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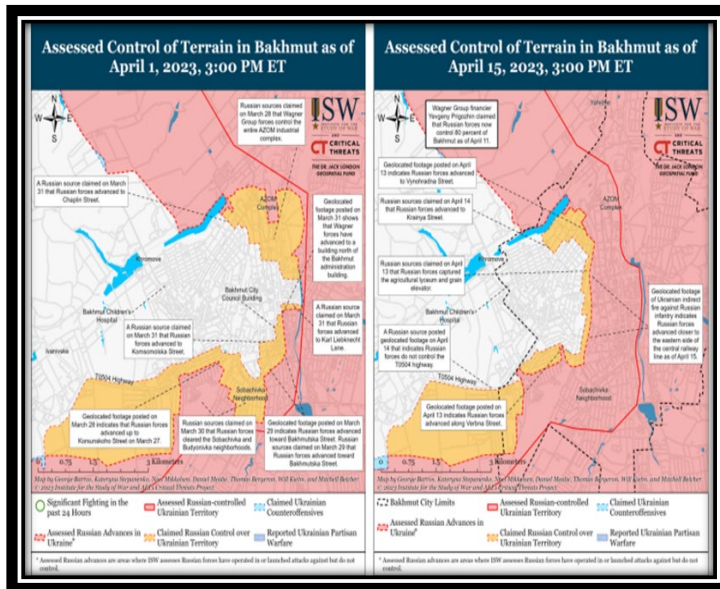
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Ukraine War Update 01-15 April 2023

Even though Russian Forces have managed to incrementally enhance their territorial control, extraordinarily bloody battles continue in the eastern city of Bakhmut and Ukrainian forces are still holding on. Bakhmut has witnessed the longest and deadliest battle of the war for both sides since last summer and was the main target of the Russian winter offensive.



The Russian defence ministry said Wagner units had taken two areas on the northern and southern outskirts of the city on April 15, 2023, and Russian army paratroop units were supporting the claimed advance by holding back Ukrainian forces on the flanks. While Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy made no mention of Bakhmut in his daily video address on Saturday, a spokesperson for Ukraine's eastern military

command said, "Bloody battles unprecedented in recent decades are taking place in the middle of the city's urban area."

As on April 15, Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City frontline. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive actions near Novokalynove (13km north of Avdiivka), Sieverne (8km southwest of Avdiivka), Pervomaiske (11km southwest of Avdiivka), and Marinka (27km southwest of Avdiivka).

Russian forces continued defensive operations in southern Ukraine. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian troops continued defensive actions in Kherson and Zaporizhia oblasts, and Ukraine's Southern Operational Command noted that there have been no changes in the condition, composition, or position of Russian forces on this front.

A large cache of classified Pentagon documents was leaked on social media by Jack Douglas Teixeira an airman with the Massachusetts Air National Guard who has since been arrested by the FBI. While the documents were leaked on a gaming website chat room in early February 2023, half a dozen photographs of printed classified documents, mostly about the state of the Ukraine war as of the beginning of March, started to be shared on Russian Telegram channels in early April. On April 07, a further batch of more than 100 Pentagon documents appeared on Twitter, seemingly revealing confidential information that US spy agencies had obtained, not just about Russia and its war of aggression against Kyiv, but also about supposed allies such as Israel and South Korea. While

potentially embarrassing for the Pentagon, the leaked documents highlighted the US's ability to penetrate Russian military planning.

The documents — some of them are as much as six weeks old — give a detailed insight into the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine as they reveal information about the battle of Bakhmut, casualties on both sides, weapon deliveries and military strategy. The leaked documents reveal that in late February this year, Russian forces nearly encircled the Ukrainian military in the town of Bakhmut, which has been a scene of fierce fighting for months now. Leaked documents indicated that the Ukrainian air defences were at risk and were likely to run out of missiles soon.

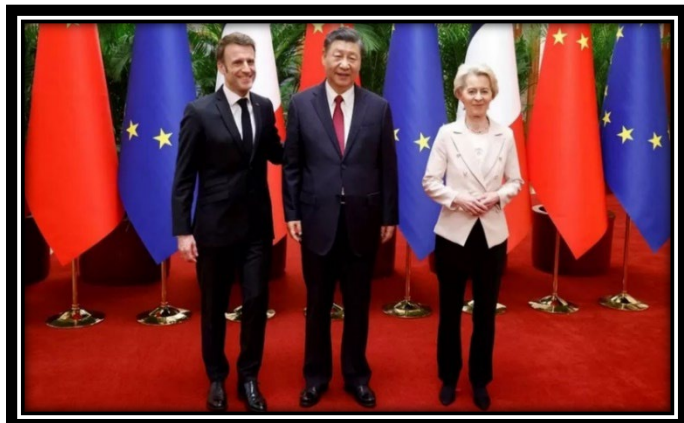
Ukrainian officials, while voicing their displeasure with the leaks, have told the US officials that the disclosures will not seriously impact their planned offensive because Russia already knew the broad parameters of Ukrainian vulnerabilities (like its shortages of weapons and ammunition). And the documents did not disclose precisely when, where and how the Ukrainians would carry out their counteroffensive, one senior U.S. official said.

Even though the leaked document purported to have contained significant intelligence on the Ukraine war, there was little palpable alarm in Kyiv about this leak. In fact, some welcomed the leak, hoping that it would emphasize what President Volodymyr Zelensky has been saying for months — that Ukraine urgently needs more ammunition and weapons to expel the Russian forces.

But as Ukraine prepares for a long-anticipated counteroffensive, the leaked documents have heightened attention on Ukraine's challenges, the shortcomings in Western military aid and the uncertainty of what comes next. Some analysts noted that the intelligence does not determine how the war will actually unfold. Ukraine's allies vastly underestimated its capabilities in the past, predicting that Russian forces would overrun Kyiv in the opening days of the war. On top of that, the documents gauge conditions more than six weeks ago. Battlefield realities change fast.

Decoding Macron and von der Leyen's Visit to Beijing

French President Emmanuel Macron's recent visit to China on April 05, 2023, with Ursula Von der Leyen has been much talked about. Their joint trip is the latest in a noticeable push from European leaders to engage with China. Mr Macron and Ms von der Leyen aimed to persuade Mr Xi on taking further steps to halt the Ukraine war, while also finessing the increasingly fraught trade relationship between the European Union and China, its biggest trading partner.



It was expected that the visit would be re-setting Europe's economic ties with China. More than 50 French entrepreneurs and senior executives accompanied Macron in the hope of signing several lucrative contracts with Beijing. In particular, representatives of the energy company EDF, the Alstom railway and Veolia who accompanied the French president need particular mention. High hopes were placed on Airbus, which wants to conclude a new contract with Beijing in addition to the 300 aircraft previously ordered by Beijing.

The economic aspirations of the French were balanced by the EU Commission chief Ursula Von der Leyen. Shortly before the visit, she came out with a new "De-risking from China" policy that was touted as Europe's realistic way of channelling the huge economic trade that the EU and China have. In comparison to the US's rhetoric of decoupling, de-risking was hailed by experts as a more realistic that can help keep the EU's trade with China in balance.

For France, however, the commercial and economic aspect has been extremely important. His pursuit was to not sacrifice beneficial cooperation with Beijing for the relatively narrow and stringent Brussels line of alienating China over lack of support in the Ukraine war and economic coercion from Beijing. Furthermore, Macron did not want to lag behind his main European competitor – Germany, whose Chancellor Scholz made a rather successful trip to China in November 2022. According to reports, Macron had wished to accompany Chancellor Scholz, something that could not materialise.

Geopolitically, the Ukraine war and its ramifications also figured as a top priority for Macron. The French president wanted to persuade Xi Jinping to play an active mediating role in the conflict and to exert at least some pressure on Russia.

Macron hoped that Xi will also show some concern about the deployment of Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus. Visiting China long with Von der Leyen signalled to reconcile "de-risking" with trade benefits and a message for the war in Ukraine. The official motivation seemed to be coordination and unity of action within the EU. However, Joint Declaration on the talks hardly said anything about Russia's actions in Ukraine. It seems that Macron was erroneously counting on Xi Jinping's commitment to mediation with recent success in the Middle East (West Asia).

While in China, Mr. Macron managed to alienate or worry allies from Warsaw to Washington, with his embrace of what a Sino-French declaration called a "global strategic partnership with China." He adopted the Chinese lexicon of a "multipolar" world, freed of "blocs," liberated from the "Cold War mentality," and less reliant on the "extraterritoriality of the U.S. dollar." Macron's remarks at an interview given to Chinese and French journalists suggested a rift between Paris and DC and was readily interpreted by China as an attempt to undermine President Biden's position on China, especially regarding Taiwan. Macron's ill-pitched expression of his age-old foreign policy philosophy ambition i.e. strategic autonomy for Europe also created considerable disquiet.

As the storm settled, the official French position was reinstated not on Macron but also by French ministers. Recent French defence policy documents highlight its tough approach on China. For instance, France's recent draft Military Programming Law, which Macron's government released this month, speaks of China threatening to destabilize the Indo-Pacific, while reiterating concern for the security of France's extensive overseas territories in that theatre. Days after Macron's remarks, Germany's foreign minister Annalena Baerbock announced she would be doing damage control by re-iterating Europe's position against any change in the status quo in the straits.

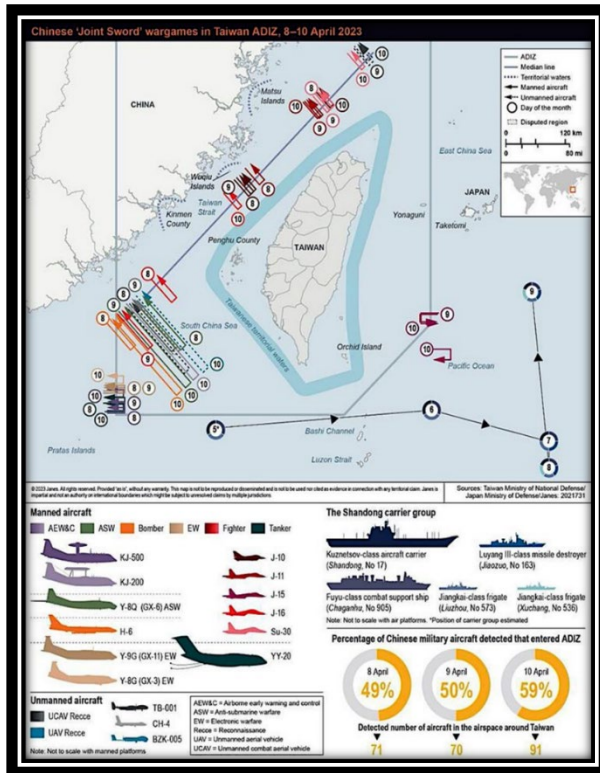
Notwithstanding ongoing furore over his earlier remarks, French President reiterated his views about Europe's strategic autonomy in a speech given in Netherland on March 12, 2023. He said Europe must limit its dependency on the U.S. and prevent itself from getting dragged into a fight between China and the U.S. over Taiwan.

Tsai Ing-wen's Visit to Taiwan's Diplomatic Allies

Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen visited two of its remaining diplomatic allies—the Republic of Guatemala and Belize—from March 29 to April 7 with stopovers at New York on March 30 and at Los Angeles on April 5 during her homeward journey. The visit termed the “Democratic Partnership for Common Prosperity Journey,” was her first visit to Taiwan's diplomatic allies since 2019. It was in keeping with the core focus of Taiwan's diplomatic work, which is “promoting summit diplomacy and friendship between [its] senior officials and those of [its] allies.” A handful of tiny Pacific Island countries, Central American countries, Eswatini in Africa, and the Holy See are important for Taiwan as they help it maintain an international personality. Taiwan had lost to Honduras to China on the eve of Tsai's tour.

During the visit, both Guatemala and Belize reaffirmed their diplomatic ties. Taiwan assured continued financial assistance and technical cooperation. Guatemalan President Alejandro Giammattei remarked that “Guatemala's friendship with Taiwan was ‘unchangeable’.” At the second stop in Belize, in an obvious reference to China, Tsai warned about “expansionist threats from authoritarian regimes” and said the “people of Taiwan face constant threats from the neighbour on the other side of the Taiwan Straits.” Prime Minister John Briceno of Belize highlighted “reaffirming Belize's formal recognition of Taiwan as a sovereign and independent country.”

However, more than these two official visits, Tsai's transit stops in the US attracted more attention even though she did not meet with any Biden administration officials. China condemned the US for granting Tsai the stopovers. It sanctioned the Hudson Institute and other parties involved in Tsai's visit. Spirited protest demonstrations by the members of the Taiwanese diaspora to welcome Tsai and by the members of the Chinese diaspora to oppose her visit, condemning ‘Taiwan independence forces,’ were witnessed in both stopovers.



In New York, Tsai delivered a closed-door speech at the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT). She delivered a public speech at the Hudson Institute in New York and received Hudson’s Global Leadership Award. During her return leg of the official visit, Tsai met with House Speaker Kevin McCarthy in Simi Valley, near Los Angeles, in California. It was the second highest-level meeting between the US and Taiwan and the first meeting between a Taiwanese president and the House Speaker on US soil. Speaking in a joint appearance with McCarthy before a bipartisan group of U.S. lawmakers at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library outside Los Angeles, Tsai vowed to "defend the peaceful status quo" in which the people of Taiwan

can continue to thrive in a free and open society.

China had responded militarily to earlier US stopovers by Taiwanese presidents in 1995, 2001, 2007, and 2019, hence a similar response was expected in the aftermath of the current visit. As expected, the People’s Liberation Army announced three days of exercises that took place from April 8 to April 10, termed “United Sword.”

While the drills did not take place as close to Taiwan as the August 2022 exercise in response to Nancy Pelosi’s visit, a record 91 aircraft and 12 naval ships were detected around Taiwan in 12 hours on April 10, 2023. Of the 91 planes, 54 crossed the median line of the Taiwan Strait, an unofficial boundary between the two sides, and entered the southwest and southeast of Taiwan’s air defence identification zone. The first use by China of the carrier-based J-15 in air incursions, as well as the deployment of China’s first domestically built aircraft carrier, the Shandong, were seen as ways in which China hoped to suggest an increase in seriousness. This was the first time that China simulated attacking Taiwan using an aircraft carrier.

Several stand-offs took place between Taiwanese and Chinese vessels during the drill. At one point, it was reported in local and international media that 10 vessels on each side were engaged in a stand-off around the median line of the Taiwan Strait.

The US has termed the Chinese reaction an overreaction. White House national security spokesperson John Kirby said, “There is no reason — none — for the Chinese to overreact here.” Besides, Daniel Kritenbrink, a senior US diplomat with wide experience in East Asia, informed that “Tsai had transited through the US six times previously ‘without incident’.”