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# Strategic Digest

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## Ukraine War Update, 01-31 May 2024

During the past month, Russia has renewed its offensive in Eastern and Northern Ukraine. Russian troops have been taking ground from Ukraine all across the front line. In some cases, they are seizing land that Ukrainians had recaptured in hard-fought battles just last year.

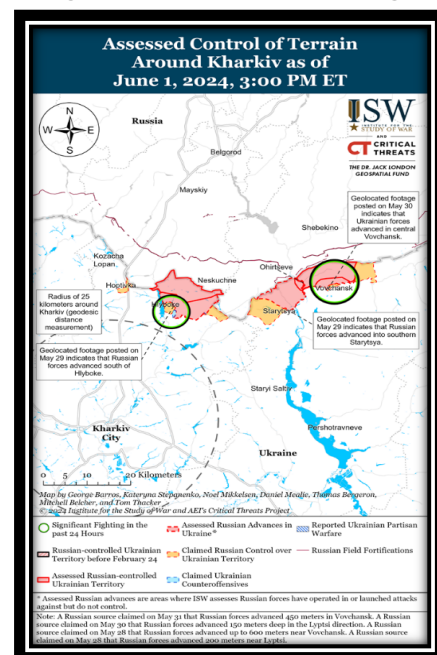
In early May 2024, Russia's Defense Ministry claimed last week that its troops had seized Robotyne, a tiny village in the Zaporizhzhia region in southeastern Ukraine. The village had been retaken by Ukrainian soldiers in August, a much-celebrated, if rare, success in Kyiv's disappointing summer counteroffensive. While Ukraine has denied this claim, satellite imagery and video footage of the fighting indicate that Russian troops control a significant portion of the village.

Further east, Russian troops have moved into Klishchiivka, a settlement that Ukraine retook in September, in one of its most significant advances at the time. Klishchiivka lies just south of Bakhmut, a city that Russian troops captured after months of fighting about a year ago. Russian control of Klishchiivka could relieve the pressure on their troops in Bakhmut and facilitate their operations to capture the Ukrainian stronghold of Chasiv Yar, a hilltop town that is one of Moscow's main targets, located just west of Bakhmut. Capturing Chasiv Yar would give Russian forces control of commanding heights in the area and expose cities that Ukraine uses as military logistical hubs in the eastern Donetsk region to increased artillery fire. Russian troops have entered the eastern edge of Chasiv Yar but have not crossed a canal that separates those outskirts from the rest of the town.

Russia's biggest advances so far this year have taken place in Ukraine's northeast, near the city of Kharkiv, where Moscow opened a new front in the first week of May 2024 and seized settlements that Ukraine had liberated in the fall of 2022.

Analysts say the goal of the new offensive is twofold: to stretch Ukraine's already outnumbered and outgunned forces to allow Russia to break through Ukrainian defences more easily elsewhere, and to push Ukrainian forces away from the border to prevent them from targeting Russian towns and cities with artillery. Senior Ukrainian military officials reported that Russian forces are transferring forces to northern Kharkiv Oblast from other sectors of the frontline, indicating that the Russian military continues to prioritize efforts to draw and fix Ukrainian forces in northern Kharkiv Oblast.

With growing concern about Kyiv's ability to hold off an assault threatening its front lines, Secretary of State Antony Blinken made a two-day unannounced visit to Ukraine on 14 May 2024. The visit was intended as a show of solidarity as the Pentagon sped up the delivery of air defences, artillery and other combat equipment in a bid to stabilize Kyiv's military

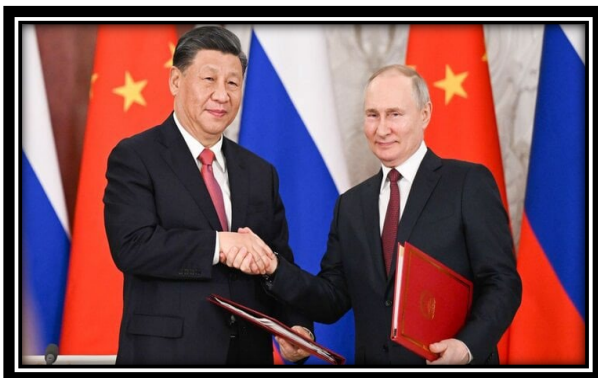


With his army struggling to fend off fierce Russian advances all across the front, President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine urged the United States and Europe to do more to defend his nation, dismissing fears of nuclear escalation and proposing that NATO planes shoot down Russian missiles in Ukrainian airspace. During an interview with the New York Times, Mr Zelensky said he had also appealed to senior U.S. officials to allow Ukraine to fire American missiles and other weaponry at military targets inside Russia.

On 29 May 2024, in a significant change to the US approach, Joe Biden allowed Ukraine to use some US-made weapons over one part of the Russian border, to allow Kyiv's forces to defend against an offensive aimed at the city of Kharkiv, relaxing an important constraint on Ukraine's ability to defend itself. However, limits on the use of US long-range weapons such as the Army Tactical Missile System (ATACM) will remain. Following the US line, Ukraine's European allies have begun to announce their support for allowing Ukraine to use Western-provided weapons to strike military targets in Russia. Danish Foreign Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen confirmed during a press conference on May 30 in Brussels that Denmark will allow Ukraine to use Danish-provided weapons and promised F-16 fighter jets to strike military targets in Russia. It appears that Germany is also now in favour of permitting Ukraine to use Western weapons to strike military targets in Russia.

In response, senior Russian security official Dmitry Medvedev issued a series of warnings to the West on 31 May 2024. "This is no military assistance, this is participation in a war against us," Medvedev said. He said it would be a "fatal mistake" on the part of the West to think that Russia was not ready to use tactical nuclear weapons against Ukraine - and spoke of the potential to strike unnamed hostile countries with strategic nuclear weapons.

### Russian President Visited China



Russian President Vladimir Putin recently paid a highly symbolic state visit to China on 16-17 May 2024. This trip, Putin's first since assuming the office of President for the fifth time, is inevitably a reflection of the qualitative strengthening of the Russia-China partnership. Incidentally, Moscow was President Xi Jinping's first port of call when Xi secured a third term last year.

The excellent rapport between the two Presidents, amid them meeting each other more than 40 times in the last decade, was evident during talks which also celebrated 75 years of diplomatic relations between the two neighbours.

Unsurprisingly, Putin labelled the official discussions 'very meaningful and very substantive' and insisted on 'relations having now reached the highest level in history'.

While no big-ticket announcements were made during this visit, the key takeaway was the signing of the 7,000-word joint statement which highlights the extraordinarily multifaceted bilateral relationship. It covers trade, investment, energy, defence, nuclear, health, education, innovation, artificial intelligence (AI), connectivity, ecology, space, automobile, agriculture, cyber, media, tourism and sports. Strong emphasis was placed on people-to-people interaction with both sides agreeing to hold the Year of Culture. It outlines a blueprint for cultural and humanitarian cooperation till 2030. It will also see St. Petersburg State University and Harbin Institute jointly establish a S&T school for 1,500 students.

Crucially, the joint statement highlighted their mutual support on their core issues such as Ukraine, Taiwan, North Korea, and, Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security architecture.

Notably, this growing traction in the Russia-China partnership is a remarkable feat given their chequered history. Their relationship since the 1950s has oscillated between friendship, alliance, adversary and partnership. The epochal trigger in the ongoing recalibration, however, has been the US geo-political pressure on both Moscow and Beijing. This has led to Russia and China finding common ground on shaping the emerging global order anchored to diluting their shared assessment of American unilateralism. Today, Russia appears to be increasingly depending on China to absorb the Western sanctions. Bilateral trade and inbound Chinese FDI have been vital in cushioning the blow of Western economic exodus from Russia. This includes China lapping up surplus Russian energy amidst the West weaning itself away from Russian hydrocarbons. Unsurprisingly, bilateral trade crossed US\$ 240 billion in 2023 with more than 90 per cent of their mutual transactions now being carried out in rouble and yuan.

In the same vein, Russia is relying on China to develop its resource-rich Far East – seen as the incubator of Russia's future growth. Similarly, Chinese micro-electronics, drone technology and machine tools are viewed as keeping the Russian needle moving in the war in Ukraine.

Perhaps, Russia's geo-strategic calculus in keeping China on its side is also shaped by the legacy of the Cold War. A US-China tandem made the Soviet Union's geopolitical environment extraordinarily hostile. A lesson learnt would have been to prevent a redo.

Also, a robust Russia-China partnership inevitably opens up two theatres for the West to tackle - Europe and Indo-Pacific - leading to possible distraction and diversion of Western focus and resources.

Meanwhile, China today gets to tap Russia's diplomatic heft (Kremlin has been batting for China, especially on the Indo-Pacific), military technology (particularly missile defence and jet engine technology) and natural resources. A market of 145 million strong Russian people also allows China to promote Chinese technological standards and Renminbi as a regional currency. Moreover, a peaceful border with Russia would enable Beijing to channel its strategic attention on its main rival in the US.

However, the growing conjecture of a Russia-China military alliance seems far-fetched. Moscow and Beijing are not natural allies. There also exist underlying Russian apprehensions about the unequal and imbalanced nature of ties which has seen Russia accommodate China in what has traditionally been its red lines – the Arctic, Far East and Central Asia. There also appears a growing consensus in the Russian strategic establishment that the Kremlin’s projection of Russia being a global pole cannot be juxtaposed with it being a junior partner of Beijing. This calls for Russia to maintain a degree of strategic autonomy vis-à-vis China, especially in Russia’s engagements with others.

For India, a Russia-China entente complicates India’s geopolitical environment. However, India could leverage the scope of the mutually beneficial relationship with Russia to wean Moscow away from Beijing. It includes adding more pillars to the India-Russia partnership. This could prevent Russia from toeing a Chinese line inimical to India’s interests. On the other hand, an India-Russia drift will likely lead to the latter seeking a closer embrace of China. This could particularly make India’s continental strategic environment acutely hostile.

### **Inauguration of Taiwan’s President William Lai and China’s Response**

On May 20th, Taiwan celebrated the inauguration of its fifth democratically elected president William Lai Ching-te. President William's Inaugural speech focused on three key areas. Firstly, he emphasized the importance of deepening democracy in Taiwan and working with other democratic nations to combat misinformation. Secondly, he highlighted plans to integrate AI and smart technologies into Taiwan's industrial sector and develop the nation's strengths in maritime industries. Lastly, he outlined Taiwan's commitment to deepening economic integration, signing bilateral investment agreements, and developing Five Trusted Industry Sectors.

Regarding the most important issue of Taiwan’s relationship with China, Mr. Lai in his inaugural speech was both conciliatory and unyielding on how the island should preserve its brittle peace with China, which claims Taiwan as its territory. He said he hoped to hold talks with Beijing. But he set out broad conditions that China’s leaders were unlikely to accept and vowed that Taiwan would keep building ties with fellow democracies as it fortified against China’s military buildup.

In his speech, Mr. Lai called for dialogue with leaders in Beijing — based on accepting Taiwan as a sovereign equal, still officially called the Republic of China. He also urged both sides to agree on reviving tourism between them and allowing Chinese students to attend Taiwanese universities.

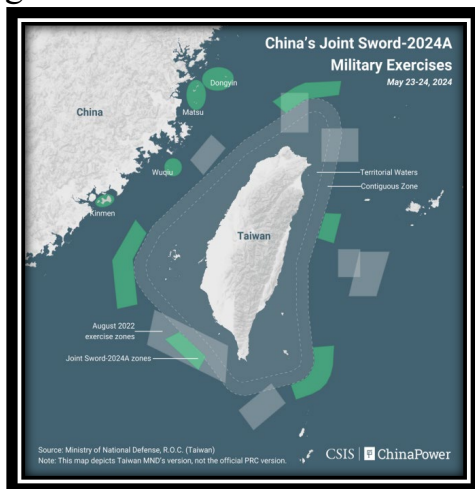
President William highlighted that China’s military action and grey-zone coercion tactics are a challenge to global peace and stability and called on Beijing to cease “political and military intimidation against Taiwan”. He emphasised that Taiwan “will uphold the Four Commitments, neither yield nor provoke, and maintain the status quo.”

Taiwan must not “harbour any delusions,” Mr. Lai said. “even if we were to accept China’s proposals in their entirety and forsake sovereignty, China’s attempts to



swallow up Taiwan would not disappear,” he said. “In the face of the many threats and attempts of infiltration from China, we must demonstrate our resolution to defend our nation.” He expressed hope that in the future China recognising the reality of the Republic of China’s existence will choose dialogue over confrontation and exchange over containment. International observers have broadly opined that President William’s speech projected a vision of a confident, international, and forward-looking Taiwan. Further, regarding cross-strait relations, the inaugural address indicated that the new administration would largely continue his predecessor’s approach of maintaining the status quo with China.

However, China reacted very sharply to Lai’s inaugural speech. The Chinese government’s office for Taiwanese affairs quickly denounced Mr. Lai’s speech,



accusing him of “inciting antagonism and confrontation across the strait.” Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson was quoted by the Chinese media stating that “Taiwan independence is a dead end” and “No matter under what guise or banner, pursuing Taiwan independence and secession is doomed to failure”. Chinese foreign minister, Wang Yi, condemned Mr Lai, saying “separatists” like him will be “nailed to a pillar of historical shame”.

On May 23, 2024, China commenced large-scale military exercises surrounding Taiwan, called “Joint Sword-2024A.” Chinese officials stated that the drills are intended to “serve as a strong punishment for the separatist acts of ‘Taiwan independence’ forces and a stern warning against the interference and provocation by external forces.” This activity by the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) was accompanied by what China called “comprehensive law enforcement operations” involving China’s coast guard around two of Taiwan’s offshore islands. This is the third round of major escalatory military exercises China has held around Taiwan, following unprecedented exercises in August 2022 and another round in April 2023. China’s MND published a map showing that operations would occur in five different zones around the island as well as four smaller zones surrounding Taiwan’s outlying islands (Kinmen, Wujiu, Matsu, and Dongyin). The publication of this map is different than before. When China conducted large-scale exercises in August 2022, Chinese authorities issued specific coordinates for seven exercise zones and warned ships and aircraft not to enter those zones. While China again announced zones for the exercises during the current exercise, it did not issue coordinates and warn ships and aircraft not to enter. The exercise lasted for two days. As per the Chinese Ministry of Defence, the joint exercises were “punishment” for “Taiwan separatists” and a “severe warning” to outside forces intent on interference and provocation.

The Joint Sword-2024A exercise and linked law enforcement operation indicate two likely trends. First, China is likely to continue to employ large-scale military activities around Taiwan to signal its displeasure. Second, China appears to be routinizing future large-scale PLA exercises intended to punish Taiwan.