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Current Geostrategic Issues Report

The War in Ukraine

As the war in Ukraine entered its third year on 24 February 2024, a strategic stalemate pertained. Both sides were exhausted and were facing severe shortages of defence matériel and combat personnel, but Russia was recovering faster and since then has been slowly gaining the upper hand on land.

Most analysts assess that Ukraine is gradually losing the war. Promised Western aid to Ukraine largely remains stalled. Nevertheless, following the US Congress on 21 April finally approving some USD61 billion (AUD92 billion) in aid to Ukraine, some American war matériel has begun flowing through to the front line. Further, America has eased some constraints on Ukraine's use of US munitions to attack targets within Russia itself, particularly on the new northeastern front opposite Kharkiv. These constraints have been severely compromising Ukraine's ability to attack Russian command, logistics and other facilities in rear areas, although the new permission granted covers only some 16 per cent of the Russian territory now within range (300km) of US Army Tactical Missile System (A T A C M S) missiles.

The flow of US aid to the front, however, remains slow and, so far, it has not included more air defence systems for which Zelenskyy has been pleading. If Ukraine is to win, it will be vital to get the long-promised US F-16 fighter jets in the air as soon as possible along with the Mirage 2000-5 fighters that France promised on 6 June. The latter, though, will require Ukrainian pilots to be trained in France and will not be ready to enter combat before year's end.

At a St Petersburg International Economic Forum on 7 June, Vladimir Putin articulated his current strategic approach to eventual Russian victory in the war. He assumes that:

- Russian forces will be able to continue gradual creeping advances on land indefinitely – aiming to “squeeze” Ukrainian forces out of “those territories that should be under Russian control”;
- prevent Ukraine from conducting successful, operationally-significant counter offensives; and
- win a war of attrition against Ukrainian forces – given the level of voluntary recruitment (currently some 20,000 – 30,000 per month) and increased rate of manufacture of war matériel, Russia will be able to outlast Western and Ukrainian resolve to continue the war.

At present, Putin's strategy appears to be on track. In the crucial land battle, an armoured ground attack from the Russian border towards Kharkiv (40km south of the border), which began on 10 May, was held initially by Ukrainian forces. Since then, Russia has gained some 1000km² of territory, captured several villages, and entered the town of Vovchansk. It has deployed air-

launched 'glide bombs' from inside Russia in support of the advance and against Kharkiv. Two glide bombs devastated a crowded hardware store in Kharkiv on 25 May killing at least 18 civilians and wounding dozens more. Russian forces also are massing over the border further north opposite Sumy, which has been under intermittent missile and drone attack for several days. So far, this is a limited Russian advance which seems to have stalled over the past week. It remains unclear whether Russia plans to develop it into a new front in northeast Ukraine, or simply create a buffer at the border, or whether it is a feint intended to draw in and pin Ukrainian reinforcements.

Elsewhere, Ukraine remains on the defensive along the full length (1300km) of the line of contact with Russian ground forces which runs from north to south in eastern Ukraine through the Donbas, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson sectors. Fierce fighting is continuing along the entire front line. 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, the area northwest of Avdiivka, Kupyansk, Siversk, Donetsk City and nearby villages, several of which have fallen to the Russians. Critical shortages of artillery ammunition and reinforcements to replace battle casualties continue to impede the Ukrainian defence.

It is anticipated, though, that as Ukraine receives more of the US Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS) equipments and missiles which have a range of 300km, the US may permit Ukraine to deploy them to strike targets in Russia more widely than just the Kharkiv front. It certainly will be able use the ATACMS to strike Russian targets anywhere within the Crimean peninsula, where Ukraine is attempting to make Crimea uninhabitable for the Russians. Indeed, it is seeking to isolate Crimea and deny Russia its use as a logistics base for the fighting in the Kherson, Zaporizhzhia and Donbas sectors. Crimea is no longer a base for the Russian Black Sea Fleet.

Also in its favour, Ukraine has maintained its dominant position in the Black Sea where a third to half of the Russian Black Sea Fleet has been destroyed by Ukrainian missiles and sea-drones since the war began. Almost all that remains of the previously formidable Black Sea Fleet has been forced to relocate from Sevastopol to the port of Novorossiysk, over 300km away on the Russian mainland. Novorossiysk itself came under attack from both marine and aerial drones on 17 May. The naval base, a railway station and a power-generation plant were hit. Since then, Russia has made some attempt to disperse Russian some naval ships back into the Black Sea and Sea of Azov as the fleet is too vulnerable when concentrated in Novorossiysk. 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.

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. Ukraine, in response, has launched missile and drone attacks on Russian cities near the Russia-Ukraine border and has deployed hundreds of long-range drones to attack infrastructure targets deep inside Russia. 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.

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 certain weapons currently entering operations at scale may be coming more from Soviet-era war stocks than from new manufactures. Further, Russia, with its much larger population, is much better placed to address its personnel problems than is Ukraine. It also is continuing efforts to coerce migrants into military service. Ukraine has lowered its draft age from 27 to 25 years and introduced a voluntary enlistment programme to address its shortage of defence manpower.

Publicly at least, China has promoted a narrative that it is neutral in the war between Russia and Ukraine. Senior US officials, however, said on 12 April that China is backing Russia's war effort by providing drone and missile technology, satellite imagery and machine tools. In response, China said it has not provided weaponry to any party, adding that it is not involved in the Ukraine crisis.

Conflicts in the Middle East

Hamas, the fundamentalist Sunni Islamic organisation that governs 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 about 250 hostages back into Gaza, some 120 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, however, the international focus has been on Gaza.

Gaza

Israel began a ground offensive in Gaza 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 now is assaulting Rafah in the far south on the Egyptian border, which had been the last remaining Hamas stronghold. Hamas, however, re-emerged in the last couple of months in previously cleared areas of north and central Gaza. Hence, the IDF has had to return to northern Gaza over the past six weeks. After heavy fighting, especially in Jabalia refugee camp, northern Gaza has been cleared again, so the IDF focus has shifted to central Gaza once more, especially the Nuseirat refugee camp, concurrent with the continued assault on Rafah.

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. The Secretary-General of the United Nations and the President of the United States have led diplomatic pressure on Israel. South Africa has taken Israel to the International Court of Justice (ICJ – the UN's body which adjudicates disputes between and among member states) alleging genocide and the court has issued interim restraining orders against Israel (which Israel has ignored). Separately, South Africa has asked the International Criminal Court (ICC – an independent agency which investigates and, where warranted, prosecutes alleged breaches of international humanitarian law by individuals) to investigate individual leaders of parties to the conflict. Following a lengthy investigation, the ICC prosecutor has asked the ICC to issue arrest warrants against Israel's prime minister and defence minister for deliberately using famine as a weapon of war and separately against three Hamas leaders for planning and directing the raids on southern Israel on 7 October 2023.

Concurrently, peace negotiations led by the United States, Egypt and Qatar have continued culminating in a plan being championed by the US. On 11 June, the United Nations Security Council voted to support a US resolution backing a ceasefire plan for the war in Gaza. The proposal sets out conditions for a "full and complete ceasefire", the release of hostages held by Hamas, the return of dead hostages' remains and the exchange of Palestinian prisoners. It would occur in three stages – stage one would involve a six-week truce during which some Israeli hostages and Palestinian prisoners would be exchanged and humanitarian aid would be delivered to Gaza's starving civilian population. This would serve as a first step towards a more lasting peace

agreement with the two protagonists to negotiate directly between stages one and two. The second stage would complete the return of hostages and the institution of a permanent cessation of hostilities, while the final stage would focus on the rebuilding of Gaza. It is uncertain, though, whether the two protagonists have accepted the proposal. While there is much in it for each to like, they still seem far apart on their fundamental demands: for Israel, it is the complete destruction of Hamas as a political and fighting force; for Hamas, it is the complete withdrawal of Israeli troops from occupied Palestinian lands. Neither side seems willing to compromise at this stage.

Notwithstanding these diplomatic activities, the war continues apace. In a dramatic daylight commando raid on the Nuseirat refugee camp in central Gaza on 10 June, the IDF rescued four hostages. It was a well-planned and rehearsed operation, supported by air and artillery fire. Inevitably, though, given the densely populated 'refugee camp' (really a long-established and well-built city), Palestinian casualties were heavy – some 270 killed and hundreds more injured by Gaza health authority estimates, although the IDF put the number killed as closer to 100. One IDF commando also was killed.

This brings to seven the number of hostages rescued since the war began by the IDF, which says further operations of this type are likely to be beyond its resources. [Please note that Hamas released some 41 hostages during a four-day truce in November 2023 and several bodies of deceased hostages have either been released or separately recovered by the IDF. By February, Israel had assessed that a further 32 hostages had died and another 20 may have also. There are thought to be between 110 – 120 hostages, some probably deceased, still in captivity.]

Turning to Rafah, despite the multiple diplomatic efforts to bring the fighting to an end and enable humanitarian aid to be delivered to the Palestinian civilian population, on 5 May the IDF ordered 100,000 Palestinians to evacuate eastern Rafah and move to a new refugee centre at al-Muwasi near Khan Yunis. By 10 May, some 300,000 were estimated to have complied with this order and numbers swelled by several hundred thousand more as Rafah came under attack. On 28 May, the al-Muwasi safe zone itself came under attack and some 21 people, including 12 women were killed.

On 7 May, following a night of air strikes, an IDF tank unit entered Rafah and seized the border crossing from Rafah into Egypt, cutting off further aid to Gaza. The IDF then isolated east Rafah from central and 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 anyway and, if it had to, would go it alone.

Israel then methodically cleared eastern Rafah and, once accomplished, turned its attention to central Rafah. On 6 June, the IDF carried out a predawn 'precise' air strike on a UN school in central Rafah where some 20 – 30 terrorists were said to be meeting, a few of whom had participated in the Hamas raid on southern Israel of 7 October 2023. Hundreds of Palestinian refugees also were sheltering in the school, a declared safe zone. The IDF said it took extensive precautions to protect civilians. Nevertheless, at least 27 people, which may have included about nine Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad terrorists, were reported to have been killed, and dozens more were injured. Since then, the IDF has continued its systematic clearance of central Rafah.

With Rafah surrounded and isolated, the IDF has been able to occupy and secure a buffer zone along the full length of its southern border with Egypt. This is considered important to prevent re-supply of Hamas with war matériel from the Sinai.

The humanitarian situation in Gaza by 10 June remained extreme. The Israeli siege of Gaza had been tightened; nearly 36,000 Gazans had been killed (of whom some 52 per cent were women and children) and 80,000 injured 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 the population remained on the brink of famine especially in northern Gaza. Up until 7 May, aid convoys had been able to enter Gaza but only with extreme difficulty. Since Israel took control of the Rafah crossing it has permitted aid to enter intermittently from Israel.

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 had been vetoed by the United States in April. The application will now go back to the Security Council.

After eight 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. Observers are wondering where to for Israel from here. Options appear to include a prolonged occupation of Gaza with a likely ongoing insurgency; or a ceasefire which may leave Hamas in control in Gaza. Faced with these considerations and no plan for the post-war management of Gaza, the centrist member of the three-person Israeli war cabinet, former general Benny Gantz, resigned on 9 June and called for early parliamentary elections. Nevertheless, the Israeli government remains stable, but now with little to curb its right-wing agenda. This resignation, however, is indicative of the increasing political turmoil and division in Israeli society.

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