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Ukraine War Update, 1-30 April 2024

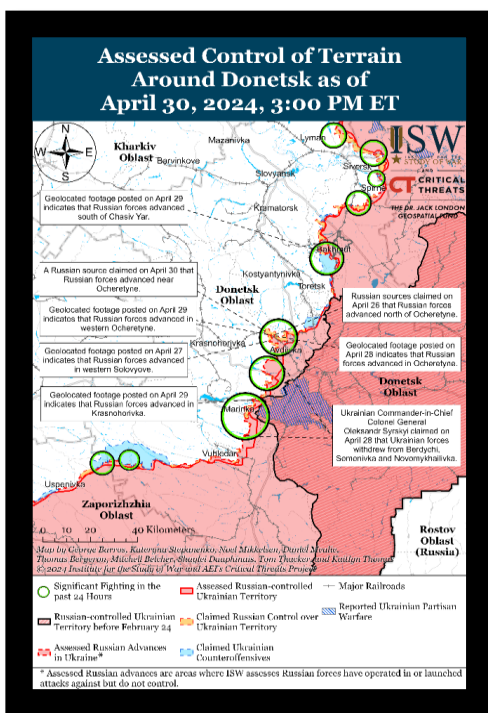
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Ukraine War Update, 1-30 April 2024

During April, Ukraine’s Eastern Front particularly in Donetsk region faced sustained Russian Offensive. Since the capture of Avdiivka in February, Ukrainian forces have been on the back foot and Russian forces have renewed attempts to maintain their offensive momentum. During the last week of April, Ukrainian forces had withdrawn from three villages in the eastern Donetsk region, a tactical retreat that highlights Kyiv’s deeper vulnerabilities compounded by crippling shortages in man and war materials. Along various sections of the front line, Ukrainian authorities are weighing whether to sacrifice men or territory.

“The situation at the front has worsened,” Gen. Oleksandr Syrsky, Ukraine’s top commander, said in a statement on April 28, 2024, in which he announced that his troops had retreated from two villages west of Avdiivka, a Ukrainian stronghold in the east that Russia seized earlier this year, and another village further south.



After Russia captured Avdiivka, Ukrainian forces fell back to a new defensive line about three miles to the west, along a series of small villages, but Russian forces have now overrun that line. General Syrsky said on Sunday that his troops had withdrawn from Berdychi and Semenivka, the last two villages in that area that were not yet under full Russian control.

Further complicating the situation, Russian forces have managed to break through the northern part of this defensive line by exploiting a gap in Ukrainian positions and quickly advancing into the village of Ocheretyne. That village sits on a road leading to Pokrovsk, about 18 miles to the west. It is unclear whether Russian forces have gained full control of it.

Russia’s gains in Ocheretyne presented the Russian command with a choice: continue to push west toward Pokrovsk, or push north toward Chasiv Yar, a town that has suffered relentless Russian attacks in recent weeks. Chasiv Yar, about seven miles west of Bakhmut, lies on strategic high ground. Its capture would put the town of Kostiantynivka, some 10 miles to the southwest, in Moscow’s direct line of fire. The town is the main supply point for Ukrainian forces along much of the eastern front. A push northward from Ocheretyne could also allow the Russian forces to attack Kostiantynivka from the south, in a pincer movement.

While the frontline remains precarious, much delayed US military aid may soon start reaching Ukraine. After months of wrangling, Congress finally approved \$60 billion in military aid for Ukraine, and President Biden signed the bill on April 24, 2024.

The Pentagon indicated that it would rush a \$1 billion military aid package to Ukraine, including shoulder-fired Stinger surface-to-air missiles and other air



defence munitions, 155-millimeter shells, Javelin anti-tank guided missiles, cluster munitions and battlefield vehicles. The aid package would also include ammunition for High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) which can launch ATACMS missiles. The Pentagon has pre-prepared arms consignments and is poised to deliver them. The first shells could start arriving in a couple of weeks, if not sooner. U.S. officials are urging

the Ukrainians to use the new military aid to consolidate their lines and hold tight through the rest of 2024, rather than rush another counteroffensive like last year's unsuccessful push toward the Sea of Azov.

On 25-26 April, Russia attacked railway facilities in three different regions across Ukraine. The latest attacks on the rail network came after Russia's defence minister, Sergei Shoigu, promised to target Western weapons as they arrived in Ukraine. "We will increase the intensity of strikes on logistics centres and storage bases of Western weapons," he said in a speech at the ministry on 23 April.

While the imminent arrival of US military aid may have provided some solace to Ukrainian defenders, Ukraine's situation remains precarious. Military experts have argued that Moscow's recent advances reflect its desire to exploit a window of opportunity to press ahead with attacks before the first batch of a new American military aid package arrives in Ukraine to help relieve its troops. Further, the American military kit cannot resolve Ukraine's other military constraint: manpower. Fighting off a giant neighbour has taken a huge toll on Ukraine's defenders. While the recent lowering of the age of conscription from 27 to 25 may increase the potential pool of military recruits, maintaining morale will require immense skill from Ukraine's political and military leaders. As per reports, youth have been showing reluctance to join the military and there has been a renewed exodus of military-age youths from Ukraine. Ukrainian authorities argue that Ukraine is addressing its manpower shortages. Things already look better than they did in December, when Ukraine's draft system essentially "broke down".

United States Secretary of State Antony Blinken's Visit to China

Amidst persisting tensions between the United States (US) and China over trade, technology and Taiwan, the US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, travelled to Shanghai and Beijing. The trip was a three-day official visit to China, extending from 24 to 26 April 2024. During his visit, Blinken met with President Xi Jinping, and other high-level officials including, Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Minister of Public Security Wang Xiaohong, and Shanghai Party Secretary Chen Jining.

Reportedly, over three days the US Secretary of State held in-depth and substantive discussions on various key bilateral, global and regional issues. According to, the official statement of the US State Department, Blinken raised concerns about the continuous flow of synthetic drugs including fentanyl into the US. He also highlighted US concerns about China's support of Russia's defence industrial base and war efforts in Ukraine and its "destabilising actions" at the Second Thomas Shoal. About the crisis in the Middle East, the US Secretary of State emphasised the need to prevent an escalation. Calling for deepening military-to-military communication to avoid miscalculation, Blinken also suggested launching talks on managing security risks posed by artificial intelligence. Further, he assured the Chinese leadership that the US intended to continue to use diplomatic measures to manage differences between the two countries.

The official statement from the Chinese Foreign Ministry, on the other hand, noted Xi Jinping's call to the US to be partners rather than pursue rivalry. The statement informed that during the talks, President Xi Jinping urged the two sides, should seek common ground, reserve differences and honour words with actions. He also proposed mutual respect, peaceful coexistence and win-win cooperation as the three overarching principles for the relationship. The Chinese official statement also highlighted that Blinken during the talks had assured that "the US does not seek a new Cold War, does not seek to change China's system, does not seek to suppress China's development, does not seek to revitalize its alliances against China, and has no intention to have a conflict with China". Further, Washington adheres to the one-China policy. Reportedly, the two sides agreed to increase people-to-people exchanges.

Blinken's China visit threw up every sign possible to indicate that relations between the two foremost global powers are fraying. While his meetings witnessed applause for the efforts of the China-U.S. working groups on climate change, artificial intelligence, and counter-narcotics, the reality remains that meaningful bilateral cooperation on any of these fronts is being hindered by mistrust.

According to observers, the visit made little gain about alleviating tensions between the US on China. Moreover, many policy analysts in China did not appreciate Blinken's visit being made at the invitation of the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and urged the government to take a tougher stand vis-à-vis the US.

The visit also clearly indicated that US-China relations are riddled with disagreements on almost all topics. Blinken, in conversations with Xi and Wang, made it clear that China's support for Russia's defence industry is assisting in its invasion of Ukraine while also impairing European and transatlantic security. The term "support" referred not to widespread weapon exports, but rather to crucial dual-use components like microelectronics, machine tools, and rocket-propellant-grade nitrocellulose that China exports to Russia.

On the other hand, Chinese authorities contended that the United States' directives to China in this regard constitute "interference" in "regular" commercial relations. Wang also did not mince words when he told Blinken that the "first red line" that

the US cannot cross is the "Taiwan question." China has always believed that American weaponry deliveries to Taiwan are a major cause of the unrest in cross-strait relations, but Washington has refused to give up on these initiatives. In actuality, Blinken's trip to China coincided with the bipartisan passage by the US Congress of a bill authorising \$8 billion in defence assistance to Taiwan and the Indo-Pacific, demonstrating the Congress's ongoing commitment to bolstering deterrence in the area.

The areas where the meeting seemed to break ground were the issues of cooperation on curbing the flow of synthetic opioids, a willingness to collaborate on AI governance and people-to-people ties. Blinken met China's minister of public security, Wang Xiaohong, and noted the early successes of the bilateral Counter Narcotics Working Group. He also pointed to official U.S.-China talks on artificial intelligence that will be held in the coming weeks.

Ibrahim Raisi's Pakistan Visit: An Analysis

Amid increasing geopolitical tensions, shadow wars, and looming threats of violence in the West Asian theatre and beyond, Iranian President Ibrahim Raisi embarked upon a three-day official visit to Pakistan leading a high-level delegation, including Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian.

The visit commenced on 22 April 2024 with the arrival of the Iranian President in Islamabad and concluded with the issuing of a joint statement on 24 April 2024. Besides Islamabad, President Raisi visited Lahore and Karachi and paid homage to Allama Muhammad Iqbal and also attended a wreath-laying ceremony at Mazar-e-Quaid. The two sides held several high-powered meetings and signed multiple MoUs (Memorandum of Understanding) to strengthen bilateral relations and increase economic cooperation.



Riasi's visit to Pakistan is significant in many ways. Firstly, it came not long after the two sides targeted 'non-state actors' violating each other's territorial space. Secondly, it was against the backdrop of regional tensions running high due to the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict. Thirdly, it came on the heels of increasing instability in West Asia, due to growing tensions between Iran and Israel, which has the potential to threaten and jeopardize the peace and stability in the region. Some analysts even express fears of a larger global conflict involving multiple states including major powers.

It is important to note that on 16 January 2024, Iran fired four missiles to target Jaish-al-Adl terrorists, responsible for attacks in Iranian Sistan Baluchistan province, in Koh-e-Sabaz village of the Pangur district in Pakistani Balochistan province. The purported attack came after repeated requests from Iran over the presence of Jaish-al-Adl terrorists in Pakistan. Iranian Foreign Minister Amir Abdollahian later claimed that he had spoken to his Pakistani counterpart and

assured him that Iran respected the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Pakistan.

As the opposition started questioning the establishment-backed caretaker government over the violation of sovereignty, on 18 January 2024, Pakistan launched an intelligence-based operation codenamed 'Marg Bar Samachar' targeting alleged hideouts of Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) and Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF) in Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan province. Some analysts considered it to be a serious escalation between the two neighbours, while quite a few termed it as part of a 'Friendly Fire' where each side gets the informal approval of such a strike in advance. The 'Friendly Fire' analogy appears to be quite close to reality in case one carefully observes the developments that followed the mutual strikes.

On 29 January 2024, Iranian Foreign Minister Amir Abdollahian undertook an official visit to Pakistan during which he met with Pakistani caretaker Foreign Minister Jalil Abbas Jilani. During the meeting, the two sides underscored the importance of brotherly bilateral relations and reaffirmed their commitment to deepen and broaden the existing wide-ranging cooperation. It was during this discussion, that Jilani renewed Pakistan's invitation to the President of Iran for an official visit to Pakistan.

Responding to the invite, President Raisi landed in Pakistan intending to strengthen existing bilateral relations, deepen economic cooperation, and reaffirm commitments to combat commonly identified threats together. The joint statement issued at the end of the visit underlined the importance of bilateral relations and the two sides agreed to expand trade and economic ties with a commitment to transform the common border from a 'Border of Peace' to a 'Border of Prosperity' through joint development-oriented economic projects. It was also agreed to boost bilateral trade up to \$10 billion in the next five years. The importance of cooperation in the energy sector including trade in electricity, power transmission lines and Iran-Pakistan Gas Pipeline was reiterated. A consensus emerged to fully operationalize the barter trade mechanism to facilitate economic and commercial activity through border sustenance markets.

Islamabad and Tehran emphasised harnessing their respective geographical locations to promote bilateral as well as regional connectivity. The two sides condemned terrorism in all its forms and manifestations and recognized that it posed a common threat to regional peace and stability. They strongly condemned the 1 April 2024 Israeli attack on the Consular Section of the Iranian Embassy in Damascus. They also expressed their strong and unequivocal condemnation of the Israeli aggression and atrocities against the Palestinian people.

Given the fast-changing geopolitical dynamics in the region, Raisi's Pakistan visit also offers a glimpse of global alignment and realignment. For a country like Pakistan, it offers both opportunities as well as challenges.

The joint statement appears to be a highly ambitious document that would be difficult to implement on the ground due to several reasons including the growing internal security threats in Pakistan and threats of Western sanctions, as indicated by none other than the US State Department that strictly warned about considering business deals with Iran.