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Ukraine War Update, 16-31 Oct 2023

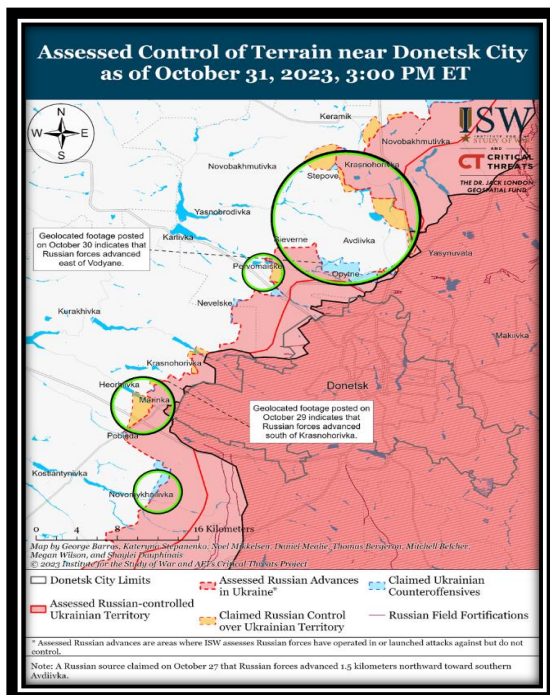
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Ukraine War Update, 16-31 Oct 2023

With the Ukrainian summer offensive stalling, Russia launched a new ground offensive in Ukraine, in mid-October, seeking to gain momentum in the gruelling fight of attrition in the East Ukraine. During the last fortnight, Russian forces have zeroed in on the eastern industrial city of Avdiivka and have used multi-wave attack, airdropped bombs and heavy artillery to try to overwhelm Ukrainian forces and encircle them. While this heavy attritional battle remains inconclusive, Russian forces are believed to have suffered some of the country's biggest casualty rates so far this year.

As per some estimates, Russia had committed elements of up to eight brigades to the Avdiivka sector in the ongoing offensive. Nearly three weeks into the battle, the Russian army has failed to make the swift breakthrough it wanted. It has lost



hundreds of men and more than 100 armoured vehicles and tanks as per the assessment of the Institute for the Study of War. In the main direction of the attacks, it has advanced barely a mile, and in other places only a few hundred yards. As per Ukrainian media reports, Ukraine's 110th Brigade destroyed 200 Russian vehicles and killed 800 Russians in the last two weeks. On 27 October, Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, claimed that Russian forces had lost at least a brigade's worth of troops attempting to advance on Avdiivka.

Over the past nine years, Avdiivka has become a bastion of Ukraine's defence in the east. The city stands a few miles from

Donetsk, the largest city of the Russian-controlled eastern provinces, well within range of its airport and main installations. The city has significant strategic value since its fall would push Ukrainian forces back from the threshold of Donetsk and open up the main rail and road routes for Russian forces in the area.

Some of the most intense fighting is taking place near Kupyansk, a city on the Oskil River, just 25 miles from the border with Russia. As per Ukraine's Ground Force Commander, the situation had "worsened significantly" and Russia was aiming to encircle Kupyansk and to reach the river, which cuts through the city. The city and the surrounding area have been under near-constant bombardment since Ukrainian troops recaptured Kupyansk in September 2022.

President Zelensky on 17 October confirmed that Kyiv used US-supplied long-range ATACMS missiles (Army Tactical Missile Systems) on the battlefield against Russian forces. The comments come after Kyiv's military said Ukrainian forces struck airfields in Russian-held territory in eastern and southern Ukraine,

destroying helicopters, knocking out an air defence missile launcher and damaging runways. Ukraine said it carried out “well-aimed strikes on enemy airfields” near the eastern city of Luhansk and the southern city of Berdiansk overnight.

The version of the ATACMS missile sent to the Ukrainians, in what officials said were small numbers, is a cluster munition that dispenses 950 small bomblets that can do damage over a wide area. The ATACMS missiles are the second type of cluster weapon the U.S. is known to have provided to Ukraine. In July, the Biden administration began supplying Ukraine with 155-millimetre artillery shells that each contain 72 smaller submunitions designed for destroying armoured vehicles and enemy soldiers.

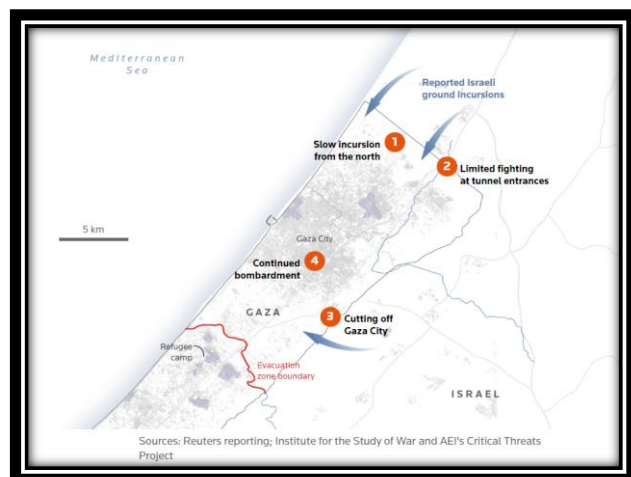
The Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orban met President Putin on the sideline of the Belt and Road Forum meeting in Beijing, China. During the meeting, both sides reaffirmed their commitment to bilateral ties amid international tensions over the war in Ukraine. During the meeting, Orban told Putin that Hungary - which has opposed many EU initiatives to support Ukraine in resisting Moscow's forces and gets most of its crude oil and gas from Russia - has never wanted to oppose Russia and is trying to salvage bilateral contacts.

While the meeting was broadly criticized by the EU, Viktor Orban defended his right to meet Putin during the European Council summit in Brussels on 26 October. The French president, Emmanuel Macron, condemned the Hungarian leader Viktor Orbán's recent meeting and handshake with Vladimir Putin.

During the Summit, the European Council outlined plans to seize the profits from frozen Russian assets and direct billions of euros to support Ukraine. In a set of formal public conclusions after the culmination of an EU leaders' summit, it said that “extraordinary revenues held by private entities stemming directly from Russia's immobilised assets” could be directed to support Ukraine and its recovery.

Israel Prepares the Ground for Invading Gaza

In the two weeks since the October 7, 2023 terrorist strikes that shook Israel, the Israel Defence Force (IDF) has conducted thousands of air strikes in the Gaza Strip to take out Hamas military infrastructure. The IDF contends that the northern part of Gaza contains key military nodes of Hamas, including its headquarters. In the immediate aftermath of the terrorist strikes, after the remnants of the terror modules within Israeli



territory were eliminated, the IDF put out posters urging residents of northern Gaza to move towards the south of the enclave, beyond the Gaza River. The IDF even charged that Hamas was physically preventing such movement in order to maximise civilian casualties and turn world opinion against Israel.

The massive bombardment of targets inside the Gaza Strip has led to significant loss of lives. More than 8,000 Palestinians have died, while the Israeli casualties stand at over 1,400, including more than 330 IDF soldiers. Over 230 hostages still remain in Hamas custody, even as a couple of American citizens have been released. The Hamas spokespersons have stated that these hostages can be released in return for the release of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails.

The bombing at the Al-Ahli hospital on October 18 led to charges of war crimes against Israel, which were vehemently denied by the IDF by releasing video footage and intercepted phone conversations of Hamas militants indicating that the strike was most probably the result of a failed rocket launch.

The IDF insisted that Israel continued to follow the principles of distinction between non-combatants and combatants, military necessity as well as proportionality in executing its war aims. Even so, the rising civilian casualties led to criticism of Israeli military action by the UN Secretary-General and countries like China.

To ease humanitarian suffering, around 20 aid trucks were allowed to enter Gaza from the Rafah crossing on October 21. The UNRWA Chief noted that the numbers were not sufficient to address humanitarian issues as nearly 500 trucks used to enter the Gaza Strip every day before the start of the military conflict between Hamas and Israel. As on October 29, more than 80 aid trucks delivered essential items to Gaza residents.

The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) meanwhile on October 26 adopted a Jordanian resolution that called for a humanitarian truce between Israel and Hamas. The resolution was passed overwhelmingly with 120 countries voting in favour while 14 voted against. 45 countries including India abstained. A Canadian amendment seeking to name Hamas was rejected.

While India's vote was the subject of domestic debate, it is a fact that India has maintained a consistent and principled stand vis-à-vis the Palestinian conflict as well as regarding the current conflict between Israel and Hamas, which is a designated terrorist group by the US, the UK, EU, among others. India has also sent relief materials and medicines to people in the Gaza Strip via Egypt in the aftermath of the October 7 terrorist strikes. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has also spoken with the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Egypt's President, among other regional leaders.

As for Israeli military operations, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated on October 27 that the second stage of the Gaza military offensive began when IDF made some minor incursions into the Gaza Strip. Netanyahu and the Israeli

leadership have vowed to eliminate Hamas and have repeatedly asserted that a ground invasion was imperative to achieve this objective. The Israeli prime minister has stated that the current conflict with Hamas was Israel's "second War of Independence" and has stated that this is expected to be a "long war" to "destroy Hamas".

While IDF air strikes are expected to reduce the potential challenge posed by Hamas's underground military infrastructure to a certain extent, the IDF will have to overcome the reality of a difficult urban warfare situation once boots are on the ground. The IDF has also conducted strikes in places like Lebanon and Syria, even as the US is continuing to bolster its force presence in the eastern Mediterranean with two nuclear-powered aircraft carrier battle groups.

The UN Security Council meanwhile is meeting on October 30, at the request of the United Arab Emirates, Israel's Abraham Accords diplomatic partner. While four previous attempts to pass a resolution at the UNSC have not succeeded, the latest attempt is also not expected to produce a resolution critical of Israel.

Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation held in China

China marked the 10th anniversary of the Belt and Road Initiative by convening the 3rd Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (BRFIII) in Beijing. The two-day summit was inaugurated on 17 October and was attended by representatives of more than 150 countries. Reportedly, 20 heads of state and governments including Russian President Vladimir Putin also participated in the Forum. However, there were notable absences as leaders of major Western countries stayed away.



The forum marked the 10th anniversary of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) championed by President Xi Jinping to recreate the fabled Silk Road to boost global trade through enhanced connectivity. The grand gathering took place at a time when great geopolitical upheaval spawned by the conflicts

in Ukraine and the Middle East has sharply polarized the world and widened the chasm between the Collective West and the Global South.

The theme of the third Belt and Road Forum was "High-quality Belt and Road Cooperation: Together for Common Development and Prosperity". The two-day

event was divided into several sessions. Three high-level forums possibly involving the heads of state were held to discuss Connectivity in an Open World Economy, Green Silk Road for Harmony with Nature, and Digital Economy as a New Source of Growth. Subsequently, six forums focusing on Trade Connectivity, Maritime Cooperation, Clean Silk Road, Think Tank Exchanges, People-to-People Bonds, and Subnational Cooperation were conducted. A Chair's Statement on BRF III released to the press after the Forum provided a brief account of the major discussions which were held during the Forum.

The summit sought to dispel the impression that the BRI has lost steam, or that China's lending largesse has waned. President Xi said in his speech at the forum that the BRI has progressed from "sketching the outline" to "filling in the details" as "blueprints have been turned into real projects." China gave assurance for a fresh impetus to the BRI notwithstanding prevailing economic headwinds. Beijing reaffirmed that BRI partners will continue to benefit from China's generosity for quality development.

Focusing on the diplomatic activities that continued in Beijing, Russian President Vladimir Putin's participation in the Forum was widely discussed in the international press. It was opined that Putin's visit to Beijing amidst the raging Ukraine war and international censure of Russia's actions highlighted the diplomatic energy Moscow was expending to maintain the "no-limits partnership" with Beijing. Putin not only declared the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to be consistent with the Russian vision of creating an integrated circuit which will ensure freedom of trade, investment and labour but also held bilateral meetings with Xi to strengthen strategic coordination between the two countries. Further, the visit also denoted Russian support for the alternative international order promoted by the Chinese.

Besides China-Russia strengthening cooperation, China's changed approach to the Belt and Road Project was noteworthy. President Xi Jinping in his speech declared that China will allocate 350 billion yuan each to the China Development Bank and the Export-Import Bank of China. An additional 80 billion yuan will be allocated to the Silk Road Fund. He underscored that the funds will be available based on market and business operations. According to observers, the pledged amount of 780 billion yuan in new financing for the BRI is a modest figure compared to previous years. More importantly, with emphasis on market and business operations Chinese scrutiny of the projects could be higher and Beijing might prefer to pursue projects involving low risk, low-investment and guaranteed returns. Recently, phrases like "small but beautiful" and "small yet smart" have emerged to advance smaller and simpler projects like building solar power plants which involve smaller loans. This stands in marked contrast to earlier policy willingness to fund large rail-road and maritime infrastructure.

After the Summit on 18 October, the Chinese Foreign Minister indirectly referring to the Western counter-initiatives against BRI remarked that while Beijing is willing to align and cooperate but will not shy away from competing.