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Current Geostrategic Issues

Report

The War in Ukraine

As the war in Ukraine entered its third year in February 2024 it was at a strategic stalemate. Both sides were exhausted and were facing severe shortages of defence matériel and combat personnel, however Russia has recovered faster than Ukraine and since then has been gaining the upper hand on land.

The situation now is looking grim for Ukraine.

In the crucial land battle, Ukraine remains on the defensive along the full length of its 1300km line of contact with Russian ground forces. Russian forces have made slow but steady gains, especially in the Donetsk Oblast, since seizing Avdiivka on 17 February. They are now focusing on Chasiv Yar (20km west of Bakhmut), Svatove, Kreminna and nearby villages, several of which have fallen to the Russians.

Since launching an armoured attack from its borders on 10 May Russia has made tactically significant advances north and northeast of Kharkiv, Ukraine's second largest city. It now appears that Russia is developing this thrust into a new front in northeast Ukraine.

Shortages of artillery ammunition and reinforcements to replace battle casualties continue to impede the Ukrainian defence. Russia, with its much larger population, is much better placed to address its personnel problems than is Ukraine which has lowered its draft age from 27 to 25 years and introduced a voluntary enlistment programme to address its shortage of defence manpower.

Russia has ramped up its manufacture of defence matériel and is receiving missiles, drones and other matériel from Iran and North Korea, although many of the vehicles and weapons currently entering operations at scale may be coming more from Soviet-era war stocks than from new manufactures.

Following renewed pleas for assistance from the Ukrainian President, the US Congress, on 21 April, finally approved some \$ 61 billion (US Dollars) (\$ 92 billion Australian dollars) in aid to Ukraine. Other nations, including Australia, which announced a \$100 million aid package, made more modest promises, but it will take time for the aid to flow through, especially to the front line where Ukraine remains critically short of artillery ammunition. Potentially, a case of too little too late.

The Ukrainian military and political leadership are openly talking of having to stage a tactical retreat in some areas to newly-prepared defensive lines some 30km behind the current front – in effect, ceding ground in the hope of eking out the available ammunition longer and reducing casualties.

Meanwhile, Russia has continued harassing missile and drone strikes on Ukrainian cities and key infrastructure, exploiting Ukraine's degraded air defence umbrella ahead of the arrival of US security assistance at scale. The most recent was a major airstrike on 7th and 8th of May causing damage to three thermal power plants.

There is a growing expectation that Russia is preparing to launch a major offensive within the next three months. Indeed, the new Kharkiv offensive, which Ukraine is struggling to contain, may be it. Should Ukraine prove unable to contain any such offensive, there is concern that Ukraine would be forced to sue for peace on Russia's terms, which the French President has deemed to be unacceptable.

In its favour, Ukraine has maintained its dominant position in the Black Sea where about a third of the Russian Black Sea Fleet has been destroyed by Ukrainian missiles and sea drones since the war began. These naval successes have enabled Ukraine to maintain the export of grain by sea, which has been vital for Ukraine's struggling economy and for food security in Africa and the Middle East.

Ukraine has also launched missile and drone attacks on Russian cities near the Russia-Ukraine border and deployed long-range drones to attack infrastructure targets deep inside Russia. It is estimated that attacks on Russian oil refineries have shut down around 14 per cent of Russia's refining capacity, impacting Moscow's highly lucrative trade in refined oil products.

Turning to the conflict in the Middle East

Hamas, the fundamentalist Sunni Islamic organisation that controlled Gaza, launched a series of coordinated raids on Israeli towns and villages near the Gaza border on 7 October 2023. Employing the tactics and tools of terrorism, the raiders killed some 1200 Israelis, mostly civilians, and then withdrew taking 253 hostages back into Gaza, some 130 of whom remain in captivity. This has led to conflict in Gaza, on the West Bank, on the Lebanon-Israel Border, in Iraq and Syria, in the Red Sea, and in Iran.

The war in Gaza

Israel began a ground offensive on 27 October with a view to destroying Hamas and rescuing as many hostages as possible. Initially, the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) focused on northern Gaza, especially Gaza City. Once the north had been subdued, the IDF then moved to southern Gaza, targeting Khan Yunis. The IDF then focused on central Gaza and now has begun to assault Rafah (in the far south on the Egyptian border), the last remaining Hamas stronghold.

In February, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ordered the Israeli Defence Forces to draw up a dual plan for the evacuation of some 1.3 to 1.7 million residents and internally displaced Palestinian citizens from Rafah, followed by a ground assault.

Pressure from the international community, especially the US, in early March forced Israel to suspend its Rafah offensive plans while ceasefire negotiations were conducted. Ceasefire talks continue in Cairo and Qatar (mediated by Egypt, Qatar and the US) but to date without success.

President Biden declared that Benjamin Netanyahu would 'cross a red line' if he undertook the Rafah offensive and would jeopardise the aid the US is providing to Israel pursuant to a 2016 multi-billion dollar annual funding agreement to provide Israel with military logistics support for 10 years.

On 5 May the IDF warned 100,000 Palestinians to evacuate eastern Rafah and move to a new refugee centre at al-Muwasi near Khan Yunis. The UN agency responsible for humanitarian aid in Gaza has estimated that about 450,000 have fled the city of Rafah over the past week. Residents in northern Gaza in the Jabalia area also were advised to move to shelters west of Gaza City.

On 7 May, following a night of air strikes, an IDF tank unit entered Rafah and seized the border crossing from Rafah into Egypt. The IDF then isolated east Rafah from west Rafah, encircling the eastern side of the city with tanks. President Biden immediately paused a shipment of bombs to Israel and warned that the US would cease provision of arms and ammunition to Israel should a full-scale invasion of Rafah follow. Israel said it already had sufficient munitions for the Rafah offensive and, if it had to, would go it alone.

The humanitarian situation in Gaza remains extreme. Up until 7 May, aid convoys had been able to enter Gaza but only with extreme difficulty. Israel closed the Kerem Shalom border crossing on 5 May. While it was reopened a few days' later, it has not recommenced operating. The situation now since Israel took control of the Rafah and Keren Shalom crossings is unclear.

At an estimated cost of US \$320 million, the US military has completed construction of the Gaza aid pier, a floating pier located off the shore of Gaza in the Mediterranean Sea, designed to increase the amount of aid getting into Gaza. The floating pier is reported to become operational "within days". Aid will be transported via commercial vessels to the floating platform, where it will be transferred to smaller vessels for shipment to Gaza. It is estimated that the amount of aid it can deliver would be around 100 trucks per day, which of itself would not replace the need for the Kerem Shalom and Rafah crossings to be reopened to humanitarian aid.

Wider Conflicts in the Middle East

Israelis continue to clash with Arab Palestinians on the West Bank, with Hezbollah on the Lebanese border and with Yemen's Houthis. The danger of triggering a wider war in the Middle East involving Iran remains and threatens to draw in the US and its allies. US forces in Iraq and Syria have been coming under sporadic missile attack from Shia militia thought to be acting as proxies for Iran.

Iran itself, however, has been careful not to become directly involved against the US and the US similarly has been careful to avoid direct conflict with Iran.

The Iran-Israel conflict.

On 1 April Israel launched an airstrike on Iran's embassy in Damascus, destroying the consulate building adjacent to the embassy and killing 13 people, including several senior military officers one of whom was Brigadier-General Mohammad Reza Zahedi, a senior commander in Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps. Iran vowed to respond.

Its response, however, was measured. It was signalled well in advance and focused on the Nevatim air base in the Negev Desert (home to Israel's F-35 fighter aircraft). On 13 April, Iran fired some 300 missiles (both cruise and ballistic) and long-range drones from Iran at Israel. Israel's 'Iron-Dome' air defence system, and allies in neighbouring territories – United States, Britain, France and Jordan – had little trouble in intercepting nearly all of them, most before they reached Israel. Four missiles hit Nevatim but caused only minor damage. A likely explanation for the limited response is that it was undertaken with a view to preventing further escalation.

Israel's response when it came on 19 April was equally restrained – a missile and some drone (armed quadcopter) strikes, probably launched from within Iran itself, directed at an army base in Isfahan province which contains a large airbase, a major missile production facility and several nuclear facilities. Rather than causing significant damage it served to illustrate Israel's capability. Iran made clear that it considered this series of exchanges had ended the matter and a further response by it was unnecessary.

The West Bank.

On the West Bank, over which the IDF provides security, clashes between Arab Palestinians, Israeli settlers and the IDF have continued over the past month. According to UN data, between 7 October and 31 January, some 440 Palestinians (110 of them children) and 15 Israelis had been killed. Since January, there has been an escalation of settler violence leading the US to impose sanctions on entities that had raised money for men accused of settler violence. The sanctions are the latest sign of growing US frustration with the policies of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

In Lebanon.

The militant Shia organisation in southern Lebanon, Hezbollah, is part of the Lebanese government and does not want war with Israel at this time. Nevertheless, it has been assisting Hamas by exchanging sufficient artillery and rocket fire with the IDF since 7 October to keep substantial IDF forces pinned on Israel's Lebanese border and forcing the evacuation of some 100,000 Israeli settlers from the border area. Border clashes have escalated recently and extended to the occupied Golan Heights. Israel also, using surgical missile strikes, has assassinated several key Hezbollah leaders in Lebanese towns well away from the border.

As of 21 March, around 100,000 Lebanese civilians had been displaced, 54 killed, and 1359 wounded. At least 320 militants had been killed. On the Israeli side, 5 civilians and 11 soldiers had been killed, and 41 civilians and 127 soldiers injured. Some 500 Israeli homes had been damaged. Targeted Israeli air and drones strikes continued during April and early May, as did drone and missile attacks by Hezbollah and its allies on Israel. By 6 May, the IDF death toll had increased to 18.

Iraq and Syria.

Since the main US withdrawal from Iraq in 2019, some 3000 - 5000 US forces have remained stationed in Iraq and Syria to help prevent a resurgence of ISIS. These forces have been coming under missile and drone attack from Iran-aligned terrorist groups that wish to expel the US from the region.

Israel also has a history of targeting leaders of Iran-aligned militias in Syria as opportunity presents. Since the IDF strike on the Iranian embassy compound in Damascus on 1 April, the IDF and Iranian-aligned militias in Syria have exchanged fire, at times almost daily.

Yemen and Red Sea

Yemen's Houthis are Shia rebels supported by Iran, who now govern much of western Yemen bordering on the Red Sea. In support of Hamas, since November, they have been using Iranian-supplied missiles and drones to attack commercial shipping in the Red Sea, the Bab el-Mandeb strait and the Gulf of Aden.

An international naval coalition led by the US has been seeking to provide protection for commercial shipping in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The naval ships have successfully intercepted many of the missiles and drones fired at the commercial vessels, but unless the Houthi bases are destroyed, the Houthi attacks are likely to continue. To this end, US and UK air force and naval strikes on Houthi rebel launching sites, arms caches, headquarters and the like in Yemen are continuing, but a ground assault on the bases does not appear to be in prospect.

More than 60 merchant ships have been attacked to date and three merchant seamen have been killed. The danger to crews and cargoes and increased insurance costs have forced shippers to avoid the Suez Canal and to choose the longer route via the Cape of Good Hope. Possibly as a result, there have been fewer attacks recently. Grain ships originating from the Black Sea and ones bound for Iran, Russia or China (for whom the Houthis guarantee safe passage) are about the only ones still using the Suez Canal route.

Strait of Hormuz

In early April, Iran moved to close the Strait of Hormuz at the entrance to the Arabian Gulf. On 13 April, Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps commandos seized a Portuguese cargo ship, the *MSC Aries*, in the strait and took it into Iranian waters. Iran claims the ship was linked to Israel. Iran released seven of its 25 crew on 10 May.

At the United Nations in New York on 10 May, Australia was one of 143 nations who voted in the General Assembly in favour of a motion which recognised that Palestine was qualified to join the UN as a full member. The vote, however, did not grant Palestine full membership as this requires the approval of the Security Council where a motion to grant it was vetoed by the United States in April. The application will now go back to the Security Council.

After seven months of conflict, while Gaza has been largely destroyed at a huge humanitarian cost, Israel is yet to achieve its stated war aims. It has not destroyed Hamas, has not rescued all the hostages and has not restored its security. For the first time, it has been attacked on its own soil by Iran and it is facing an unprecedented erosion in international support. Israel has begun its assault on Rafah but also has had to return to Jabalia in northern Gaza where fierce fighting with Hamas has broken out again. It will no doubt be successful in removing Hamas from Rafah and Jabalia for now, but it is less clear whether Hamas will have been broken as a fighting force.

Observers are wondering where to for Israel from here. A likely outcome at this stage would appear to be a prolonged Israeli occupation of Gaza with a probable ongoing insurgency, as Israel turns its attention to its northern borders.

Turning now to other areas of strategic interest for Australia

In the Solomon Islands

In a surprise outcome, former prime minister Manasseh Sogavare and his party failed to secure an outright majority at last month's parliamentary elections in the Solomon Islands. While Sogavare retained his seat in parliament, he was ousted as leader by his party and resigned the premiership. He was replaced as party leader by former foreign minister Jeremiah Manele, who on 2 May was elected as prime minister by the parliament at the head of a diverse coalition. Manele has said there will be no change to foreign policy under his administration, although he is thought to bear less animus towards Australia than Sogavare did. The Solomons tilt towards China, though, is unlikely to change.

Australia-China Military Diplomacy

The Australian Chief of Navy, Vice Admiral Mark Hammond, met face-to-face with his Chinese counterpart in late April at the 19th Western Pacific Naval Symposium in Qingdao, China. Hammond advised Admiral Hu Zhongming that he remained concerned about unsafe and unprofessional behaviour by units of the Peoples' Liberation Army-Navy in contested international waters, citing in particular the incident in which divers from HMAS *Toowoomba* were injured in a sonar attack in the South China Sea last November.

Notwithstanding these representations, there was a similar unsafe incident in international waters on 4 May, this time in the Yellow Sea. An Australian MH-60R Seahawk helicopter from HMAS *Hobart*, which was engaged in enforcing UN Security Council sanctions against North Korea, was forced to take evasive action after a Chinese People's Liberation Army Air Force jet fighter detonated flares about 60m above and 300m in front of the helicopter. Fortunately, the helicopter was unaffected, and all crew are safe but had flares hit the helicopter the consequence would have been significant. Australia considers the Chinese plane's actions as 'unsafe and unprofessional' and immediately made diplomatic representations to China.

India-Australia Relations

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, leads a Hindu nationalist government which pursues many populist policies. He appears to be very popular among India's predominantly Hindu population and the Indian diaspora, including in Australia. While India officially remains non-aligned, it still relies heavily on Russia for military equipment and training. It is supporting Russia economically, but has a tense strategic relationship with its neighbour, China, both along the common land border and at sea, principally in the Indian Ocean. Many Indians, like Chinese, undertake higher education in Australia. As a consequence of these conflicting interests, our partnership with India through the Quad is somewhat fraught.

The alleged assassination by Indian intelligence operatives last June of a Canadian citizen on Canadian soil has not helped the relationship. Canada announced on 4 May that Canadian police have arrested and charged three Indian men with the murder of Sikh separatist leader Hardeep Singh Nijjar who advocated for an independent Sikh homeland in Kashmir. They said they were probing whether the men had ties to the Indian government. There remains concern that Indian expatriates in Australia who advocate for an independent Sikh homeland also could be targeted similarly.

It emerged publicly for the first time on 30 April that the 'nest of spies' uncovered by ASIO in 2020 and expelled by Australia were also Indian intelligence operatives. That will add further tension to the bilateral relationship.

This strategic update summary was produced by David Leece, chair of the RUSI NSW Special Interest Group on Strategy.

The SIG Strategy Group seeks to enhance knowledge of strategy, including the evolution of strategic thought; maintain awareness of current geo-strategic issues; and undertake research on nominated issues of current strategic interest.

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