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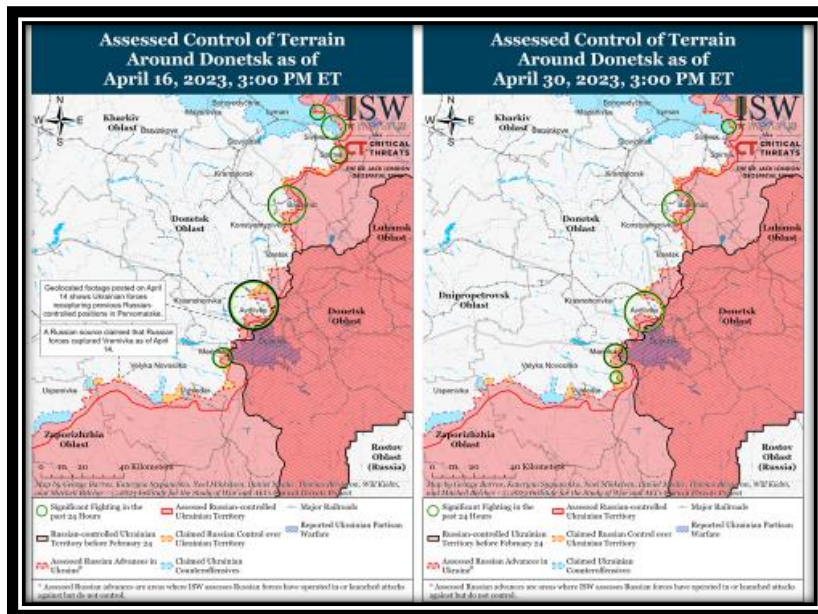
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Ukraine War Update, 16-30 April 2023

Even though Russian forces have incrementally enhanced territory during the fortnight and are assessed to be holding more than 90% of the embattled city of Bakhmut, Kyiv contends that its forces remain engaged in the battle. During the past nine months, the battle for Bakhmut has become the fulcrum of a conflict sans a definite breakthrough for either side. While the Russian forces seem to be on the cusp of a breakthrough, Ukraine still claims to be in control of key supply routes to the city.



Ukraine's top military command said in its daily update on 30 April 2023 that its forces had repelled 58 Russian attacks over the past day along the part of the frontline stretching from Bakhmut through Avdiivka and on to Maryinka further south in the Donetsk region. On the other hand, the Russian Wagner group which have been spearheading the Russian attack on

Bakhmut, complained that his fighters lacked ammunition. In an interview with Russian media on 29 May 2023, Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin threatened to withdraw Wagner forces from Bakhmut if the Russian military command fails to provide more ammunition to the Wagner mercenaries.

On 18 April 2023, Russian President Putin and Ukrainian President Zelensky made duelling trips to Front Line in Ukraine. The visits by the Ukrainian and Russian leaders came as both sought to display strength and confidence ahead of an anticipated Kyiv counteroffensive. President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine visited the embattled eastern town of Avdiivka near Bakhmut to boost the morale of the troops. Mr Putin visited the southern region of Kherson and the eastern Luhansk region, the Kremlin's spokesman, Dmitri S. Peskov, said. It was the Russian leader's second trip close to the front line in a month.

On 26 April 2023, Ukrainian President Zelensky held an hour-long phone call with Chinese President Xi Jinping. This was the first known contact between the two leaders since Russia invaded Ukraine last year which materialized two months after the unveiling of China's proposed peace plan. China's official account of the discussion was notable for its omission of two words: "Russia" and "war." It referred instead to the need for a "political settlement of the Ukrainian crisis," and warned of the danger of nuclear escalation. For his part, Mr Zelensky said the two leaders "had a long and meaningful phone call."

Russian forces attacked Kyiv and several other cities across Ukraine with more than 20 missiles and two drones on 28 April 2023. The bombardment was the first aerial assault on Kyiv in 51 days and came less than 48 hours after Zelenskyy held his first telephone call with China's Xi. While Ukraine claimed that Russian missiles struck civilian areas, the Russian Ministry of Defence claimed that missiles were launched on Ukrainian military concentrations and equipment storage depots. The next day, a fuel depot in the Crimean port of Sevastopol was set ablaze by a drone strike. While Ukrainian officials did not claim responsibility for the drone attack, they argued that the blast was "God's punishment" for a Russian strike on the Ukrainian city of Uman on Friday that killed 23 people.

Ukraine's preparation for the much-discussed counter-offensive seems to be nearing completion. Ukrainian Defense Minister said on 29 April 2023, Oleksii Reznikov Ukraine's forces are nearly ready to launch a counteroffensive against the Russian invaders with weapons from the West, Reznikov said that Western-supplied arms would serve as an "iron fist" in this effort. The day prior, NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg said that alliance members and their partners had delivered over 98% of the combat vehicles pledged to Kyiv. Stoltenberg said the aid provided to Ukraine included over 1,550 armoured vehicles, 230 tanks, and other military hardware, as well as "vast amounts of ammunition." Although Ukraine has deviated from the usual secrecy surrounding military plans by talking openly about the coming battle, it is expected that Ukraine's army will use deception and feints to throw the Russians off balance.

Australia Ambitious Defence Strategic Review meets with mixed responses at home

Key focus areas of DSR include:

- The transition from "balanced force to "integrated force" to harnesses effects across all five domains: maritime, land, air, space and cyber.
- Reformation in the Defence's force design to more effectively operate
- Development of advanced and asymmetric capabilities in key technological areas.
- An enhanced network of bases, ports and barracks across northern Australia
- Increase the workforce
- Delivering the defence equipment timely with relevant capability.
- Minimum viable capability in the shortest possible time.
- A reprioritisation of the Integrated Investment Program to enable new and accelerated capability acquisitions.
- Defence policy development should entail a biennial National Defence Strategy
- Defence indigenisation

Australia's Defense Minister Richard Marles released the public version of the long-awaited Defence Strategic Review (DSR) recently which calls for fundamental changes to the structure of the Australian Defence Force to counter modern and emerging threats.

The 110-page document is considered "the most ambitious review of Defence's posture

and structure since the Second World War,” outlining that a large-scale force buildup without strategic reassurance, together with shorter warning time, risks of military miscalculations, combined with climate change effects, are encroaching on strategic decision-making areas of countries in the region...It notes that ally US, "is no longer the unipolar leader of the Indo-Pacific," and that Australia must manage and work to avert the possibility of serious conflict in the area given China's covert military expansion. Recognising that conflicts and dangers now take on several forms it listed advances that have "radically reduced Australia's geographic benefits" of the "comfort of distance" as cyber warfare, long-range missile attacks, and risks to trade routes.

The thrust of the review is on deterrence, particularly on a strategy of denial through deterrence at a distance which would require Australian investment in stronger defence capabilities as a way “to help deter coercion and lower the risk of conflict.”.According to the DSR, Australia should adopt a "northern approach," making the local area that includes the northeastern Indian Ocean through maritime Southeast Asia into the Pacific its main area of military interest. This approach is a departure from the past focus on the "defence of Australia" doctrine since it was centred on the threat of low-level conflict from small to middle-sized regional powers. The new strategy ‘National Defence’, entails getting ready for "potential threats emerging from major power competition, including the prospect of conflict." In order to do this it delineates a new approach to planning, force posture, force structure, capacity development, and acquisition, as well as a much more comprehensive approach to security by the entire government and nation.

The DSR reiterates Australia's previous stance on "collective security of the Indo-Pacific," but highlights that to maximize deterrence and denial, the Australian Defense Force (ADF) must evolve into a genuine integrated force across all five domains: maritime, land, air, space, and cyber. The review also recommends improving the ADF's ability to operate from Australia's northern bases. Substantively it allocates more funding to long-range missiles in a deterrence-aimed strategy for security. These capabilities according to experts have been given precedence over land-based Army roles, with a focus on preparing the maritime environment to address the strategic challenges centred on the air and sea. This is clear from the emphasis on reducing some acquisitions (howitzers and land combat vehicles) and allocating funds to others (land-to-sea-missiles and landing craft). More long-range shooting weapons (Himars), a continuing naval shipbuilding programme, nuclear-powered submarine acquisition, and land-based maritime strike capabilities are suggested. Along with alternatives to create a local missile industry, the DSR calls for the "rapid establishment of domestic manufacturing" of guided weapons. It also calls for a reform of the Capability Acquisition and Sustainment Group's acquisition policy, labelling it as unsuitable for Australia's current strategic circumstances.

The importance of the alliance with the US and key ally Japan in the Indo-Pacific is maintained and stressed as an effort to maintain a regional balance of power. Emphasis on expanding and cooperation with key players like India, ASEAN, PICs, EU, and UK (through AUKUS) are all highlighted. While the document seemingly looks like a blueprint to counter China's rising influence in the Indo-Pacific, it appears to acknowledge the economic benefits that China's rise has brought for Australia and other Indo-Pacific countries. While the review doesn't mention Taiwan or the Strait crisis it makes implicit references to escalating tensions when it talks about China's "assertion of sovereignty over the South China Sea threatens the global rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific in a way that adversely impacts Australia's national interests".

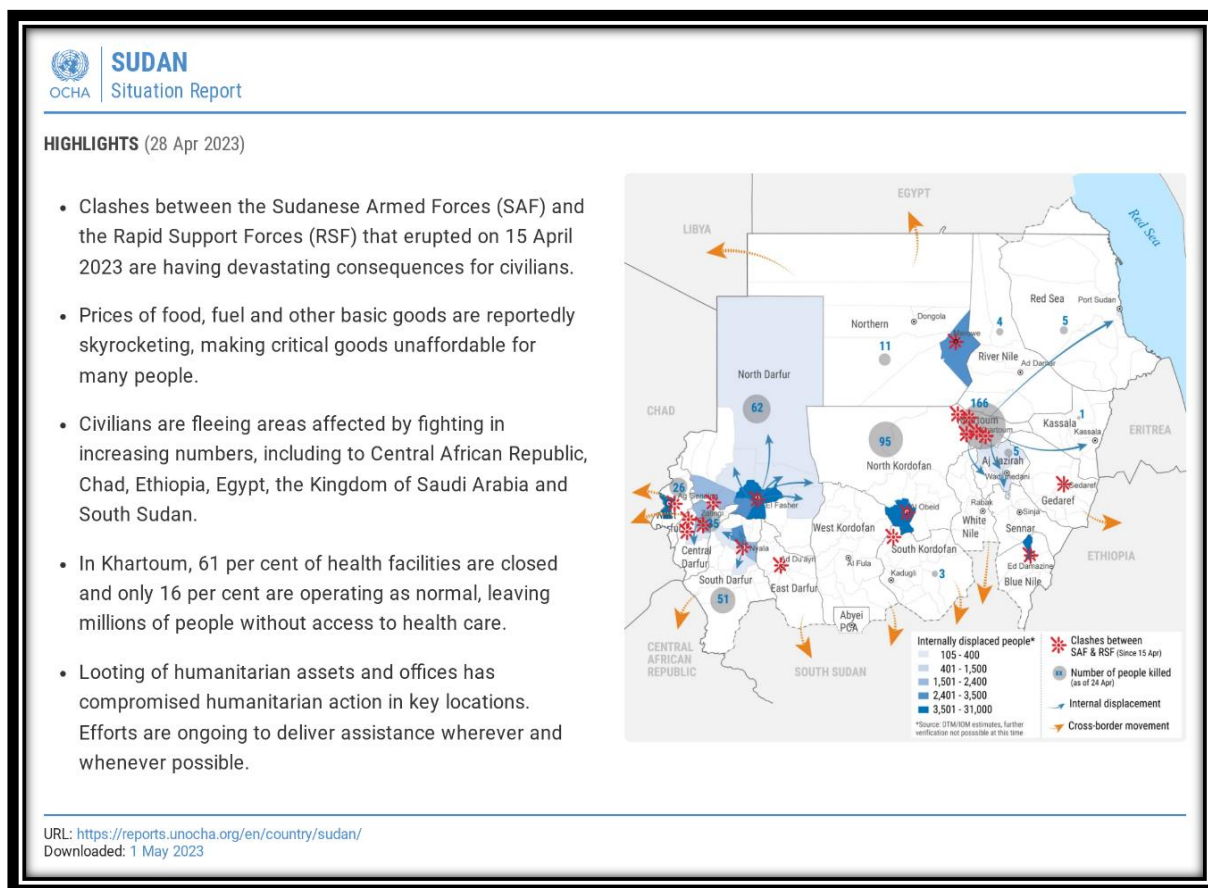
Domestically, the review has received a mixed response with criticism mounting on the Albanese government that while the document makes an ambitious statement, there are no new resource allocations to build this deterrence capability, just re-prioritisation of existing resources/

Intensifying Violence and Political Fragility in Sudan

The ongoing violence in Sudan that erupted on 15 April is rooted in a power struggle between the Sudanese army led by the de-facto ruler Gen. Abdel-Fattah al-Burhan and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a paramilitary group led by Gen. Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo (also known as Hemedti). The political climate in Sudan has been tense since the ousting of President Omar al-Bashir in 2019 with constant tussling between the military and civilian leaders for control of power. Owing to international pressure, a transitional council was set up with an agreement on rotating leadership of the council with 21 months headed by the military and the next 12 by a civilian leader. However, just before the handing over of leadership, Burhan executed a coup ending the transitional government. Pro-military and pro-civilian protests have been taking place in the country. The army was in control with the RSF supporting them to maintain power. The coup was supposed to lead to an election in 2023, however, the Army and RSF have turned against each other engaging in sudden violent clashes resulting in over 420 deaths and thousands wounded. United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres described the situation as "catastrophic" warning that further escalation could have devastating consequences for the country and the region.

The roots of the current crisis lie in former President Bashir's deliberate setting of one security force against another, with rising tensions in recent months. The conflict was triggered by a disagreement on the incorporation of RSF paramilitaries into the Sudanese army, with tensions boiling over when the RSF deployed members around the country and in the capital Khartoum without the Army's permission. Hemedti rose to power in the RSF in the early 2000s. Both Hemedti and Burhan have been criticized for violent crackdowns on pro-democracy activists in 2019 and 2021-23 respectively. The intense clashes and

fighting have already spread to different parts of Sudan threatening the nation's stability and its prospects for democracy. The role of regional actors, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt, has also been a factor. Meanwhile, Russia has established close ties with Hemedti and is on track to finalise an agreement with Sudan for setting up a military base in Port Sudan on the Red Sea.



Since the violent clashes appear to continue, they have sparked a series of evacuation processes by foreign countries amidst failed ceasefires. The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) has called on Kenyan, South Sudanese, and Djiboutian presidents to broker an immediate ceasefire. Several attempts at ceasefires have failed to hold. On 25 April 2023, the U.S. and Saudi Arabia brokered a 72-hour ceasefire (the fourth ceasefire) allowing countries to evacuate their citizens from the area.

There are serious concerns about the possible spillover of the conflict onto Sudan's neighbouring countries such as Chad, South Sudan, and Ethiopia which are already in security crises and political turmoil. This would push the region into further instability. Porous borders aggravate trafficking issues and the risk of a refugee crisis. An unstable Sudan would also disrupt the maritime routes and commerce networks and escalate security threats such as terrorism, civil conflict, humanitarian crises, the collapse of the healthcare system, forced displacement and economic downfall.