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## Ukraine War Update, 01-30 Jun 2024

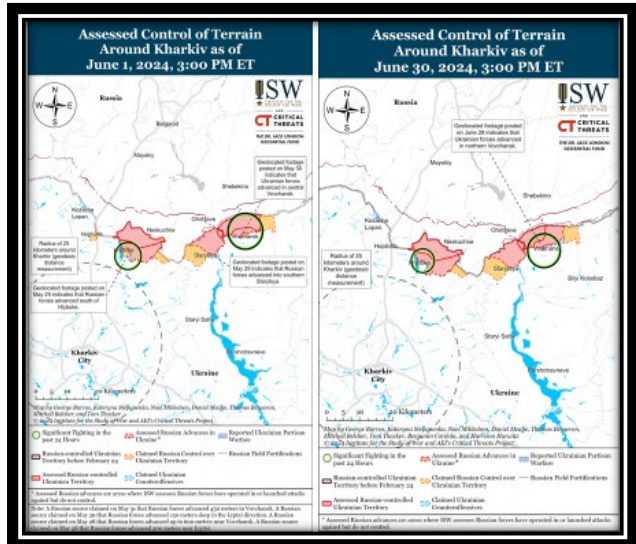
During June 2024, the front line remained mostly unchanged despite intense and violent battles in various areas. Russia's Kharkiv offensive, which started in early May 2024, has mostly fizzled out. Russian forces have been unable to achieve their goals of pushing Ukrainian forces away from the international border with Belgorod Oblast and getting within artillery range of Kharkiv City. Although Russia has gained some ground in Donetsk, overall, Ukraine, strengthened by improved weapons supplies from its allies, has managed to stabilize the situation. Russian attempts at smaller offensives have led to significant losses in terms of personnel and equipment.

During his video address on 09 Jun, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Russia has "failed" in its offensive in his country's northeastern Kharkiv region. Expressing that the Ukrainian army is currently holding off Russian forces "to the best of our ability," Zelenskyy said they reinforced the front in the region and would reinforce further.

Western-provided artillery ammunition has reportedly started arriving to Ukrainian forces on the frontline, although not at a scale that would allow Ukrainian forces to fully challenge the Russian military's current artillery shell advantage. The US has also prioritized the supply of weapons to Ukraine over other alliance commitments.

Since mid-June, Russian forces conducted multiple attacks on Ukrainian positions defending the strategically important eastern town of Chasiv Yar. Russian troops were seeking to press their advantage in troop numbers and weaponry before Ukrainian forces were bulked by Western military aid. While Russian forces made some incremental gains, Chasiv Yar remained in Ukraine's control.

Following mounting concerns about Ukraine's potential frontline collapse due to the Russian offensive in Kharkiv, the US made a significant policy shift regarding the use of US weapons on Russian territory. According to the US Department of Defense, Ukraine has been granted permission to use US-provided weapons to target Russian forces. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan stressed that allowing Ukraine to strike back against forces attacking from across the border makes sense if Russia is launching or preparing to launch an offensive from its territory into Ukraine. Ukrainian officials have stated that the US has imposed a restriction, permitting Ukraine to fire within 100 kilometres of the border. While this policy has resulted in a decrease in Russian attacks, it still restricts the range of the weapons, preventing Ukraine from targeting crucial airfields in Russian territory.



At the sideline of the G-7 summit in Italy, President Biden signed a 10-year security agreement with President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine on Thursday. The agreement is an effort to signal a long-term American commitment to Ukraine's future as an independent and sovereign state. The deal outlines a long-term effort to train and equip Ukraine's forces, provide more modern weapons, and help the Ukrainians build their self-sustaining military industry. G-7 leaders also agreed on a plan to give Ukraine a \$50 billion loan to help it buy weapons and begin to rebuild damaged infrastructure.

Over 90 countries participated in the Summit on Peace in Ukraine in Switzerland on 15-16 June. China did not participate, and Russia was not invited. A joint communique endorsed by Western powers and allies reaffirmed the signatories' commitment to "refraining from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, the principles of sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of all states, including Ukraine, within their internationally recognized borders." India, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and the United Arab Emirates attended the weekend meeting but did not agree to sign the joint statement.

On June 14, the day before the summit was set to begin, Russian President Vladimir Putin reiterated the Kremlin's peace plan, which called for Ukrainian troops to withdraw from four southern and eastern regions of Ukrainian territory. Moscow said it would annex these regions in violation of international law and demanded that Kyiv abandon its bid to join NATO.

On June 22, European Union countries formally approved the start of accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, marking another step in the two nations' quest to join the 27-nation bloc. Ukraine applied to join the EU less than a week after Russia invaded in February 2022, and EU leaders acted quickly to make it a candidate in June of that year. However, the process has since progressed slowly, and if membership is granted, it will take years, or even decades. Nonetheless, the commencement of negotiations shows continued support for Ukraine, complementing the substantial financial aid provided by the EU.

### **Russian President Visited North Korea and Vietnam**

Russian President Vladimir Putin recently paid highly symbolic reciprocal visits to North Korea and Vietnam from 18-20 June. He was, unsurprisingly, accorded red carpet welcome at both his ports of call, having earlier hosted his counterparts from Pyongyang and Hanoi in 2023.

During Putin's fifth visit to Vietnam, he emphasized the strong Russia-Vietnam partnership. The key outcome was the joint statement to further strengthen the 'comprehensive strategic partnership,' along with the signing of several agreements in areas such as education, science, tourism, health, customs, nuclear energy, mutual investments, and national currencies for trade. Both sides agreed to revitalize the Vladivostok-Ho Chi Minh City maritime corridor and Vietnam's Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Meanwhile,

Putin's trip to North Korea, his first in almost a quarter of a century, highlighted the mutual endeavour to explore new equations in bilateral ties. The growing bonhomie between the two heads of state was quite evident in this. Apart from personally receiving Putin at the airport, Kim Jong-Un also offered North Korea's 'unwavering support' to Russia.

During Putin's visit to Pyongyang, the highlight was the signing of the 'Treaty of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership'. This treaty, reminiscent of the 1961 agreement between the two Cold War partners, is extraordinary in scope and importance. This is particularly relevant given that Russia had previously supported the UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions imposing sanctions on the North Korean regime, which led to Pyongyang's international isolation. However, during his visit, Putin expressed the need to review UNSC sanctions on Pyongyang, marking a significant shift in Russia's position. .



Incidentally, the new Treaty commits to developing robust bilateral economic, investment and technology partnerships. Its pièce de résistance, however, is on mutual defence as elaborated in Article 4. It states - 'if one of the Parties is subjected to an armed attack by any state or several states and thus finds itself in a state of war, the other Party will immediately provide military and other assistance with all means at its disposal'.

These two visits of President Putin have focused attention on the factors driving bilateral engagements and their potential impact on regional security. These visits come at a time when Russia is seeking partners who pursue independent foreign policies rather than joining the Western efforts to isolate Russia. As a result, Russia is strategically seeking new avenues for investment, technology, and markets, particularly in areas where Russia has a competitive edge, such as defense, hydrocarbons, and raw materials. Hanoi and Pyongyang present new opportunities for collaboration. Notably, North Korea has openly supported Russia's actions in Ukraine, while Vietnam has remained neutral. Putin's visit is likely intended to send a strategic message about Russia's continued relevance on the global stage.

The new treaty with North Korea could provide Russia with more support for its efforts in Ukraine. It might also enable Russia to utilize North Korean labor to address its increasing industrial and agricultural labor shortages. Similarly, the mutual defense clause could serve as a signal from Russia to Japan and South Korea, warning them to stop supplying military equipment to Ukraine or face a stronger and more emboldened North Korean regime supported by Russia. Putin cautioned Seoul against actions that South Korea would not welcome if it proceeded with exporting lethal weapons to Ukraine.

North Korea could benefit from building a strong relationship with Russia, a P5 member. This partnership could provide North Korea with the backing of a mutual defense pact and the ability to use the "Russia card" to deter the West. This would allow North Korea to expand its security measures and also give it more independence from China. Further, North Korea could gain access to Russia's defense and space technologies, as well as much-needed energy and food supplies for its people.

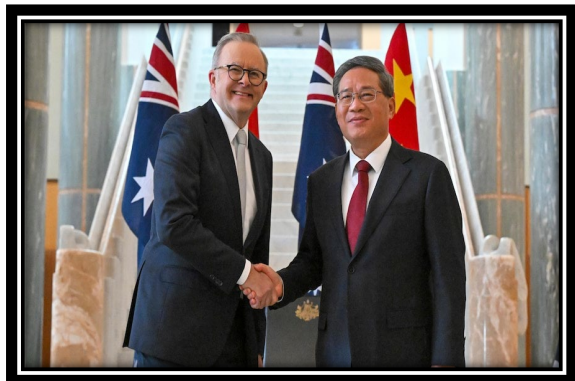
Vietnam has a historically valuable and mutually beneficial relationship with Russia. This includes cooperation in defense, energy, trade, investment, power generation, and automobile industries. At a time when Vietnam is also seeking to establish new connections with the US, balancing these relationships could enhance Vietnam's strategic independence and expand its opportunities for action.

Notably, Putin's visits highlight the indivisibility of security amidst growing inter-connectedness between Euro-Atlantic and North-East Asian theatres. A key feature of this is stakeholders in one theatre taking steps that could upend the existing security architecture in the other. Amidst a clear division of camps, new insecurities could lead to new recalibrations while complicating existing contestations and rivalries.

### **Australia-China pursue Stabilisation amidst underlying Tensions**

Chinese Premier Li Qiang's visit to Australia, a first by a senior Beijing leader since 2017, signaled a rapid thaw in bilateral ties at a time of escalating security tensions in the larger Indo-Pacific. The Relationship reached a breaking point after China imposed trade restrictions on a slew of Australian agricultural and mineral products in 2020 during a diplomatic dispute after Canberra asked for an investigation against Beijing over the origin of the covid 19 pandemic. Since Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's government took power in 2022, they have pursued a diplomatic approach to Beijing looking for a stabilisation of ties.

While Albanese and his government have stuck firmly to language geared toward "stabilizing" the relationship



with China, Beijing has pushed for closer ties. China wants closer economic ties, given domestic economic challenges while the federal government is hoping Beijing will soon remove the last few remaining trade sanctions it has placed on Australian goods. The thaw in ties is also high on Beijing's priorities given its aspirations to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) trade pact and the need for Canberra's support.

Amidst the big announcements that came from the visit was that China and Australia will provide each other's citizens with multiple-entry visas of up to five



years for tourism and business. During Li's trip to Australia, he said China would also include Australia in its visa waiver scheme, allowing Australians to visit the country for up to 15 days without a visa. Official statements also outlined signing a range of agreements to foster closer cooperation on trade and economic issues, education, climate change, and notable agreements to boost military-to-military communication. In Perth, leaders attended the Australia-China CEO Roundtable—the first since 2017. The platform is important given that two-way trade with China, Australia's largest trading partner hit a record \$327 billion in 2023, accounting for 27 percent of Australia's total goods and services trade.

Apart from indulging in Panda Diplomacy in Adelaide Zoo, Premier Li's visit to Western Australia highlighted China's strategic interest in new energy partnerships, particularly in the lithium sector. Chinese electric cars are gaining popularity worldwide, and securing a stable supply of lithium is crucial for maintaining China's competitive edge. Experts note nearly 99 per cent of Australia's lithium exports go to China, highlighting the importance of Western Australia's mines in this equation. China has long had a near-monopoly on the supply of refined materials such as lithium, graphite and rare earths, which are vital to high-tech manufacturing and the green energy transition. In recent years, Australia has been working with the US and other partners such as Japan and the European Union to try to diversify critical minerals supply chains.

However, many Australian analysts continue to question the stability of the relationship given that there are structural issues that remain. These include Australia's increasing involvement in the emerging security framework in the Indo-Pacific that is aligned against Beijing, such as the AUKUS alliance. There have been near-misses between the countries' militaries, such as in May when Canberra accused a Chinese fighter jet of firing flares near an Australian military helicopter in the Yellow Sea. This incident occurred just six months after a separate incident resulted in the injury of a navy diver.

Furthermore, Canberra has been reluctant to allow China to invest in key industries. While the Australian government claims to welcome interest from foreign investors, in practice there seems to be no willingness to approve Chinese requests, which has upset Beijing. Earlier this year, Australian Treasurer Jim Chalmers instructed a China-linked investor to sell its stake in a rare earth mining company. Additionally, the federal government has blocked Chinese investments in strategically crucial sectors as part of the West's efforts to reduce dependence on Beijing's supply chain.

However, what has frustrated most government officials, according to a report on ABC, is that Australia was the focus of Beijing's efforts to frame the relationship in the context of the Sino-US rivalry. The report highlighted that Chinese officials repeatedly expressed the belief that Australia was being used by the United States as part of a broader strategy to contain Beijing, rather than making independent choices. This appears to be a common challenge for many countries dealing with Beijing, including India.