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# Strategic Digest

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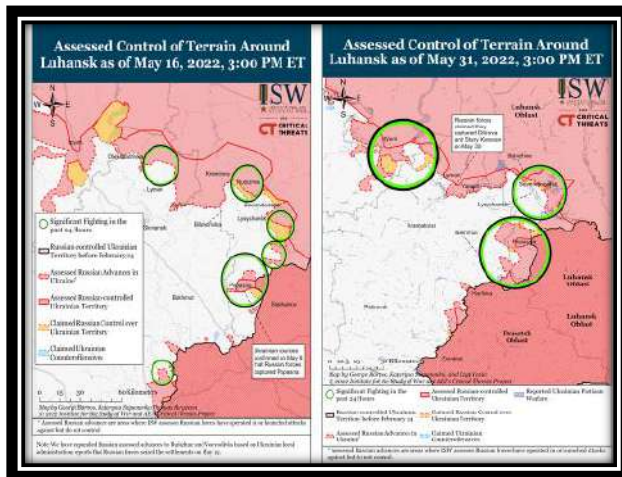
**Ukraine Conflict Update, 16 May -01 Jun 2022**

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## Ukraine Conflict Update, 16 May-31 May

In the past two weeks, the Russians have made steady progress in the conduct of their eastern offensive in the Donbas. There have been persistent, incremental Russian advances in and around the Severodonetsk-Lysychansk area. Officials in Ukraine have acknowledged that Russia has the “upper hand” in fighting in the country’s east, as Ukrainian forces fell back from some of their positions in the Donbas region. Russian forces have captured a key node in Ukrainian Railway at Lyman and appeared to be advancing on Severodonetsk, Bakhmut and Avdivka.



Russian forces now control “around half” of Severodonetsk, one of the last major Ukrainian-held areas of the country’s eastern Luhansk region, local officials said. Capturing the city would be a major symbolic victory for Russia. Russian forces are trying to quickly complete the capture of the eastern industrial region of the Donbas before more Western arms arrive to bolster Ukraine’s defence. In the Luhansk region, just 5% of the region now remained in Ukrainian

hands – down from about 10% little more than a week ago – and Ukrainian forces were retreating in some areas.

Russian forces in Kharkiv continue to focus efforts on preventing a Ukrainian counteroffensive from reaching the international border between Kharkiv and Belgorod. Russian forces in Kharkiv continue to focus efforts on preventing a Ukrainian counteroffensive from reaching the international border between Kharkiv and Belgorod.

With the failures around Kyiv & Kharkiv, the Russians have had to reassess their approach to the conflict. The operations in the east demonstrate a degree of learning by Russian Forces in the effective use of combined arms operations. The Russian air force sortie rate has improved, and it is concentrating much of its efforts to support ground operations in the east. The coordination of Russian ground forces has also shown considerable improvement.

As Russia seeks to solidify its grip on the territory it has seized in the Donbas region, President Putin signed a decree simplifying the process for residents of newly captured districts to acquire Russian citizenship and passports. On 25 May 2022, The Russian parliament scrapped the upper age limit for contractual service in the military to mobilise more troops for ongoing conflict.

The European Union reached an agreement on 30 May 2022 to ban most imports of Russian oil, a move that further severs ties between Europe and Russia and marks the harshest economic retribution Moscow has faced for its war in Ukraine. The deal bans Russian oil imports arriving by sea by the end of the year, which

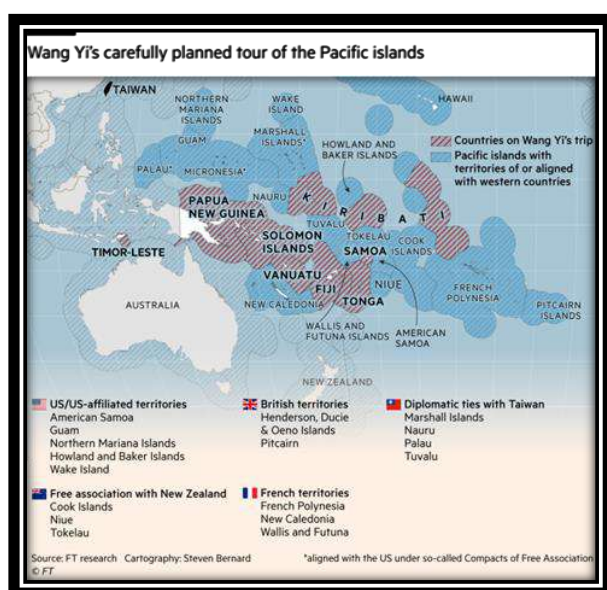
will cut off two-thirds of the bloc's total imports. The agreement is softened by an exemption for pipeline oil, a concession to landlocked E.U. members, notably Hungary.

European leaders are now wrestling with potential solutions for exporting Ukrainian grains despite an effective naval blockade from Russia. A broader economic relief package for Ukraine worth more than \$9 billion to be delivered throughout 2022 is under discussion in Brussels.

Russian President Vladimir Putin on 29 May 2022 held a telephone call with his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan and discussed "safe navigation" through the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. Russia's foreign minister will visit Turkey next week to discuss the possible release of Ukrainian grain from Black Sea ports, his Turkish counterpart said on Tuesday — an effort that faces significant obstacles, but that if successful could help alleviate a food crisis beginning to be felt around the world.

### Jostling for influence in South Pacific: Wang Yi vs Penny Wong face off

In the diplomatic tug of war for dominance in the South Pacific, China has suffered a serious setback as it failed to win support from island countries in the region for a comprehensive partnership centred on security. The second China-Pacific Island Countries Foreign Ministers' Meeting at Suva on 30 May 2022 was a key event in the island hopping itinerary of China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi's ongoing tour of eight island countries in the region. The meeting was expected to endorse the new agreement with China covering everything from security to fisheries. While many details of what transpired at the meeting remain undisclosed, it was clear the nations hadn't endorsed China's plan.



The blow to China came after the US and Australia strongly pushed back against Beijing's efforts to entice more of the Pacific Island nations into its embrace. "As always, we put consensus first among our countries throughout any discussion on new regional agreements," Fijian Prime Minister Bainimarama said.

The draft communique and five-year action plan sent by China to 10 Pacific islands ahead of a meeting of foreign ministers meeting had created some consternation in the region. A draft of the proposal obtained by The

Associated Press shows that China wants to train Pacific police officers, team up on "traditional and non-traditional security" and expand law enforcement cooperation. Even more extensive than the security cooperation agreement signed

between China and Solomon Islands, this proposal had the potential to enhance Chinese strategic presence in the Pacific much nearer Hawaii, Australia, New Zealand, and on the doorstep of the strategic American territory of Guam.

As the news broke about the new draft document on 25 May 2022, Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong vowed to stop this agreement from becoming reality. The Pacific has been a top priority for the new Labour government in Canberra which had labelled the China-Solomons deal the biggest Australian strategic blunder since World War II during the election. Australia's new labour government faced a diplomatic test dissuading Pacific Island nations from partnering with Beijing in exchange for security guarantees after years of political disputes and economic turmoil exacerbated by COVID-19.

While returning from Quad Summit, Penny Wong said "China has made its intentions clear. So too are the intentions of the new Australian government." Penny Wong, the Australian foreign secretary, rushed to Fiji on 26 May 2022 to meet with Fijian Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama and Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) Secretary-General Henry Puna. Wong assured Pacific countries about Canberra's commitment to PIF Partnership goals – including tackling climate change, pandemic recovery, economic development and regional security. In close coordination with the US, Ms Wong also managed to convince Fiji to join the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework recently launched during the Quad Summit in Tokyo.

The duelling visits by Wong and Wang in an essence epitomise the intensification of geopolitical jostling for influence in the South Pacific. While Ms Penny Wong seems to have managed to scratch a tactical advantage in the diplomatic showdown with Wang Yi, China signalled it would continue to campaign for more influence in the region. Even though China fell short on a bold plan to have 10 Pacific nations endorse its ambitious agreement, there have been plenty of smaller wins for Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi as he continues an island-hopping tour of the region. Signalling its intentions for long term engagement with the region, China has responded to Pacific island rejection with a paper on 'mutual respect and common development. The document outlines China's enduring commitment to deepening its strategic partnership with Pacific nations.

### German Chancellor's Three-Day Visit to Three African Nations



In his first tour to the African continent after taking office, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz embarked on a three-day visit to three African countries from 22 – 24 May 2022. Scholz's itinerary had been meticulously thought out. His first stop was Senegal, which currently holds the presidency of the African



Union and is seen as a powerful and reliable force in the region. His second port of call was Niger, a loyal partner to Germany and a country that plays an important role as a buffer state next to Mali. Business matters topped the agenda on the final day of his tour in South Africa, a strategic ally in the G20 and a hub for German companies based in Africa.

The geopolitical backdrop of Scholz's visit to Africa was the economic and strategic consequences of the Ukraine conflict on oil, gas and food prices; and the escalating security crisis in the Sahel. As Germany looks for alternatives to Russian gas around the world, the visit aimed to tap African gas reserves in the future. In addition, Africa holds the key to Europe's economic resilience, especially as Europe continues to decouple from Russia.

In Senegal, the Chancellor was received with military honours by President Macky Sall. The discussion between the two leaders focused on bilateral and international issues like security, climate change, initiatives for sustainable investment, food security, global health, development of natural gas projects off the coast of West Africa, and the spread of conflict in the Sahel amongst others. In the Chancellor's own words, "I made a conscious decision to go to Senegal as the first stop. Because the partnership that connects us is becoming more and more important. We can count on each other."

In Niger, the Chancellor visited the "Tillia air transport base to meet the German special forces mission "Gazelle", which is part of the European Union Training Mission Mali (EUTM)" and interacted with the German troops commending their achievements and success in a difficult region. Later in Niamey, the Chancellor met with President Mohamed Bazoum for bilateral talks which primarily focused on solutions for improving the security situation in the region, strengthening their development partnership, commitment to democratic traditions, and also discussed the serious food shortages in the Sahel.

In South Africa, Chancellor Scholz was welcomed with military honours and received by President Cyril Ramaphosa. In the joint press conference following the bilateral talks, the Chancellor underscored that "South Africa is and will remain a key country for Germany in Africa" and praised its "invaluable role" in ensuring economic and political stability in Africa. He visited Sasol, a South African transnational petroleum and chemical company, which is a member of the "German-South African research cooperation project to develop climate-neutral fuels."

Scholz's visit has captured attention across Africa. For Africa, the biggest fallout from the war in Ukraine is the sharp rise in food and fuel prices. In African countries, spiralling food prices are threatening to trigger a famine. Scholz promised economic aid to the affected countries.

The German Chancellor's visit is also expected to be a catalyst in reinvigorating the EU's strategic partnership with Africa. Follow-through on food security pledges now needs to materialize as proof of Europe's seriousness and as a means of flanking its pursuit of partnership with Africa.