



Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies NSW

September 2024

Current Geostrategic Issues

Report

Please note: This monthly update presents the geostrategic situation as at 10 September 2024. As often with these rapidly changing events, the monthly update can be out-of-date by the time the podcast is issued.

The War in Ukraine

The War on Land

This year until the end of July, Russia had held the initiative in the war on land and had been principally on the offensive while Ukraine had been on the defensive. Fighting had been fierce along the whole 1000km front from Kharkiv oblast and the Donbas in the east to Zaporizhzhia and Kherson oblasts in the south. Russia had inched forward on several fronts making most progress in Donetsk oblast, where it had been threatening Chasiv Yar, Toretsk and the strategic logistics hub of Pokrovsk.

Neither side, however, had seemed able to concentrate the combat power [munitions, equipment and troops] that would be needed for a decisive breakthrough anywhere along the front. Indeed, in May-June, Ukraine blunted and contained a new Russian cross-border offensive in the northeast from Russia's Belgorod oblast towards Kharkiv. This offensive only penetrated some 6km into Kharkiv oblast and gained little territory.

This situation changed on 6 August, however, when Ukraine launched a successful cross-border incursion from Sumy oblast in Ukraine's northeast into Kursk oblast in Russia's southwest. It caught Russia by surprise. Ukraine used some of its best formations supported by tanks, artillery and swarms of aerial drones and employed speed and manoeuvre to good effect. It made considerable ground against weak opposition.

By 10 September, the war on land had devolved into two offensives – the Russian offensive in Donetsk oblast; and the Ukrainian offensive in Kursk oblast. On 5 September, President Putin declared that Russia's "primary objective" in the conflict was to capture the entire Donbas area – which consists of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts.

The Donetsk Offensive: In Donetsk oblast over the past month, Russian forces have been pressing ahead with their offensive towards Pokrovsk. They launched some 43 attacks on the city's outskirts on 21 August, but took heavy casualties in the process. They subsequently seized several outlying villages and were putting tremendous pressure on the defenders. By 5 September, they were also undertaking intensified operations southwest and west of Donetsk City trying to widen the southern flank of their Pokrovsk salient. On 8 September, Russian forces took the town of Novohrodivka, 12km from Pokrovsk. Later reports said Russian forces were attacking beyond Novohrodivka in at least two places less than 7 km from Pokrovsk.

In response to Ukraine's Kursk offensive, however, Russia has been forced to transfer some 30,000 troops from Ukraine to Kursk oblast. These troops have been drawn from across the front. Any hopes Ukraine had had regarding their transfer from Donetsk seem not to have been realised. Instead, Ukraine has been forced to strengthen its Donetsk defences.

Overall, since January, Russia has seized a further 930 km² of Ukrainian territory and now controls about 80 per cent of Donbas, but has done so at a very heavy cost in personnel (more than 180,000 casualties), armoured vehicles and munitions, leading some Western experts to predict that Russia will be unable to sustain its current Donetsk offensive for more than another couple of months.

The Kursk Offensive: As to Ukraine's Kursk offensive, by 10 September, Ukraine claimed to have pushed 28 to 35km into Kursk oblast on a front at least 40km wide, and to have captured some 1263km² of Russian territory, including 93 settlements. It had also captured about 100 prisoners which it is hoping to exchange for captured Ukrainian soldiers. More than 121,000 Russian civilians had been forced to flee. Ukraine also had damaged three bridges over the Seym River, cutting resupply to Russian troops opposing the Ukrainian invasion and providing left flank protection to the invading forces. Further, the destruction of these bridges may impact resupply, particularly of ammunition, to Donetsk oblast and the battle for Pokrovsk. By 10 September, however, the Ukrainian incursion had slowed considerably and Ukraine may need to go on the defensive there soon. President Zelenskyy says the Kursk operation is intended to create a 'buffer zone' at the border to prevent further Russian attacks across the border there.

The War at Sea

On the maritime front, there has been little change over the past month. Ukraine is continuing to maintain its dominant position in the Black Sea and Sea of Azov. At least 15 warships, nearly half of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, have been destroyed by Ukrainian missiles and sea-drones since the war began. Most of the Black Sea Fleet's remaining warships have been forced to relocate from Sevastopol to the port of Novorossiysk, over 300km away on the Russian mainland. Novorossiysk itself continues to come under Ukrainian missile and drone attack forcing Russia to disperse some warships within the eastern Black Sea. 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.

Harassing Civil Society

Meanwhile, Russia has continued harassing missile and drone strikes on Ukrainian cities and key infrastructure (energy grid and ports), exploiting Ukraine's degraded air defence umbrella. For example, on 3 September, two Russian ballistic missiles blasted a military academy and nearby hospital in Poltava in eastern Ukraine, killing more than 50 people and wounding more than 200 others. The following day, there was a Russian missile strike on Lviv in western Ukraine near the Polish border which killed seven people. The Poltava attack was one of the deadliest in the war to date.

Lack of adequate air defence measures, including fighter aircraft, remains a major issue for Ukraine. Ukraine, however, recently received the long-promised US F-16 fighter jets. One F-16 has been lost already. It crashed while opposing a Russian missile strike, possibly shot down in error by a Ukrainian surface-to-air missile. The pilot, one of Ukraine's most experienced, was killed. President Zelenskyy responded by sacking the chief of the Ukrainian Air Force.

In response to such Russian attacks, Ukraine continues to launch missile and drone attacks on Russian cities near the Russia-Ukraine border and has deployed hundreds of long-range drones to attack infrastructure targets, including airfields and oil depots, deep inside Russia. Ukrainian missile and drone 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.

On 10 September, Ukraine targeted the Russian capital, Moscow, in its biggest drone attack so far, killing at least one person, setting fire to multi-storey residential buildings and wrecking dozens of homes. Russia said it had destroyed at least 20 Ukrainian attack drones as they swarmed over the Moscow region and 124 more over eight other regions. During the attack, three of Moscow's four airports were closed for more than six hours and almost 50 flights were diverted.

While Ukraine uses the drones that it manufactures itself to attack targets deep within Russia, it is not permitted to use the missiles provided by NATO for such purposes. Ukraine is seeking to have that prohibition rescinded. The immediate US response appeared to be "no".

Political Leadership and Wider Implications for Europe

Overall, the war is putting tremendous strain on the political leadership of Ukraine and Russia. In Ukraine on 5 September, President Zelenskyy replaced nine senior ministers, including the foreign minister and two deputy prime ministers, with a view to reinvigorating his administration.

NATO countries on the fringes of the conflict say their airspace is being increasingly violated by Russian drones. Romania reported that a Russian drone flew into its territory during night-time attacks on Ukraine on 1 September, while another crashed in eastern Latvia the previous day. Latvian president, Edgars Rinkevics, said these types of incidents were becoming more frequent along NATO's eastern flank. Poland also has flagged repeated Russian incursions. Analysts say there are suspicions Moscow may be testing the Western alliance, and little is being done to stop it. Now countries close to the war are becoming more vocal, calling for greater powers to protect themselves and take out Russian threats.

Since the war began in February 2022, Russian exiles have established a vibrant community in Belgrade, with over 30,000 Russians registered for temporary residence in Serbia. Many Russians, though, struggle to integrate, preferring to maintain their cultural identity. A wave of tens of thousands of Russians went to Serbia after the invasion, many choosing Belgrade for its ancient cultural and religious ties to Moscow.

Conflicts in the Middle East

Hamas, the fundamentalist Sunni Islamic organisation that governs Gaza, launched a series of co-ordinated 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 about 250 hostages back into Gaza, about 100 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.

Over the last month, the international focus has been on the expected response by Iran and its proxies in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen to Israel's assassination of two top Hezbollah and Hamas leaders – Hezbollah military commander, Fuad Shukr, in Beirut on 30 July; and Hamas political leader and chief peace talks negotiator, Ismail Haniyeh, in Tehran on 31 July.

There was also major concern about an outbreak of polio among children in Gaza; the killing of six Israeli hostages by Hamas which spawned political demonstrations in Israel against the government; and a major IDF security operation in the occupied West Bank, during which a Turkish-American citizen was shot dead by an IDF soldier.

Meanwhile, the all-important peace talks have continued, but the two sides have failed to reach agreement.

Revenge Attacks

Hezbollah carried out a carefully calibrated attack on northern Israel on 25 August. It launched more than 320 Katyusha rockets and drones towards Israel and hit 11 military targets, after Israeli jets, anticipating the barrage, extensively bombarded southern Lebanon in a pre-emptive attack reducing the dimensions of Hezbollah's strike. Hezbollah said the strike was in retaliation for the assassination of Hezbollah military commander, Fuad Shukur, in Beirut on 30 July; and that the barrage had completed "the first phase" of its response, but that the full response would take "some time".

As to revenge by Iran and its proxies other than Hezbollah, the major retaliation for which Israel is preparing itself had not eventuated by 10 September. Iran indicated that it would withhold its retaliatory attack if Israel agreed to a ceasefire deal.

Gaza

In Gaza itself, Israel began a ground offensive there 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, especially Khan Yunis. The IDF then cleared central Gaza and on 7 May began systematically clearing Rafah in the far south on the Egyptian border.

Rafah had been the last remaining Hamas stronghold and some had expected that its clearance might end the fighting. Hamas, however, re-emerged in previously cleared areas of north and central Gaza. Hence, the IDF had to return to those areas and has been involved in heavy fighting in both north and central Gaza concurrent with its assault on Rafah. Indeed, the war seems to have evolved from a sequence of major battles to reduce Hamas strongholds into continuous urban warfare against smaller Hamas forces throughout the Gaza Strip.

With Rafah surrounded and isolated, the IDF was able to secure a buffer zone along the full length of its southern border with Egypt – the so-called Philadelphi Corridor. This was considered important to prevent resupply of Hamas with war matériel from the Sinai.

The IDF completed its operations in Rafah on 31 August and before it withdrew it found in a tunnel under the city the bodies of six hostages, including one Israeli-American, Hersh Goldberg-Polin, who had been murdered by Hamas a short time before the IDF reached them. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he was heartbroken to hear the news and that Israel would not rest until it had caught those responsible. Senior Hamas official Izzat El-Reshiq said that Israel, in its refusal to sign a ceasefire deal, was responsible for the deaths.

Meanwhile, Hamas and Islamic Jihad resumed suicide bombing in Tel Aviv on 19 August and urban guerrilla warfare has continued across the Gaza Strip with the IDF using overwhelming firepower to defeat the Hamas guerrillas. In part to minimise infantry casualties, Israel is relying heavily on air strikes to destroy valuable targets and assassinate Hamas leaders. With Hamas

operating from a system of tunnels beneath the enclave, especially its cities and major infrastructure such as hospitals and schools, even with the use of ‘smart weapons’ informed by good intelligence and aerial surveillance, it is inevitable that collateral damage will be high.

For example, on 10 September, at least 40 Palestinians were killed and 60 injured in an Israeli air strike on a tent encampment west of Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip. Women and children were among those injured. The pre-dawn Israeli strike by at least four missiles blasted a huge crater, set tents ablaze and buried Palestinian families under sand. The tent encampment was in the Al-Mawasi area which is designated as a humanitarian zone. The camp was crowded with displaced Palestinians who had fled from elsewhere in the enclave. The Israeli military said it targeted a Hamas command centre. Hamas denied its fighters were present.

International Peace Efforts

While these IDF ground operations have been underway, the international community has become appalled by the ongoing loss of civilian life and mass destruction of civil infrastructure which have accompanied the IDF assault on Gaza. Peace negotiations led by the United States, Egypt and Qatar have continued culminating in a ceasefire plan being championed by the US. On 11 June, the United Nations Security Council backed this plan. The two protagonists, however, did not accept the proposal and remain far apart on their fundamental demands.

The US, Egypt and Qatar are urging the two protagonists to return to the negotiating table, claiming there are only a couple of issues to be resolved before an interim truce could come into force. Hamas agreed to a modified plan put to the parties on 2 July but Israel inserted additional clauses unacceptable to Hamas.

With negotiations stalled, a view widely held in Israel is that Netanyahu does not want peace until he has achieved ‘total victory’, which overrides any desire he may have to recover the hostages. As of 21 August, the main sticking points seemed to be:

- Israel’s insistence on keeping troops in Gaza in two places, the “Philadelphi Corridor” (along the Gaza/Egypt border) and the “Netzarim Corridor” (an east-west corridor just south of Gaza City which divides northern Gaza from southern Gaza), whereas Hamas insists on a complete IDF withdrawal from Gaza;
- Israel’s insistence that certain prisoners it releases in exchange for the Hamas-held hostages be exiled [i.e. not be permitted to return to Gaza or the West Bank] – Hamas rejects this proposal; and
- while Israel may accept a temporary ceasefire, it rejects a permanent ceasefire as demanded by Hamas.

Of these, the Philadelphi Corridor condition is the most contentious. Netanyahu is insisting that the IDF troops remain there. His main political opponent, former general and IDF chief-of-staff, Benny Gantz, however, said on 3 September that Israel does not need to keep troops in the southern Gazan border area for security reasons and doing so should not be used as a reason to prevent a deal to bring the remaining hostages home.

The Humanitarian Situation

The humanitarian situation in Gaza by 10 September remained extreme. More than 40,800 Gazans had been killed (of whom more than half were women and children) and 94,100 wounded since the war began, according to the Hamas-run health ministry; health and social services were

in disarray; key civil infrastructure had been largely destroyed; and children were dying of malnutrition as famine spread across the enclave. An outbreak of polio among children was feared.

Polio has re-emerged in Gaza for the first time in 25 years. In August, a 10-month-old unvaccinated child contracted the disease and became paralysed in one leg. The spread of polio, a highly infectious disease that is most often spread through sewage and contaminated water, poses life-threatening risks for children – especially as the majority of Gaza’s hospitals and health clinics have been destroyed or are only partially functioning. There is no cure for polio, but vaccines can protect a child for life.

A vaccination programme began on 31 August using 1.6 million polio vaccines provided by UNICEF with a view to vaccinating 640,000 children in two rounds. Within each round, pauses in the fighting agreed to by the IDF and Hamas are scheduled to enable vaccines to be administered by 708 teams at hospitals and primary health care centres and by 316 community outreach teams throughout the Gaza Strip. Around 2700 health workers, including mobile and outreach workers, will support the delivery of both rounds of the campaign.

By 4 September, UNRWA reported that good progress was being made, some 187,000 children in central Gaza having received the vaccine. Israel and Hamas were agreeing to daily eight-hour pauses in the fighting in pre-specified areas to allow the vaccinations to proceed. No violations had been reported. The campaign will move to other areas of the Gaza Strip for the second round scheduled for late September.

It has not all been ‘plain sailing’ more recently, though. A convoy of United Nations vehicles and staff was detained for more than eight hours by the IDF in northern Gaza on 9 September despite prior detailed co-ordination. The convoy included Palestinian and international staff working as part of the polio vaccination campaign underway in northern Gaza and Gaza City. The IDF said it had received intelligence that a number of “Palestinian suspects” were travelling with the convoy.

The West Bank

On 15 August, Israeli settlers attacked a Palestinian village near the city of Nablus on the West Bank. Israeli leaders, including Netanyahu, condemned the attacks.

On 28 August, hundreds of Israeli troops began carrying out raids on Palestinian towns and villages in one of their largest operations in the occupied West Bank in months. Israel said that it aimed to thwart attacks on its civilian settlers, notwithstanding that there had been a rise in Israeli settler attacks on Palestinians.

On 31 August, clashes broke out between Israeli troops and Palestinians as Israel pushed ahead with a military operation in the flashpoint city of Jenin. The operation involved hundreds of troops and police backed by helicopters and drones entering all areas of the city and the adjacent refugee camp as well as surrounding villages. During subsequent days, troops fought running gunbattles with Palestinian fighters from factions including Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Fatah.

From an international perspective, matters came to a head on 6 September when Israeli troops shot dead a 26-year-old Turkish-American woman who had been participating in a protest against Israeli settlement expansion in the West Bank. The White House said it was deeply disturbed by the death of Aysenur Ezgi Eygi and called on Israel to investigate. Turkey’s foreign ministry said she was shot in the head, and blamed Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s government for her death.

The same day, the IDF ended its nine-day operation having killed many militants and some civilians. By the time the Israeli forces pulled out of Jenin, they left behind a mass of demolished and damaged buildings and infrastructure. Thousands of residents had been displaced from their homes. Water and electricity services remained cut and around 20km of roadway had been dug up by Israeli bulldozers, a tactic the military said was aimed at neutralizing roadside bombs but which had ripped up much of the centre of the city. The military said 30 explosives planted under the roads had been dismantled.

On 8 September, the IDF said a truck driver opened fire at an Israeli border crossing between the occupied West Bank and Jordan, killing three Israeli guards before being shot dead by security forces. Israel closed all three of its land border crossings with Jordan after the attack.

Lebanon

Over the last month, the daily exchanges of artillery and rocket fire by the two sides across the Lebanese-Israeli border have continued. On 7 September, three Lebanese paramedics from the Lebanese Civil Defence were killed and two others wounded, one critically, in an Israeli attack while they were extinguishing fires sparked by recent Israeli air strikes in the southern town of Faroun. The IDF said it struck and eliminated terrorists from the Amal terrorist organisation that operated within a Hezbollah military structure in the area. Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati condemned the attack as a violation of international law and announced an emergency meeting with Western ambassadors and international organisations to address the ongoing hostilities.

Hannibal Directive

It emerged in the Israeli press during the month that, in the chaos accompanying the 7 October 2023 Hamas raid on southern Israel, Israeli forces may have killed some of their own citizens to prevent them being taken hostage in the belief that the so-called 'Hannibal Directive' applied. The Hannibal Directive is a controversial procedure used by Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) to prevent the capture of Israeli soldiers by enemy forces. According to one version, it says that "the kidnapping must be stopped by all means, even at the price of striking and harming our own forces".

The Israeli military is now coming under increasing pressure to reveal just how many of their own citizens were killed by Israeli soldiers, pilots and police in the confusion of the Hamas attack. Survivors and relatives have been asking not just "what went wrong", but whether the military invoked the Hannibal Directive.

Assessment

The war in Gaza has evolved into asymmetric urban guerrilla warfare which both sides may be able to sustain indefinitely at different levels of intensity, unless a peace agreement can be reached.

Dr Roger Shanahan, a Middle East analyst and former Australian army officer with operational experience in Lebanon, Syria and Afghanistan, writing in The Sydney Morning Herald on 16 August assessed the strategic situation as follows:

"... too much of the Netanyahu government's decision-making has been driven by a short-term desire for vengeance rather than Israel's long-term security ..."

"There is no question that the Netanyahu government had to respond to the Hamas attack [of 7 October 2023]. Yet the strategic aims it set itself, along with the scale and duration of the

operation, should have been constructed so that at the end Israel was more secure than it was at the start. In its local and regional response, Israel has mistaken tactical acumen for strategic acuity. In trying to destroy Hamas by military means alone and therefore prolong Gaza's misery, Israel's future security is now less certain."

Sudan

Sudan is a country of 50 million people and a civil war there, which has been ongoing for 17 months (since 15 April 2023), has created a humanitarian crisis on a scale comparable to or exceeding those in Ukraine and Gaza. The civil war is between rival factions in the Sudanese military government – the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) under General Abdel Fattah al-Burnham and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) under Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, aka 'Hemedti'.

Most fighting has been concentrated around the capital, Khartoum, and in the Darfur region in the country's west. Since April, intense fighting has focused on three regions – North Darfur where more than 40 villages have been burned and civilians trapped with no safety or food in El Fasher; Kordofan in central Sudan, which the RSF now largely controls; and around Khartoum and along the Blue and White Niles where the RSF also appears to have the upper hand. On 2 May, a US Senate hearing estimated that the death toll could be as high as 150,000.

As of 5 July, the war continued unabated with the RSF having the upper hand in Darfur and Khartoum, with the SAF operating from Port Sudan on the Red Sea coast and seeking to challenge the RSF in its strongholds. Some 7.7 million had been internally displaced, more than 2.1 million had fled the country as refugees, and perhaps up to 25 million (half the population) were facing starvation.

The UN World Food Programme now considers this to be the world's largest hunger crisis. More than half the population is now experiencing crisis levels of hunger. Multiple areas are at risk of famine, and on 1 August famine was confirmed in a camp sheltering hundreds of thousands of displaced people in North Darfur.

UNHCR advises that since the war began more than 10 million people have been forced to flee. Conflict is escalating, malnutrition is rampant and medical supplies are running out. Families are seeking protection, both in Sudan and in neighbouring countries – Chad, Central African Republic, South Sudan, Ethiopia and Egypt. Famine has been confirmed in North Darfur. Some 50 per cent of the population is experiencing acute hunger. Many people have died of starvation and millions more across the country are on the brink. Some people have resorted to eating dirt and leaves out of desperation. Women and children are experiencing atrocious violence. There are more internally-displaced people in Sudan than anywhere else in the world. Camps for displaced people are stretched to their limits and health clinics have been forced to close.

Indonesia

On 29 August, Australia and Indonesia signed an Australia-Indonesia Defence Co-operation Agreement. The treaty-level pact was signed in Jakarta by Richard Marles, Australia's defence minister and deputy prime minister; and Prabowo Subianto, a former general who is Indonesia's defence minister and incoming president. The agreement is expected to facilitate more ambitious joint military exercises between the two countries and will allow for enhanced practical co-operation and interoperability between our defence forces in areas such as maritime security, counter terrorism, humanitarian and disaster relief, logistics support, education and training, as

well as across defence industry. Indonesia, however, is not expected to ditch its non-aligned foreign policy nor its concerns about the AUKUS agreement.

Timor Leste

In mid-August, Beijing signed an agreement to strengthen its “comprehensive strategic partnership” with Timor Leste. Two weeks later, it sent a military delegation to the small island state. It was reported on 31 August that the two sides had reached a series of understandings on bilateral defence.

In recent years, China has been boosting its defence diplomacy with small island developing states like Timor Leste, which sits on the Southeast Asian boundary with Oceania. Faced with development and climate change challenges, many of these island nations have gained traction from the geopolitical rivalry between China and the United States.

Pacific Tourism

On 8 September, it was reported that Pacific Island nations like Fiji hope to lure China’s tourists with a promise of ‘purity’ as travellers return to the skies.

In the case of Palau, though, tourist numbers from Asia are less than half their pre-pandemic levels – partly driven by a drop in Japanese and Korean visitors, but it is Chinese tourist numbers that have fallen most. After peaking at 90,000 in 2015, the number of visitors from China fell to 28,000 in 2019. Last year, fewer than 8,000 visited.

Commenting on the trend in August, Palau's president, Surangel Whipps Jr, said the Chinese government was “weaponising” tourism by discouraging citizens from visiting Palau, one of a shrinking number of Pacific countries that recognise Taiwan and therefore do not have official relations with Beijing.

Antarctica – new Chinese base

China has expanded its presence in Antarctica opening a new base, Qinling, which can house 80 residents year-round. It is China’s fifth Antarctic base and the third capable of year-round operations. While ostensibly focused on ‘sustainable development’ [which may mean preparing for natural resources exploitation], from this highly strategic location it also potentially can monitor Australian and New Zealand communications using the BeiDou navigation network.

AUKUS

AUKUS is the Australia-United Kingdom-United States Trilateral Security Partnership signed in September 2021, an agreement to jointly develop advanced military technology, Pillar One of which relates to building a nuclear-powered attack submarine (SSN) and Pillar Two of which relates to other advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, hypersonic missiles and quantum technologies.

On 9 September, it was reported from Washington that, while the United States is satisfied with progress under AUKUS Pillar I, it is growing impatient with lack of progress under Pillar II’s eight priority research fields: advanced cyber, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, undersea capabilities, hypersonics, electronic warfare, innovation, and information sharing; each of which has game-winning potential in the strategic competition with China. Since AUKUS was announced three years ago, China has extended its advantage in critical technologies. The Biden

administration is pushing for the AUKUS partnership to launch two or three world-leading military technology projects under AUKUS Pillar II before President Biden's presidency ends next January.

Australia

RAN Long-range Strike Capability. Australia's 2023 Defence Strategic Review emphasised the need for Australia to be able to hold an enemy at risk and at longer distance from Australia. Long-range missiles were to be an important means of doing this. To this end, the Royal Australian Navy demonstrated its long-range strike capability in a military exercise, Exercise RIMPAC 24, in the Pacific near Hawaii in July, when the air-warfare destroyer, HMAS Sydney, successfully tested its new naval strike missile, the so-called Standard Missile 6 (SM-6). The SM-6 is expected to replace the ageing Harpoon weapon system in the RAN inventory and both the Hobart-class air-warfare destroyers and ANZAC-class frigates will be equipped with it.

RAAF Long-range Strike Capability. On 5 September, the Australian government announced that it had signed a contract with Kongsberg Defence & Aerospace to acquire Joint Strike Missiles (JSMs) for the RAAF F-35A Lightning II joint strike fighter. The contract, valued at AUD142 million, will expedite Australia's guided weapons capability and give the F-35As a long-range strike capability. The JSM is designed to fit into the F-35A's internal weapons bay, preserving the aircraft's stealth characteristics. The number of missiles to be acquired under the contract was not specified.

Missile Manufacture. Australia will invest \$850 million on a factory near Newcastle to build long-range strike missiles, with the first to be delivered in 2027. The factory will be operated by Norwegian arms manufacturer, Kongsberg. It is the latest measure to establish a guided weapons facility in Australia. The factory will produce the Naval Strike Missile (NSM) and the Joint Strike Missile (JSM). The factory will be the first outside Norway to make the NSM and the JSM which will be carried by the navy's warships and the air force's joint strike fighters, respectively. The JSM has a range of about 500km; the NSM's range is about 250km and can sink a surface warship. The missiles cost up to \$4 million each. About 100 missiles a year will be produced, with the potential for them to be exported to other militaries, including the United States.

Mild Traumatic Brain Injury. Scientists have discovered that invisible blast waves repeatedly buffeting soldiers' brains in routine training are causing new kinds of visible physical brain injury, inflammation and scarring. The debilitating symptoms of mild traumatic brain injury (mTBI) can look a lot like PTSD and other psychological conditions experienced by many veterans. Soldiers are most exposed to blast waves during repetitive heavy weapon training exercises – meaning even those who never see active combat are at risk.

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