence and renewing Compact of Free Association (COFA) accords with three island states Palau, Micronesia and Marshall Islands under which it retains responsibility for their defence and provides economic assistance while gaining exclusive access to huge strategic swathes of the Pacific in return. Renewing these agreements has become a key part of U.S. efforts to push back against China's bid to expand its influence in the Pacific. However these have not been without problems: since 2022 more than 100 arms-control, environmental and other activist groups urged the Biden administration to formally apologize to the Marshall Islands for the impact of massive U.S. nuclear testing there and to provide fair compensation.

While 18 representatives from the Pacific Island Forum Members attended the summit, all were not at leader level proving that China's shadow looms large in the region. Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare, who has deepened ties with China, did not attend, signalling that Washington appears to have made no progress on offers of substantial infrastructure funding and expanded aid to the Solomons. Sogavare meanwhile had visited China in July this year, announcing a policing agreement with Beijing that builds on a security pact signed last year.

Similarly, politics in the Pacific Island nation of Vanuatu, located east of Australia, has been turbulent, with consequences for the U.S.-Australia alliance. Analysts have speculated on the China factor in the recent abrupt expulsion of the 10-month-old government led by then-Prime Minister Alatoi Ishmael Kalsakau. In late August, Kalsakau lost a vote of no confidence against him by opposition leader Bob Loughman, who has for years backed China's increasing influence in the Pacific nation. While the government struggles with a poor economy and unemployment the main trigger for the latest political crisis was a security agreement with Australia signed by Kalsakau in December 2022 and due for parliamentary ratification. Vanuatu is one of many Pacific Island states that do not have their armed forces and depend on military assistance from bilateral partners when needed. It is speculated that for Loughman, the unratified bilateral pact, which would increase military and law enforcement, but also disaster and

humanitarian relief and cybersecurity cooperation with Australia, could have risked Vanuatu's relations with China. New Prime Minister Kilman claimed there had been a lack of consultation about the pact with ministers even though discussions about the agreement had been occurring between Australia and successive governments in Vanuatu for five years.

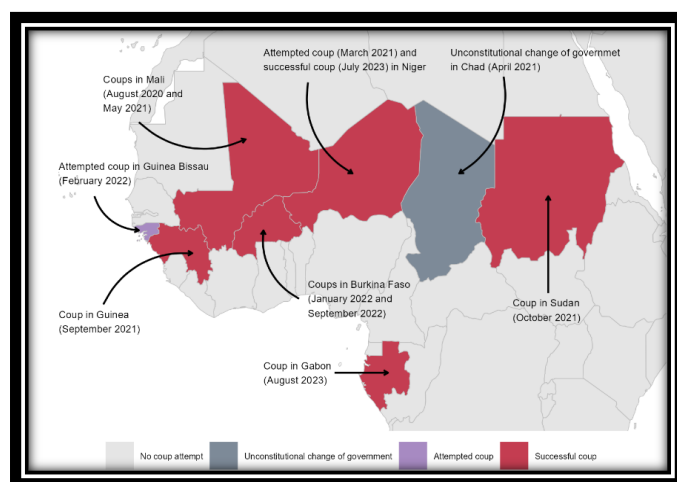
There is no doubt that Pacific Island leaders are opposed to being parties in the regional U.S.-China rivalry and are reasserting their rights of sovereignty above all else. At the G7 summit in May 2023, PIF reflected on the priorities and agency of the region saying " We've all got a common enemy that we have to fight and that's climate. For every dollar we put into other areas, we're losing out on an ability to combat the impacts of climate change."

Current dynamics in Africa's Sahel region

Over the last six decades, Africa has been one of the most coup-prone regions of the world owing to several reasons including ineffective systems of governance that lack the public credibility and capacity to prevent violent conflicts, ineffective democratic systems, endemic poverty, foreign interference, harsh climatic conditions, and unconstitutional extension of presidential term-limits. On August 30th, 2023, Gabon became the seventh country in a growing list of countries that have experienced successful military coup d'états when its Armed Forces overthrew President Ali Bongo.

The landmass of the countries under military rule in the Sahel region including Niger, Mali, Guinea, Chad, Sudan, and Burkina Faso stretches 3500 miles and forms the world's longest corridor of military rule, termed by commentators a "coup belt". The causes and perceptions of these coups vary significantly. Yet while some coups have attracted international condemnation, others have not. Citizens have celebrated these populist military takeovers with media clips surfacing in some instances which showed people waving the Russian flag.

The current regional dynamics in Africa's Sahel region are both unique and complicated in several ways. On one hand, there is an active threat of terrorism and violent extremism. According to the United Nations, between 1 January to 30 June 2023, the region recorded 1,814 incidents of terrorist attacks resulting in several casualties. The waters of the Gulf of Guinea are now considered to be most susceptible to the threats posed by piracy. The region is also facing a humanitarian crisis with nearly 6.3 million displaced persons and half a million refugees.



It is useful to note that once these coups are conducted, the military officers appear on live television and make statements justifying the takeover of the civilian government. However, the reasons and rhetoric provided are targeted more towards the international community rather than domestic consumption. The justifications provided in their initial declarations are often very different from when they enumerate in their local languages.

Individual coup leaders have personal ambitions and goals when they pursue coups. They often incorporate the anti-imperialist narrative because it gives them legitimacy and helps them garner public support. However, despite all their anti-colonial posturing, these new military regimes lack ideological grounding and political direction. There is little evidence to suggest military takeovers are ideal vehicles for promoting solid economic growth and development.

One major factor driving these slews of coups is the rising anti-French sentiment and waning Western influence in the region. The European Union's (EU) involvement in training military personnel in the Sahel did not result in the expected outcomes. EU has spent nearly USD 645 million on civilian missions and training in the Sahel over the years. This resulted in the training of 30,000 members of security forces and 18,000 military personnel in Mali and Niger. However, this did not serve to consolidate local armed forces that support the democratic governments but rather served the armed forces and military officials that ultimately overthrew democratically elected government leaders. The anti-French vitriol is not just a legacy of French colonialism (termed as *Francafrique*) or the failure of French security personnel to address the root causes of insecurity and curb violent extremism, but also due to the legacy of French economic policy towards its former colonies. Seven of the nine Francophone states in West Africa continue to use the CFA franc, which is pegged to the Euro and guaranteed by France, as their currency.

The situation in the Sahel continues to remain perilous. Foreign military intervention by France or the USA, or domestic military intervention through the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), which was established by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), remain on the cards. France's decision to delay the withdrawal of its 1,500 security personnel from Niger only served to make France more unpopular among Nigeriens. In response, the military leaders of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso signed a mutual defence pact, known as the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) which is established under the Lipkato-Gourma Charter. Under the pact, these three nations aim to establish an architecture of collective defence and mutual assistance. However, such a defence pact is tailored more towards fending off external intervention than tackling pressing security challenges. Militants already seem to be capitalising on the rushed departure of the United Nations peacekeeping mission MINUSMA from Mali and now the departure of French forces from Niger.

The actual possibility of a full-scale foreign or domestic military intervention is the worst possible outcome for the security and stability of the West African region. Only by bringing all the involved parties to the high table of diplomacy can any enduring solution to the political and security crisis in the Sahel be achieved.