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Ukraine War Update, 16-31 May 2023

China-Central Asia Summit

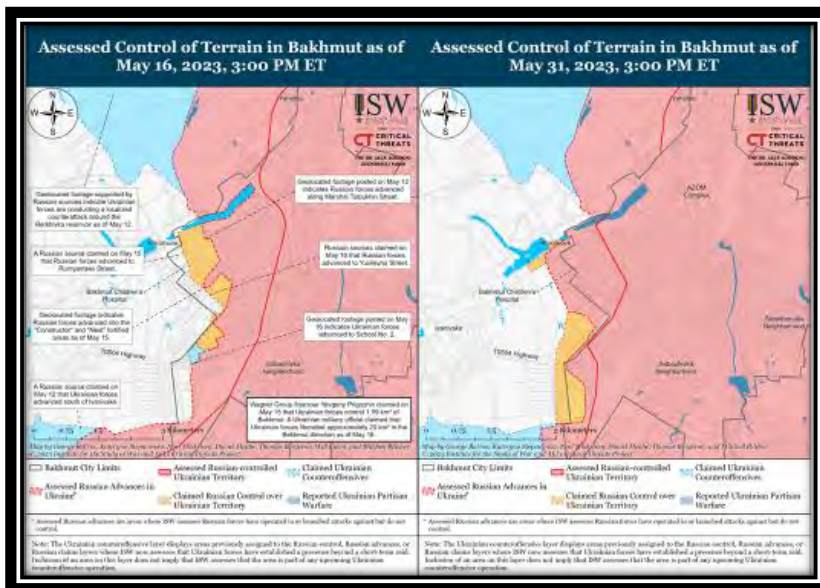
Armenia Azerbaijan Imbroglio- Peace edges closer in the troubled South Caucasus

Ukraine War Update, 16-31 May 2023

On 30 May 2023, Moscow has been targeted with a large-scale drone attack for the first time in its 15-month-old war in Ukraine, marking a new inflection point in the conflict. According to Russian authorities and media, eight drones were involved in the attack, with five shot down or otherwise disabled with jamming technology. Three of the drones hit residential buildings in the south-west of the city but no explosions were reported. On the same day, Kyiv was also hit from the air for the third time in 24 hours. During the last fortnight, both Russia and Ukraine have intensified aerial strikes on targets far from the front.

While Ukraine has faced multiple waves of missile and drone attacks, Kyiv maintains that the country’s air defence systems are stopping most of the rockets. Ukraine has also claimed that it has successfully intercepted seven of Russia’s ‘Kinzhal’ hypersonic missiles which had been claimed to be ‘invincible’ using the Patriot missile defence system.

On 25 May 2023, Ukraine’s defence ministry claimed to have shot down 36 out of 36 Shahad drones launched into Ukraine by Russia overnight. Three days later on 28 May 2023, Ukraine’s air force said it downed 52 of the 54 drones during the attack, which it said was a “record” attack by the Iranian-made Shaheds. Russia’s missile campaign against Ukraine does not seem to produce the desired strategic effects.



After 10 months of brutal artillery duels, frantic troop advances and thousands of Russian and Ukrainian casualties, The battle for the eastern Ukrainian city of Bakhmut is essentially over, for now. Russian Forces are in control of the city and its industrial hub, while Kyiv’s troops are trying to put pressure on the city’s flanks.

But what comes next for Russia, which has said it aims to capture the entire eastern Donbas region, is unclear. Earlier in the battle, Moscow had hoped to use the capture of Bakhmut as a springboard for further advances to the west — aspirationally toward the larger cities of Kramatorsk and Sloviansk. With extensive attrition in securing Bakhmut, that goal seems out of reach for now. Ukraine, in the meantime, has trained new formations, armed and equipped by the West, and is expected to launch a broader counteroffensive somewhere along the roughly 600-mile front line. In the south, which some military analysts predict will be the focus of Ukraine’s offensive, Russian forces have dug an intricate

network of primary and secondary trench lines and minefields to thwart any Ukrainian advance,

On 22 May 2023, members of two militias that oppose Vladimir Putin—the Russian Volunteer Corps and the Free Russia Legion—claimed to have carried out a cross-border raid from Ukraine into Belgorod Oblast in Russia. Russian authorities said the attacks were conducted by a Ukrainian "sabotage group" while Ukraine denied this. The Kremlin said the use of US-made military hardware by pro-Ukraine fighters who conducted a raid on a Russian border region this week was a testament to the West's growing involvement in the Ukraine conflict. Washington is looking into reports that American vehicles were used by Ukraine inside Russia, as it does not support any such use of US-made equipment.

Analysts have argued that two ideas underpinned the operation in Belgorod. The first was to undermine Mr Putin's domestic authority. The second was to pull Russian military reserves away from critical sections of the front lines, in the run-up to a long-planned Ukrainian counter-offensive.

On 25 May 2023, Ukrainian presidential adviser Mykhailo Podolyak sought to downplay the idea that there was a counter-offensive coming from Ukraine that would be marked by a single significant shift of gear. He wrote "Once again about the counter-offensive. This is not a 'single event' that will begin at a specific hour of a specific day with a solemn cutting of the red ribbon. These are dozens of different actions to destroy the Russian occupation forces in different directions, which have already been taking place yesterday, are taking place today and will continue tomorrow."

On 28 May 2023, Mykhailo Podolyak indicated that preliminary operations have begun to pave the way for a counteroffensive against Russian forces. He said that "It's a complicated process, which is not a matter of one day or a certain date or a certain hour." The commander of Ukraine's armed forces, Gen Valerii Zaluzhnyi, also raised expectations that a major operation could be imminent, declaring on social media: "The time has come to take back what's ours." However, the exact contours of the much-vaunted Ukrainian counter-offensive are yet to unfold.

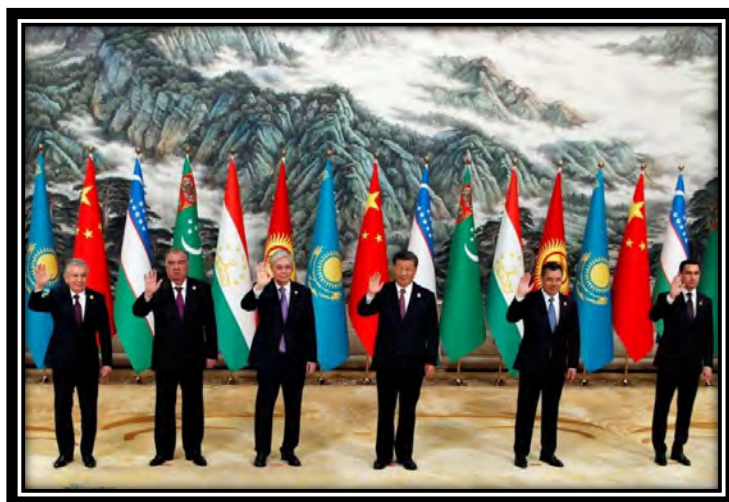
A deal allowing the safe export of grain and fertiliser from Ukrainian Black Sea ports has not yet resumed full operations, the UN said on 30 May 2023 which had come to a halt before Russia's decision last week to extend it.

China-Central Asia Summit

While the world's top economies convened in Japan for the G-7 Summit, on 18-19 May 2023, the city of Xian, China, hosted the China-Central Asia Summit attended by all the five Central Asian nation leaders and the host nation's Premier Xi Jinping. According to the Chinese foreign ministry, it was the first major diplomatic event hosted by China in 2023. The Summit resulted in the signing of 54 agreements, 19 new cooperation mechanisms, and platforms, including the Xian Declaration.

The theme of the meeting was the enhancement of cooperation, trade, security, and everlasting friendship between China and the Central Asian nations. The summit's main focus was economic relations and connectivity, with the addition of the debate on political relations and regional security. This was visible in the Xian Declaration, which stressed that all the involved countries agreed to form closer cooperation in various areas, prioritizing transport, trade, economy, people-to-people exchanges, etc. Secondly, the official establishment of a mechanism for meetings among the six heads of state was agreed upon. There was also agreement on establishing a permanent secretariat for the China-Central Asia connection. Kazakhstan was also nominated as the host for the next summit in 2025.

One of the most significant aspects of the meeting was the location; Xian has a strong history with Central Asia. For example, Xian was considered the eastern



starting point of the famed Silk Road, which connected trade to Central Asia. The Silk Road was once the epicentre of Chinese trade during the Han dynasty, where Central Asia was an essential facet of the trade from China. The same is the situation in the current era; China uses the Central Asian region as one of the lynchpins of the Belt and Road Initiative (Modern-day Silk Road). This is why the

China-Central Asia Summit has significant mentions of history and connectivity. The presence of Drawing on the linkages of history, President Xi, in his speech, brought out the connection between China and Central Asia through the Silk Road and highlighted how the relationship is millennia-old in time. In his remarks, the President stressed the need for the hour to be closer and future cooperation. The changing regional and global situations, though they have their challenges, have created space for opportunities; therefore, China- Central Asia summit would be considered a win-win for cooperation, everlasting friendship, and reflecting people's aspirations. He also stressed the need for mutual support, upholding universal security and sovereignty of the region.

Apart from regional commitments, something noteworthy has been the individual meetings between the leaders and the Chinese leadership. The meetings were held a day before (17 May) the central event of 18 May. Kazakhstan signed seven bilateral statements, including a new industrial transfer program and a pledge to support Kazakh businesses in China. Uzbekistan signed a statement with China that has twenty-eight items. Kyrgyzstan-China signed eleven statements, and Tajikistan signed together with China eighteen statements. Some significant statements include a joint cross-border railway connecting China with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan and the second one connecting China-Kyrgyzstan

and Uzbekistan. In addition, using sea ports was a significant step in cooperation with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan.

As one of the two major powers involved in the region, particularly in the economic sphere, China is trying to tap into the region's resources and increase its influence. The stress on connectivity shows that China's focus in Central Asia is to connect the entire region through its Belt and Road Initiative, a long-term project related to Central Asia. Kazakhstan is the main connection for China's Belt and Road, and any strong cooperation with Kazakhstan ensures China's strong connectivity towards the Central Asia region.

Given Russia's preoccupation with Ukraine, China which shares the status of a most important regional power with Russia in Central Asia may seek to use the regional turmoil as an option to race ahead as the most vital power. This may be another reason for the focused approach during the recent summit.

Armenia Azerbaijan Imbroglio- Peace edges closer in the troubled South Caucasus

On 22 May 2023, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, during a press conference, said that Yerevan recognizes the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, which includes Nagorno-Karabakh, provided that the safety of its Armenian population is ensured. This declaration followed Mr Pashinyan's intervention during a parliamentary debate earlier in April 2023 where he had argued "Peace is possible if we, in all our international relations, clearly record not just for today but also for the future, that we recognize the Republic of Armenia as 29,800 square kilometres territory, more specifically the territory of the Armenian SSR, where we gained independence in 1991. And not only don't we have any territorial claims towards any other country, but we will never have any."



Yerevan's unambiguous recognition of Azerbaijan's sovereignty over the entire Nagorno Karabakh, including the self-declared state of ethnic Armenians, the Republic of Artsakh, comes at a time when the United States and European Union have seized the initiative from Russia in mediating between the two countries. Notably, in the first week of May 2023, the US Secretary of State

Antony Blinken hosted foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan for four days of talks to reach a durable peace agreement.

Since the Russian-brokered ceasefire agreement in 2020 also included a clause for unblocking all economic and transport connections in the region, Azerbaijan has been insistent on opening the Zangezur Corridor, which links its Nakhchivan exclave to Azerbaijan via Syunik, the southernmost province of Armenia

bordering Iran. Amid objections from Armenia and Iran over what they see as Azerbaijan's irredentist claims over the internationally recognised territory of Armenia, Baku has threatened to open such a corridor by force.

In September 2022, the Azerbaijani military had targeted up to 23 locations in Armenia including cities such as Goris and Kapan and captured several strategic positions and heights within the Armenian territory. After Pashinyan's appeal to the CSTO for taking effective collective steps to ensure the security, territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Republic of Armenia within the framework of the CSTO Charter yielded no results, Yerevan paved the way for an EU Monitoring Capacity in Armenia (EUCAP).

The EUCAP was deployed in October 2022 along the Armenian side of the international border with Azerbaijan with the objective of monitoring, analysing and reporting on the situation on the ground. In December 2022, when the remit of the EUCAP ended, upon Armenia's request a long-term EU Mission in Armenia (EUMA), a non-executive and non-armed civilian mission, was deployed in February 2023. Tasked with observing and reporting on the security situation along the Armenian side of the international border with Azerbaijan, the mission is exclusively deployed within the internationally recognised territory of Armenia, leaving the Lachin corridor outside of its area of responsibility.

The Lachin Corridor connecting Artsakh to Armenia was created following the Russian-brokered ceasefire in 2020 and is patrolled by Russian peacekeepers. On 12 December 2022, Azerbaijani civilians claiming to be protesting environmental damage from mining in Nagorno-Karabakh blocked the corridor. The blockade lasted until 24 April 2023 when Baku set up a checkpoint in the corridor "to prevent the illegal transportation of manpower, weapons, mines" and noted that it "shall be implemented in interaction with the Russian peacekeeping force." During the five months of blockade, Baku ignored the International Court of Justice (ICJ) order as well as the warnings by the U.S. State Department that the Azerbaijani blockade "sets back the peace process and undermines international confidence."

In April 2023, Azerbaijan armed forces units fired at Armenian forces who were building a new guard post in the village of Tegh in the Armenian border region of Syunik. Following the incident which resulted in a total of seven deaths on both sides, the EU observation mission reported that "in the absence of a demarcated border, the border of 1991 should be observed and the forces of both parties should move back to a safe distance from that line."

These developments over the last two years indicate that the line of contact between the two states has shifted to the recognised inter-state border, which is yet to be delimited. Given Armenia has been downgrading its participation in the CSTO and the presence of the European Mission does not seem to have changed the calculations of Baku, the best hope for Armenia is to seek an end to the Karabakh territorial dispute by recognising Azeri sovereignty.

Armenian latest concessions to Azerbaijan could be a harbinger of peace in the longest-running territorial conflict in the Caucasus.