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# Strategic Digest

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## Tracking Russia's Military Action in Ukraine

Russia's ongoing military action in Ukraine has led to a dramatic escalation of tensions in Eastern Europe. Intense fighting has broken out almost across the entire Ukraine. With Russian forces simultaneously mounted a land, air and naval offensive from the northern, western and southern directions of Ukraine on 23 March 2022, Russia's desired end state, in this conflict, appears a regime change in Kyiv. This was reflected in President Putin's appeal to the Ukrainian armed forces to overthrow the country's government. At present, Russian military progress seems to have considerably slowed down due to tenacious fighting by Ukrainian forces.



Moscow's invading forces met stiff resistance from Ukrainians on all four axes of attack on the fifth day of conflict. On the Kyiv axis, Ukrainian forces were holding off Russian troops advancing on the capital. Kharkiv axis saw heavy bombardment by Russian artillery which included residential districts which as per Ukrainian officials led to a score of civilian casualties. In the rebel-held Donbas area, a Ukrainian missile had blown up an oil terminal in the town of Rovenky. In Crimea, Russian forces bombed the Ukrainian city of Mariupol which had caused death and injury to

dozens of Greek nationals. Russian and Ukrainian officials met on the Belarusian border to discuss a ceasefire on 28 Feb 2022. The talks ended with no breakthrough. Ukrainian President Zelinsky also urged the European Union to grant Ukraine immediate membership in the bloc.

Ominously, amidst these reports of Russia getting bogged down, President Putin has put his nuclear forces in combat-ready mode. This seems to be part of the continuing Russian stratagem of raising the stakes to compel the West to recognise Moscow's redline of Ukraine's neutral status by leveraging the Western fears of nuclear armageddon.

Arguably, Ukraine's geographical relevance as a buffer makes it one of the most vital pieces of Russia's European security puzzle. However, Russia's attempts at redrawing European boundaries has led to a hardening of the Western position vis-à-vis accommodating Moscow's core concerns. NATO appears to have been energised with a renewed purpose in tackling the Russian threat. This has seen additional troop deployments across NATO's eastern frontiers bordering Russia.

Meanwhile, Russia's reputation as a responsible stakeholder has taken an immense hit. The Kremlin appears increasingly isolated. Crucially, Russia's

actions could even alienate its partners in the post-Soviet space by heightening their inherent apprehensions of Moscow's revanchism. Reports of fissures in the Kremlin apart from incipient protests breaking out in Russia amidst mounting casualties. The most immediate question is how much further Russia is prepared to go to subdue its neighbour. A prolonged military conflict will only add to the economic burden of a sluggish Russian economy severely impacted by the growing severity of western sanctions.

As the first talk between Russia and Ukraine has ended without any agreement, few expect the conflict to end soon. Satellite images have shown, a convoy of Russian armoured vehicles stretching perhaps 60km began to reach the outskirts of Kyiv on the morning of 01 March 2022. Despite Ukraine putting up a heroic fight, this could well presage an even bloodier phase of the war.

### Ukraine Conflict and Russia's deepening isolation

On 24 February 2022, Russia launched a Special Military Operation against Ukraine to liberate separatist territories in the Donbas region it had been backing for decades. Shortly before the invasion, Russia unilaterally recognized those regions in Eastern Ukraine – Donetsk and Luhansk as an independent. With the Russian invasion, a 2015 peace deal signed in Minsk (Minsk 2) has been shattered. Putin is pushing for a 'division', 'demilitarization' and 'denazification' of Ukraine, in effect desiring a pro-Russia government in Kyiv and guarantees against Ukraine joining NATO. The first round of talks have been concluded on 28 February without tangible results but both sides have affirmed to meet for the second round soon. Meanwhile, Ukraine has formally applied for the membership of the EU to push harder to safeguard its interests amidst the looming uncertainty.



Russia's stand against Ukraine has met with calculated responses from the West, who refused to put their troops on the ground but has pumped in heavy military aid and weapons. The West has additionally been supporting Ukraine by imposing harsh sanctions against Russia. The latest

tranche of sanctions includes cutting off targeted Russian banks from the international Swift banking system. This is likely to have a fatal impact on inflation in the Russian economy and the devaluation of the Ruble. As sanctions began to bite, Russia's central bank more than doubled its key policy rate on

Monday and introduced some capital controls as the country faced deepening economic isolation.

While Russia had been bolstering itself against the impact of sanctions by building its foreign reserves, yet, the impact on a G-20 economy to be cut off from Swift banking transactions could be crippling. In a further worrying development for the latter, several Chinese banks have begun to fear fiscal victimization and secondary sanctions. Two of China's largest state-controlled banks, the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China and the Bank of China have started limiting financing to purchase raw materials from Russia. They have restricted financing for Russian commodity purchases, suggesting there are limits to Beijing's support for Moscow.

The unexpected Russian onslaught has triggered a shift in the geopolitical and geo-economic calculus in Europe. Germany has shifted its position on major foreign and defence topics, ranging from arms deliveries, defence spending, sanctions and diplomacy. Until now, Berlin's foreign policy was primarily based on promoting peace via diplomatic means and a reluctance to invest in its military capabilities. So far, Germany had been the key player in co-opting, often to the disapproval of other NATO allies, its transatlantic ties and its business interests alongside a massive reliance on Russia's gas. Under the Normandy Format, it was also a keen supporter of sustaining dialogue as the best means to resolve the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Germany refused to deliver defensive weaponry to Ukraine due to its "peace policy" and restrictive stance on arms and even blocked weapons shipments from its ally Estonia to Ukraine. Changing its previous course, Germany has announced would send 1000 anti-tank weapons and 500 missiles to Ukraine. The public opinion in Sweden and Finland has also, for the first time since the WW-2, started swinging against their alleged neutral status in favour of joining NATO. This reflects changing attitudes with far-reaching implications for the security architecture of Europe.

India's stand has been to keep its national interest first and call for dialogue and de-escalation without condemning its long-standing ally and friend. India's abstaining at the UNSC can be explained by its defence dependencies and the need to engage Russia for balancing China, maximizing outreach to Central Asia and retaining relevance in Taliban controlled Afghanistan.

### **China appoints a Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa**

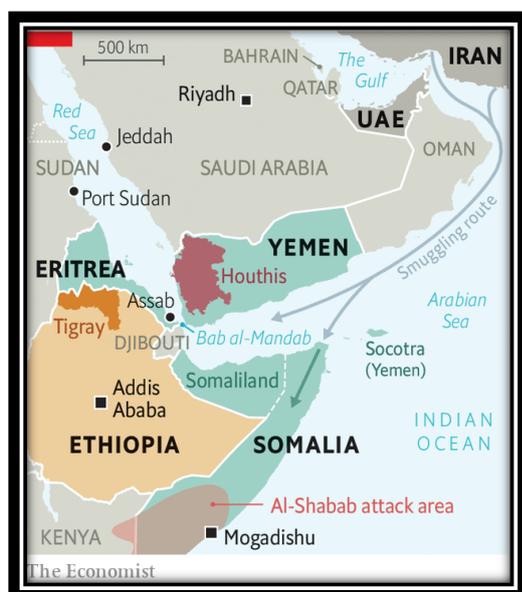
On 22 February 2022, China appointed Xue Bing as a special envoy for the Horn of Africa sub-region. The region largely covers Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, South Sudan, Djibouti and Kenya in Africa. Yemen on the south coast of the Arabian Peninsula is also considered as its part. The piracy-infested Gulf of Aden is located between Yamen and Somalia and Djibouti.

Xue Bing is a senior diplomat in the Chinese diplomatic corps who is reported to have vast experience in African affairs. His appointment has come as a follow-up of Foreign Minister Wang Yi's visit to the sub-region in the first week of

January this year. During his visit, he announced in Mombasa in Kenya that China would appoint a special envoy to the region and stated the promotion of peace as the objective of the appointment.

This appointment has drawn the attention of the strategic affairs commentators. It is wondered whether China is moving towards abandoning its approach of non-intervention, a norm that it has historically espoused in its foreign policy discourse. While it will be too early to arrive at a definitive conclusion, this announcement is, nonetheless, a notable development.

Africa has emerged as “China’s second continent,” with a noticeable enhancement of its influence in societal, military and economic realms in the last few decades. Early anti-imperial and anti-colonial solidarity of China with Africa, during the Maoist era, has considerably grown as the outcome of China’s economic rise and consequent deepening of trade and investment ties with African countries. While Xue Bing’s appointment is an important development, it is not the first of its kind. Earlier, China had appointed Liu Guijin as China’s “first special representative on African affairs” in 2007.



The Horn of Africa is the sub-region where China’s involvement has been perhaps more intense than in other sub-regions of the continent. China began sending naval task forces to the Gulf of Aden in 2008 as part of anti-piracy international efforts. It sent an infantry battalion to United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) in January 2015, which was the first time it sent an infantry battalion to a UN peacekeeping operation ever since it began participating in them in the early 1990s. The PLA acquired its first foreign naval base in Djibouti in March 2016 that became functional in August 2017. Chinese involvement in the Horn of Africa is mainly guided by its investment and sea-

lanes protection concerns. However, this is not without diplomatic implications. While China’s participation in the UNPKOs has various aspects, its involvement in the UNMISS and the previous Darfur, South Sudan issue has been widely viewed as guided by its concerns about its business interests in the oil and energy-rich country. China has increasingly become vocal about intra-Horn of Africa security issues and internal security issues of the countries there.

The development of the appointment of a special envoy for the Horn of Africa will be carefully monitored by other powers who are present and active in the region. In January 2022, State Department spokesman Ned Price had remarked that the US was “aware of reports that China will appoint a special envoy” and added that it “will work with all partners who share objectives in promoting peace and security in the region.”