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**Israel Okay
With
Reformed PA
Running Gaza,
Wants To Help
Rebuild, Top
Netanyahu
Aide Says**

*India Flags
Off First
Winter
Expedition To
The Arctic*

**Pakistan's
Army Chief
Comes to
Washington**

**India To Expand Defence
Ties With Tanzania To Boost
Presence In Indian Ocean**

**Oil Tanker With 25
Indians Hit By Houthi
Drone In Red Sea,
Crew Safe: Navy**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FLASH POINTS/ MAJOR POWERS

Israel-Palestine Conflict	1
<i>Ms Anamitra Banerjee, Research Assistant</i>	
Houthi Attacks In The Red and Arabian Sea	6
<i>Capt (IN) (Dr) Nitin Agarwala</i>	
Russia-Ukraine Conflict	12
<i>Gp Capt Amitabh Mathur (Retd), Senior Fellow</i>	
USA	16
<i>AVM Sanjay Bhatnagar, VM, VSM (Retd), Senior Fellow</i>	

NEIGHBOURHOOD SPOTLIGHT

China	20
<i>Col Tushar Mittal, Senior Fellow</i>	
Banglades/Myanmar	22
<i>Col VN Shukla, VSM, Senior Fellow</i>	
Pakistan/ Sri Lanka	25
<i>Wg Cdr Vishal Jain, Senior Fellow</i>	
Indian Ocean Region	29
<i>Col Ajay Thakur, VSM, Senior Fellow</i>	

REGIONAL SPOTLIGHT

Africa	30
<i>Col Jagat Singh, Senior Fellow</i>	
Japan	34
<i>Dr Ulupi Borah, Senior Fellow</i>	
Korean Peninsula	37
<i>Ms Arijita Sinha Roy, Research Assistant & Publications Manager</i>	
Latin America	39
<i>Ms Aanchal Sinha, Research Intern</i>	
Arctic	41
<i>Ms Diksha Jain, Research Intern</i>	

Israel Okay With Reformed PA Running Gaza, Wants To Help Rebuild, Top Netanyahu Aide Says

https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/israel-okay-with-reformed-pa-running-gaza-wants-to-help-rebuild-top-netanyahu-aide-says/

A column by National Security Adviser Tzachi Hanegbi signals that Israel's government may be softening its resistance to having the Palestinian Authority control Gaza after the war there.

COMMENTS

Following the violent confrontation over eighty days with the aghast of Israeli retaliation in Gaza, West Asia appears to be near the cusp of full-scale regional conflict. This fortnight has demonstrated **Operation Swords of Iron**—as the nation's offensive in the Strip continues unabated. However, the timing for the conclusion of the massive IDF onslaught, as well as the contours of a viable denouement for Gaza, continues to remain sketchy.

Operational & Strategic: Key Takeaways

While Sinwar claims that Hamas is fighting an "unprecedented battle," it coincides with mounting military pressure on the terrorist organisation. The Israeli military is on the verge of announcing complete operational control of the northern Strip, which would allow for the reconstruction and repatriation of groups in sovereign Israel which are right next to that portion of Gaza. Nearly 12 Hamas battalions in the north and Gaza Metropolis were successfully routed. The IDF continues to pursue Hamas in Khan Younis, where five additional Hamas brigades are stationed, most of the remaining 129 hostages are assumed to be kept, and a large portion of the organization's leadership is reportedly hiding out. The flood of displaced Gazans from the north has made the fight here much more difficult than it was within the tunnels and never-ending booby-trapped establishments located in the north.

Additionally, the IDF has started flooding of Gaza's tunnels with seawater [1] to demolish the Hamas' underground labyrinth of passageways and hideouts and force its members to ascend to the surface. Addressing the worries that the strategy could jeopardise the safe return of hostages, the IDF maintained that it acts per the intel it possesses about the area having hostages and won't engage in actions which threaten them. [2] Israel is currently grappling with "attacks across seven fronts — the Gaza Strip, Syria, Lebanon, the West Bank, Iraq, Yemen, and Iran and has responded across six fronts[3]. Recent revelations of Hamas functioning from health care facilities in Gaza came in with its own fleet of private medical vehicles, which are distinct in colour from the ambulances used by medical professionals.[4] The largest tunnel's discovery[5] coupled with increasing demand on Israel, urging an end to violence in Gaza, have grown, since Israel's military forces unintentionally killed three Israeli hostages[6].

ISRAEL-PALESTINE CONFLICT

A report by the Cyber directorate detailing cyber espionage, suspected fifteen organisations connected to Tehran, Hamas and Hezbollah, as the source of possible phishing assaults.[7] It also declared that cyberattacks on Safed's Ziv Medical Centre were carried out by Hezbollah and Iran. Although the assailant was unable to stop the facility's operations, it was successful in obtaining private medical data. On the other hand, pro Israeli groups launched cyber offensive against Iran, targeting their critical infra and causing a disruption in the energy sector.[8]

Understanding the entire causes for the IDF's unreliable performance on 7th October might take months. The Ksennet has pledged for an investigation [9]. However, reports allude [10] that the IDF was understaffed with an initially weakened battle strategy and so disorganised that troops relied over informal WhatsApp groups and online updates for geotagged intel. Military units were ordered to engage in combat, prepared solely for brief battles. Chopper crew were instructed to select sites based on media reports and communication channels on Telegram. Further the IDF failed to create a SOP prepared in case of a timely response to massive Hamas operations on Israeli land. Reports allude [11] former and current service members expressing that even if such an agenda existed in namesake, there is no training adherence to it which clearly entails that events from 7th October delivered a massive blow on the core ideology of IDF and the troops in the forward positions reacted with the flow of the events.

Humanitarian Cause

Despite continuous airstrikes and blockades, and being regarded by many as an open-air jail, questions concerning the humanitarian situation in the Strip have fallen short on the global

[1] Gayle, D., & Lakhani, N. (2023, December 24). Flooding Hamas tunnels with seawater risks 'ruining basic life in Gaza', says expert. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/dec/23/israel-flooding-hamas-tunnels-seawater-risks-ruining-basic-life-gaza-expert>

[2] IDF trial of flooding Hamas tunnels with seawater proves successful, Tol told. (2023, December 15). The Times of Israel. https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/idf-trial-of-flooding-hamas-tunnels-with-seawater-was-successful-toi-told/

[3] Ap. (2023c, December 26). Israeli forces bombard central Gaza in apparent move toward expanding ground offensive. The Hindu. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/israeli-forces-bombard-central-gaza-in-apparent-move-toward-expanding-ground-offensive/article67677357.ece>

[4] Gaza hospital director admits Hamas used medical complex as operational hub. (2023, December 20). The Times of Israel. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/gaza-hospital-director-admits-hamas-used-medical-complex-as-operational-hub/>

[5] Reporter, G. S. (2023, December 17). Israeli army says it has uncovered biggest Hamas tunnel yet. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/dec/17/israeli-army-says-it-has-uncovered-biggest-hamas-tunnel-yet>

[6] 3 hostages mistakenly killed by Israeli troops were holding white flag, official says. (2023, December 16). Axios. <https://www.axios.com/2023/12/15/hostages-killed-israeli-troops-gaza-hamas>

[7] Israel's Cyber Directorate warns of phishing attack by Iran-based hacking squad. (2023, December 26). The Times of Israel. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israels-cyber-directorate-warns-of-phishing-attack-by-iran-based-hacking-squad/>

[8] <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/software-problem-disrupts-iranian-gas-stations-fars-2023-12-18/>. (2023, December 18). The Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/software-problem-disrupts-iranian-gas-stations-fars-2023-12-18/>

[9] Where Was the Israeli Military? (2023, December 29). The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/30/world/middleeast/israeli-military-hamas-failures.html>

[10] MacFarquhar, N. (2023, December 27). Skepticism grows over Israel's ability to dismantle Hamas. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/27/world/middleeast/israel-hamas-war-military.html>

[11] A Times Investigation Tracked Israel's Use of One of Its Most Destructive Bombs in South Gaza. (2023, December 21). The New York Times.

priority.

The IDF has launched one of the most intense conventional bombing operations after the terrorist attack. As reported by the Gaza Health ministry almost 21,600 Palestinians were reportedly killed during the past two months after the offensive commenced, which includes almost 8,000 kids.[12] As reported by US intelligence, Israel launched a total of 29,000 munitions on the Strip between the start of the war and the second week of December approximately between 40 and 45 [13] percent of them being unguided which can miss their intended target up to thirty metres, meaning the disparity between striking a Hamas Headquarters and a residential complex.

With two millions displaced, vast suburbs have been turned to debris. The UN has termed the state of affairs in Gaza as "apocalyptic," [14] and WFP has labelled it a "serious famine situation." [15] Clean water for consumption remains a shortage, heightening the danger of infectious epidemics. An IDF soldier, afflicted with a potentially fatal fungal disease has succumbed. The IDF indicated that the fungal infection might have originated in Gazan soil, although this is currently being probed. The discovery of such serious illnesses has citizens concerned about the implications for the remainder of the forces operating and the hostages held by Hamas and proxies. The socioeconomic emergency among Gaza's displaced population presents a far larger risk of illness spreading in Gaza. Israel should be proactive with a strategy for managing the medical crisis in Gaza.



Source: AP News

[12] Shurafa, W., Magdy, S., & Chehayeb, K. (2023, October 30). Palestinian death toll has risen past 8,000, Gaza's Health Ministry says | AP News. AP News. <https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-war-news-10-29-2023-de1a7d660ba2f6d80b3d7aeaae5bb0f3>

[13] The Economist. (2023, December 16). Why is Israel using so many dumb bombs in Gaza? <https://www.economist.com/interactive/middle-east-and-africa/2023/12/16/why-is-israel-using-so-many-dumb-bombs-in-gaza>

[14] Borger, J. (2023, December 6). 'Apocalyptic' conditions in southern Gaza blocking aid, top UN official says. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/dec/05/un-martin-griffiths-idf-campaign-southern-gaza-apocalyptic-conditions>

[15] Gaza grapples with catastrophic hunger as new report predicts famine if conflict continues | World Food Programme. (2023, December 21). <https://www.wfp.org/news/gaza-grapples-catastrophic-hunger-new-report-predicts-famine-if-conflict-continues>

Global & Regional Response

Despite mounting international criticism, Netanyahu has stated that the conflict is "far from over." Interestingly, Israel's approach to the Palestinian Authority coincides with Ramallah's apparent increased desire to form an alliance with Hamas.[16] Several allies have lowered their backing for the Israeli cause. French President Emmanuel Macron has stepped up his condemnation of Israel's war tactics, insisting that Israeli authorities "characterise clearly and explicitly" their objectives in Gaza. [17] According to reports, European Union officials turned down Netanyahu's proposal to persuade Egyptians to open its borders to Palestinian refugees. Further, the move by South Africa to launch legal action against Israel in ICJ [18], over the concerned 21600 death toll in Gaza, was widely appreciated and welcomed by OIC. [19] The skepticism over Israeli objectives is also taking a toll with American society as political groups are denouncing Joe Biden's cabinet for transferring weapons to Israel without first obtaining legislative approval. [20]

On one hand, another possible hostage deal maybe on the agenda[6], following the meeting between Biden and Emir to push for a permanent ceasefire [21]. Qatari diplomats claimed to have struck a probable discussion with Israelis informing them that Hamas had "agreed in principle" on the release of remaining hostages held in return for a weeks-long pause. The suggestion made was release of some forty hostages, females, men over 60, and those in need of immediate medical attention, were to be released as part of this arrangement in exchange of some Palestinians detainees in Israeli jails. [22] Earlier, Egypt had suggested resuming discussions on a three-phase agreement that would ultimately bring home all the Hamas hostages and release Palestinians jailed in Israeli jails. According to the Egyptian proposal, the final stage would entail the conclusion of the conflict, the withdrawal of Israelis from the Strip, and the installation of a technocratic administration within the enclave that would remain independent of Hamas and would require the assistance of the United States, Egypt, and Qatar. [23]

[16] Israel okay with reformed PA running Gaza, wants to help rebuild, top Netanyahu aide says. (2023, December 21). The Times of Israel. https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/israel-okay-with-reformed-pa-running-gaza-wants-to-help-rebuild-top-netanyahu-aide-says/

[17] He went on to say that an acceptable reaction to a terrorist organisation was not "to bomb the entirety of civilian capabilities."

[18] South Africa approaches the International Court of Justice under the Genocide Convention with respect to acts committed by Israel in the context of its attacks on Gaza – DIRCO. (n.d.). <https://www.dirco.gov.za/south-africa-approaches-the-international-court-of-justice-under-the-genocide-convention-with-respect-to-acts-committed-by-israel-in-the-context-of-its-attacks-on-gaza/>

[19]

[20] Helmore, E. (2023, December 30). Virginia senator Tim Kaine condemns Biden's arms transfer to Israel. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/dec/30/tim-kaine-virginia-senator-israel>

[21] Jazeera, A. (2023g, December 20). Hamas head in Cairo as momentum builds towards new Israel-Hamas truce talks. Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/12/20/hamass-haniyeh-in-cairo-amid-new-ceasefire-push>

[22] Biden speaks with Qatari emir to discuss hostage release, ceasefire efforts. (2023, December 27). The Times of Israel. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/biden-speaks-with-qatari-emir-to-discuss-hostage-release-ceasefire-efforts/>

[23] לקטאר לישראל: חמאס מוכן עקרונות לחידוש המומו על חטופים. וואלה. (2023, December 29). <https://news.walla.co.il/item/3632114>

ISRAEL-PALESTINE CONFLICT

Earlier, Egypt had suggested resuming discussions on a three-phase agreement that would ultimately bring home all the Hamas hostages and release Palestinians jailed in Israeli jails. According to the Egyptian proposal, the final stage would entail the conclusion of the conflict, the withdrawal of Israelis from the Strip, and the installation of a technocratic administration within the enclave that would remain independent of Hamas and would require the assistance of the United States, Egypt, and Qatar. [24] On the other hand, though twenty nations have joined the US-led "Operation Prosperity Guardian" to form the Red Sea coalition for joint shipping protection, the alliance appears to be weak because all the nations surrounding the Red Sea—aside from Bahrain—are not part of the coalition task force. [25] Few allied nations have consented to merely being present without placing their ships under the American jurisdiction. The justification made in opposition to the American effort is the belief that should the US continue to push Israel for an end to violence in Gaza, the Red Sea waters are unlikely to be threatened and therefore a coalition shall not be necessary. [26] In the Global South, there is substantial backing for the Palestinian cause, particularly when viewed from a de-colonization" angle. India, will need to strike a balance within its own realpolitik and the current reality to emerge as a significant leader of Global South and push for UNSC changes.

Quagmire

Despite the rising death toll and global petitions for a permanent ceasefire, particularly by America, Israel remains committed to carry out its military campaign till "total victory" against Hamas is achieved. Israeli war objectives appear to be drifting: forces are mired in ground offensive while the top Hamas officials continue to remain in office, and Hamas and its allies retain the power to send munitions with the aim of wiping Israeli existence. However, there's relatively minimal public outrage within Israel to stop the airstrikes in Gaza. The vast majority of people perceive the ongoing war as a mutual existential threat by both sides. What is obviously evident is that without the unwavering backing of America, Israel's ability to accomplish its declared war aims would prove severely limited. As the battle continues and disparities across American and Israeli viewpoints widen, Israel has compelling interests for preserving its ties with its main ally. To guarantee that its relationship with America endures this conflict, Israel should additionally conduct its present military operation prudently, while addressing the political upheavals at home and resolve its dispute with the Palestinians permanently. Given Israel's designated course of action for the annihilation of Hamas, the fight is likely to stretch for a longer duration in 2024. Prime Minister Netanyahu, will likely oversee the nation's affairs over the following months, which will additionally impact how Arab governments manage their relationships with Israel, the US government, in addition to other Western and Eastern allies.

[24] Robertson, N. (2023b, December 31). The Hill. The Hill. <https://thehill.com/policy/international/4382521-qatar-tells-israel-that-hamas-agrees-in-principle-to-resume-hostage-talks-report/>

[25] Why attacks by Yemen's Houthis on Red Sea shipping pose a clear and present danger to Israel. (n.d.). Arab News. Retrieved December 20, 2023, from <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2429226/middle-east>

[26] Reuters. (2023g, December 28). US allies reluctant on Red Sea task force. The Times of India. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/us/us-allies-reluctant-on-red-sea-task-force/articleshow/106346036.cms?from=mdr>

Houthi Attacks On Israel-Linked Ships In Red Sea To Raise Prices Of Far East Imports

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/houthi-attacks-on-israel-linked-ships-in-red-sea-to-raise-prices-of-far-east-imports/>

Due to threat, global freight giants have halted Red Sea routes, diverting ships on longer, costlier voyage; shift set to impact Israel's trade with Asia, as well as global trade

Oil Tanker With 25 Indians Hit By Houthi Drone In Red Sea, Crew Safe: Navy

<https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/us-shoots-drones-warship-houthi-controlled-yemen-red-sea-centcom-2479821-2023-12-24>

An oil tanker carrying 25 Indians on board was hit by a Houthi drone in the Red Sea. The crew members were safe. The incident came amid a spike in attacks on ships linked to Israel and its allies by Houthis in the wake of the Israel-Gaza war.

COMMENTS

The Israel-Hamas war began on 07 October 2023. In a show of support to Israel and as a means of deterrence in the Eastern Mediterranean, the US ordered deployment of its first Carrier Strike Group on 08 October and then followed it with another Carrier Strike Group on 17 October.[1] As part of the 'Axis of Resistance' backed by Iran, the Houthis declared their joining the war on 31 October with their third attack by firing drones and missiles at Israel.[2] The earlier two attacks were on 19 October when the US Navy intercepted three cruise missiles and on 28 October when their drone attack led to blasts in Egypt. On 14 November, they targeted an Israeli affiliated ship and on 19 November they staged a helicopter assault and captured MV Galaxy Leader and sailed her to Houthi Yemen. In response, the US announced a defence coalition involving the UK, Bahrain, Canada, France, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Seychelles and Spain under Operation Prosperity Guardian that would work together to strengthen security in the area. The Houthis have so far conducted 16 attacks till the 26 Dec (see Fig 1 and Table listing out these attacks) and it is expected that more will follow.

Significance of the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb

The Strait of Bab el-Mandeb (also called the Gate of Tears) handles 10% of the global trade that includes nearly 30% of container traffic and 10% of global oil trade. The Strait connects the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea which allows transit to the Mediterranean Sea through the

[1] Ken Moriyasu, (2023, October 17), U.S. positions 12,000 sailors off Israel with second carrier, Nikkei Asia, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Israel-Hamas-war/U.S.-positions-12-000-sailors-off-Israel-with-second-carrier>

[2] Reuters, (2023, October 31), Yemen's Houthis declare joining Israel-Hamas war, India Today, <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/yemen-houthis-declare-joining-israel-hamas-war-2456377-2023-10-31>

HOUTHİ ATTACKS IN THE RED AND ARABIAN SEA

through the Suez Canal. This route is considered a critical route for sea travel between Asia and Europe as it reduces travel time to 16 hours in place of 24 days if the travel is round the Cape of Good Hope (around South Africa). Before the war, on an average 50 merchant ships crossed this Strait on a daily basis.

Impact of the Attacks

The attacks by the Houthis began by targeting Israeli shipping. However, with time they have begun to attack a wide variety of merchant ships passing the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb. This has created an environment of threat and uncertainty amongst the shipping companies. While the Operation Prosperity Guardian was aimed to create an environment of safety for the merchant vessels operating on this route, the result has not been encouraging. Even though the merchant ships may suffer minimum damage they would need to be pulled out of service to undertake minimum essential repairs which is counterproductive for the shipping companies. To add to this, the insurance companies have also hiked their insurance for ships transiting the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb, making operating ships on this route costly.

Such a scenario has forced the shipping companies like the British oil firm BP, Hong Kong's OOCL, Germany's Hapag-Lloyd, the Italian-Swiss-owned Mediterranean Shipping Co., the Danish Møller-Maersk and the French company CMA CGM to either halt or reroute traffic round the Cape of Good Hope. It is envisaged that this route would cost an additional USD 1 million per ship and would also increase the carbon emissions which would be detrimental to climate change efforts of the shipping industry.

It is natural that the increase in cost due to fuel, crew wages and insurance would be passed onto the consumers. For the shipping companies, in order to meet the demand, they will have to increase the number of vessels on this route which may be a challenge. For the consumer, products earlier available in quick time will see longer lead times due to additional transportation time.



HOUTHİ ATTACKS IN THE RED AND ARABIAN SEA

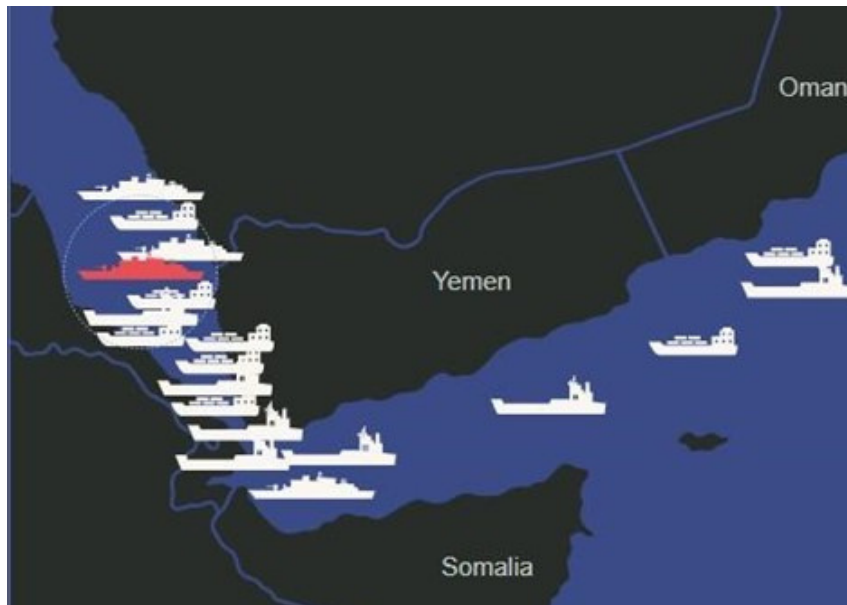


Figure 1: 16 attacks on shipping vessels by Houthis - 19 Nov - 26 Dec 2023 [3]

Impact on Israel

Trade of Israel is mostly through the sea route. With the Houthis targeting Israeli ships, the trade would have to be routed around the Cape of Good Hope. Hence, Israeli trade would be impacted both due to the additional time taken by ships and due to the additional war-insurance (that is sometimes 250% of the original) that would need to be paid for insurance. This would have a long term economic impact on Israel which possibly was the intention of the Houthis.

With Israel's trade with the Far East nations increasing to nearly 25% of its total trade, the rerouting of trade around the Cape of Good Hope would have a serious implication. Furthermore, due to the attacks, trade has moved away from the port of Eilat in the South and the Port of Ashkelon in the North to the Port of Ashdod and the Port of Haifa in the North thereby limiting the cargo that can be moved. In addition, items with short shelf life will be difficult to import due to larger time at sea. This would make these items costlier and difficult to obtain.

These changes may even force shipping companies not to take cargo for Israel but in place do transshipment at Greece or some other Mediterranean nation from where smaller vessels will make the final voyage. [4]

[3]Avi Scharf, (2023, December 20), The Full Map: All Ships Attacked by Yemen's Houthis in the Red Sea, Hareetz, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/security-aviation/2023-12-20/ty-article-magazine/full-map-red-sea-shipping-yemen-houthis-ships-attacked/0000018c-5df7-d6f9-afbc-5dff7a430000>

[4] Sharon Wrobel, (2023, December 18), Houthi attacks on Israel-linked ships in Red Sea to raise prices of Far East imports, Times of Israel, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/houthi-attacks-on-israel-linked-ships-in-red-sea-to-raise-prices-of-far-east-imports/>

Impact on India

Most of the vessels attacked by the Houthis were destined for India. It is natural that this would have an economic impact on India as maritime trade would become costlier and the availability of the good dearer. To add to this, since India is the largest provider of human resource for the maritime industry, the safety of Indians working on foreign flagged ships is a matter of concern for India. Of the recently attacked ships, MV Sai Baba had 25 Indians as crew while MV Chem Pluto had 21 Indians. The recent drone attack on MV Chem Pluto on 23 December and the Indian Coast Guard ship being diverted to assist them is testimony to this concern. The continuing threat of drone attacks has forced Indian Naval warships to begin patrolling the region even when they are not part of Operation Prosperity Guardian. Currently, INS Kolkata, INS Murmagaon and INS Kochi have been stationed in the Arabian Sea to deter any drone attacks. This is a sure sign of the concern India has about the developments in this region. It is possible that India may be forced to join Operation Prosperity Guardian if Indian flagged ships in this region are threatened.

The war in Israel would also impact the immediate development of the India-Middle East Economic Corridor (IMEC) due to instability in the region and lack of diplomatic cooperation amongst the nations of the region. It is expected that IMEC will pick up steam once the dust of war settles in the region.

Concluding Remarks

While the attack was initially conceptualised to cripple the economy of Israel, it will have a greater impact on the economies of nations of Europe, Africa and Asia. For Europe, which has been struggling to meet its energy requirements after the Russia-Ukraine war from the Rovuma oil field, the closure of the Suez Canal would make this procurement even costlier. Similarly, Egypt that is facing an economic crisis will lose out on the usage charges of the Suez Canal (nearly \$12 billion a year) making their economic condition even worse.

Since the act of the Houthi's is a breach of International Law by restricting Freedom of Navigation, it is essential that the world community comes together to ensure that such a threat is handled adequately and strongly. While some nations in the Operation Prosperity Guardian have joined to ensure 'Freedom of Navigation', others are required to join to strengthen the effort.

Even though the Operation Prosperity Guardian has been activated by the US, it requires greater participation from other sea fearing nations specially those of the region in line with the recent anti-piracy operations off Somalia that was conducted to control piracy and manage trade. This may be easy to do as the current campaign is part of the Combined Task Force 153 (CTF-153) established in April 2022 to ensure maritime security in the Red Sea, Bab el-Mandeb and the Gulf of Aden. Since the present campaign is aimed to provide overall

HOUTHİ ATTACKS IN THE RED AND ARABIAN SEA

coverage to the merchant ship rather than escort them like was done during piracy, it may not be wrong to say that the campaign needs to be upgraded to providing escort to gain trust of the merchant ships.

As for expanding involvement, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are two major and conspicuous missing partners in this campaign. However, due to evolving geopolitics, they have abstained as they would prefer to avoid spoiling their relationship with other nations of the region, especially Yemen.[5]

Table: Attacks on shipping vessels by Houthis – 19 Nov – 26 Dec 23

Sl. No	Ship	Date of Event	Region	Flag of ship	Ship Type	Route	Attack	Event
1	Galaxy Leader	19.11.23	Hudaydah Port	Bahamas	Vehicle carrier	Turkey to Indonesia	Houthis boarded by helicopter	Hijacked to Hudaydah Port
2	CMA CGM Symi	25.11.23	Indian Ocean	Malta	Cargo	Dubai to Far East	Iranian drone	Lightly damaged, Continued its course
3	Central Park	26.11.23	Gulf of Aden	Liberia	Tanker	Morocco to India. Diverted to Hudaydah Port	Boarded by assailants. Ballistic missiles fired from Yemen	USS Mason freed the vessel. Missiles missed. Continued as planned
4	Unity Explorer	03.12.23	Bab el-Mandeb	Bahamas	Bulk Carrier		Ballistic missiles fired and missed	An anti-ship missile hit and caused minor damage.
5	Number 9 and Sophie II	03.12.23	Bab el-Mandeb	Panama			Anti-ship missile hit	were hit
6	USS Carney	03.12.23	Bab el-Mandeb	US				Downed three Houthi drones
7	Languedoc	09.12.23	Hudaydah Port	France				Downed two Houthi drones
8	Strinda	11.12.23	Bab el-Mandeb	Norway	Tanker	Malaysia to Suez	Hit by cruise missile	Houthis claimed it was headed for

[5] By Alexander Cornwell and Pasha Magid, (2023, December 21), Riyadh reluctant to derail Iran detente over U.S. Red Sea taskforce, Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/riyadh-reluctant-derail-iran-detente-over-us-red-sea-taskforce-2023-12-20/>

HOUTHİ ATTACKS IN THE RED AND ARABIAN SEA

								Israel, owner said enroute Italy
9	Ardmore Encounter	13.12.23	Bab el-Mandeb	Marshall Islands	Tanker	India to Suez	Two missiles fired	US destroyer downed a Houthi drone launched at it
10	Unknown	14.12.23	Arabian Sea				Unknown assailants boarded vessel south of Oman	Hijacked and taken towards Somalia
11	Maersk Gibraltar	14.12.23	Bab el-Mandeb	Hong Kong	Container	Oman to Saudi Arabia	Ballistic missiles fired and missed	Houthis hailed the ship, threatening further missile attacks
12	Al Jasrah	15.12.23	Bab el-Mandeb	Liberia	Container	Greece to Singapore	Hit by a UAV	Fire onboard
13	Palatium III	15.12.23	Bab el-Mandeb		Container	Kenya to Saudi Arabia	Hit by a ballistic missile	After passing Bab el-Mandeb it turned south to Djibouti
14	HMS Diamond	15.12.23	Red Sea	UK				Downed a Houthi UAV
15	MSC Clara	18.12.23	Bab el-Mandeb	Panama	Container	Saudi Arabia to UAE	Nearby explosion in water	Not hit
16	Swan Atlantic	18.12.23	Bab el-Mandeb	Cayman Islands	Tanker	Saudi Arabia to Réunion	Anti-ship ballistic missile, drone	Was hit, but continued on course.
17	Chem Pluto	23.12.23	Indian Ocean	Liberia	Tanker	Saudi Arabia to India	Iranian drone	Fire was extinguished
18	Sai Baba	23.12.23	Bab el-Mandeb	Gabon	Crude oil Tanker	From Russia	Two anti-ship ballistic missiles fired at shipping lanes. Missed. Later hit by drone	Continued voyage
19	Blaamanen	23.12.23	Bab el-Mandeb	Norway	Crude Tanker	Romania to India	Houthi drone nearly hit	USS Laboon downed four drones
20	USS Laboon	26.12.23	Red Sea	US				Downed 12 attack drones, 3 anti-ship ballistic missiles and 2 cruise missiles fired Houthis
21	MSC United VIII	26.12.23		Liberia			Missile attack.	Several explosions near vessel; no injuries reported.

Russia-Ukraine Conflict: A Glance

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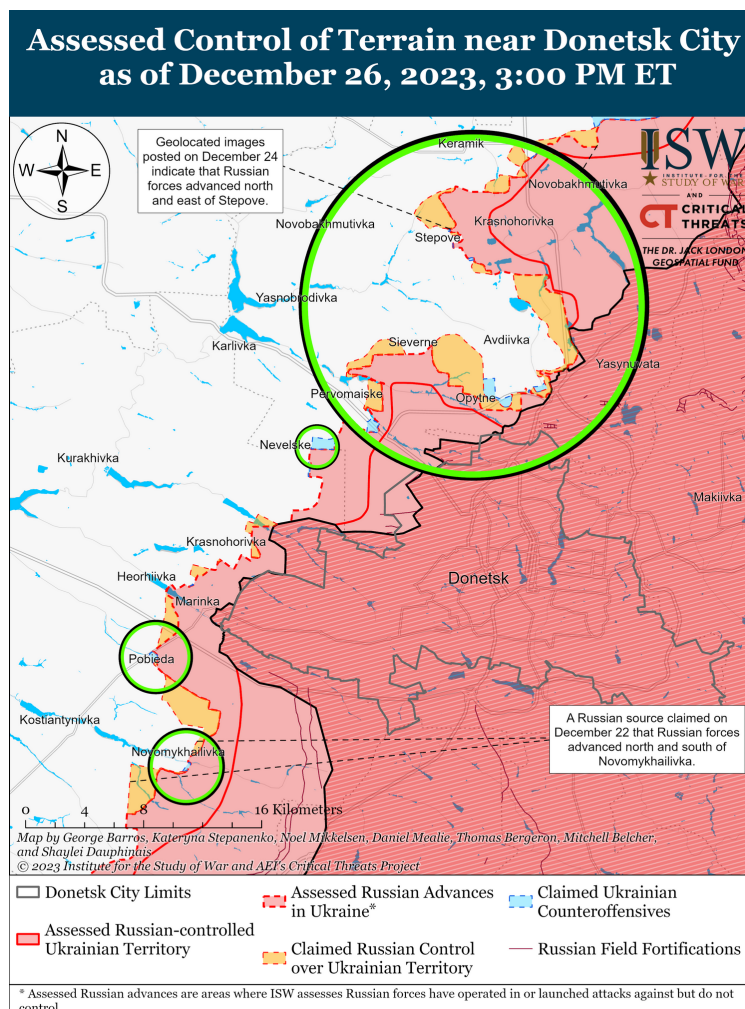
Ukrainian Counter Offensive

Ukraine claimed to have shot down three Russian Su-34 fighter-bomber aircraft on Dec 21, 22, 2023, in Kherson while firing glide bombs, reportedly by US-supplied Patriots missiles. About 28 Shahed drones, which were launched from Russian-occupied Crimea, were shot down on Dec 25, 2023. A fierce battle was being fought in eastern Ukraine, with Russian unrelenting in its advance, especially in the Avdiivka in the Donetsk region. A rare tank-on-tank battle was seen between the two sides earlier this month, underscoring the importance of heavy tanks between them. Ukrainians have been using FPV drones to destroy large numbers of Russian equipment in the last few weeks. A brand-new Ukrainian UJ-25 "Skyline" kamikaze drone is being fired on Russian territory while Kyiv is expanding its drone line-up and carrying out regular attacks. Harpoon missiles assist Ukraine in keeping the Black Sea area secure and force Russia's fleet to the eastern portion of the waters. On Dec 26, 2023, the Ukrainian Air Force claimed to have destroyed the Russian landing vessel Novochoerkassk at a Russian naval base in Feodosia, Crimea. Yuriy Ilnat, a spokesperson for the Ukrainian Air Force, hinted that long-range British-French-made Storm Shadow/SCALP cruise missiles had been used in the attack. The detonation of suspected Iranian-made Shahed kamikaze drones being stored onboard the Novochoerkassk appear to have amplified the damage.

RUSSIA-UKRAINE CONFLICT

Artillery and Air Defence. Ukraine had managed to attain steady production of the 2S22 Bohdana self-propelled gun (SPG) when Russia nearly destroyed all its indigenous defense industry. Ukraine is currently depending on Western systems like the M777 light-weight gun, M109 Paladin (US), France's 155-mm 52 calibre Caesar SPG; the Polish 155-mm AHS KRAB SPG, and Germany's Panzerhaubitze (PzH) 2000 SPG. Early in November, it deployed the Swedish-origin Archer truck-mounted SPG. Ukraine is set to boost its Air Defence by training its pilots in the UK and will move to Denmark to train them to fly F-16s.

Military Aid. In an end-of-year address, President Volodymyr Zelensky asserted that Russia achieved "not one of their goals" on the battlefield in 2023. He added that he welcomed the European Union's decision to open accession talks and expected new aid from America to be approved soon. Ukraine has proposed reducing the age of those who can be mobilised into the armed forces from 27 to 25 after the military said it needed as many as 500,000 more soldiers. However, Ukraine is in a precarious situation: its counteroffensive achieved little territorial gains and support among its allies is drying up. On Dec 15, 2023, during the EU summit in Brussels, Hungary blocked the EU's financial aid to Ukraine. The EU launched formal membership talks with Ukraine on Thursday, bypassing objections by Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban. The Biden administration is tapping into the remaining funds of \$250 million approved by Congress, including air defence equipment, artillery shells and 15 million rounds of small ammunition.



Source:
<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-december-26-2023>

Russian Offensive and Defence

Tactical Gains. Moscow is trying to maintain the tempo of its offensive operations. Russian troops had advanced along the Kupiansk-Svatove-Kreminna line northeast of Kupiansk. In the Donetsk oblast, geolocated footage confirmed gains by Russian forces northeast of Bakhmut, following recent advances southwest of the town, which has been fiercely fought for months. Russian troops had made marginal advances southeast and northwest of Avdiivka, the Donetsk town. In October, it launched an offensive towards it, which has come at high losses. Russian advances in recent days around Vodayne to the west of Avdiivka and the north and southwest of Bakhmut. There have been no confirmed territorial gains from either side on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast, western Zaporizhzhia Oblast, and Donetsk-Zaporizhzhia Oblast border area. Russia is intensifying the shelling of cities close to the front, and Ukrainian forces have gone into "defensive mode" to delay battles. On Dec 26, 2023, Russia claimed that it had gained control of the Ukrainian town of Maryinka southwest of Donetsk and the southern village of Robotyne.

Air Defence. On Dec 29, 2023, Russians fired 122 missiles and scores of drones against Ukrainian targets, its biggest barrage of the war. Russia's overnight raids, the biggest in months, were not limited to the capital. Kharkiv, Dnipro, Odessa, Lviv, Zaporizhzhia and other cities were targeted by a total of at least 110 missiles. It was the most intensive attack Ukraine had seen in such a short space of time. On Dec 30 2023, Ukraine fired a large number of drones as a retaliatory measure, and Russia claims to have destroyed 32 drones over Moscow out of 122 missiles and 36 drones fired on Dec 29 and 30,2023. Earlier, the Russian Tactical aircraft, unmanned aerial vehicles, missile troops, and artillery weapons hit Norway-made NASAMS and French-made Crotale-NG air defense systems at the airfield Starokonstantinov in the Khmelnytskyi region. In addition, aircraft equipment, flight navigation means and aviation ammunition installations at the airfields of Kanatovo in the Kirovograd region were also hit", according to Tass News.

Air Force. Russia has upgraded its fighter and other aircraft with digital technology on many platforms, including the Tu-160 and Tu-95MS strategic missile carriers, the MiG-31, Tu-22M3 long-range bombers, Il-78 tanker aircraft, and training and transport aircraft. Russia has deployed Su-33 and MiG-29 fighter aircraft to conduct combat patrols. Russia has doubled the production of its fifth-generation Su-57 fighters

Artillery. Russia has started deploying their modernised variant of its legacy Urugan multiple rocket launcher system (MLRS). Russia has a stable defense industry supplying howitzers of various calibres.

Biological Warfare. Mouse fever, a type of hantavirus transmitted to humans from rodents, is affecting troops' health.

Electronic Warfare Systems. Russia claims to have developed a 'magic radio', the RP-377 jammer, to interfere with enemy soldiers' radio communications for FPV (First Person View) drones that will make them highly resistant to jamming.

Geo-Political. Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Dec 19, 2023 that Russia could be prepared to talk to Ukraine, the United States and Europe about the future of Ukraine if they wanted to, but that Moscow would defend its national interests in Russian troops. Putin said they now had the initiative on the battlefield. "We are not going to abandon the goals of the special military operation," Putin said, though he added that Russia needed better military communication, surveillance, targeting and satellite capability.



Source: BBC

COMMENTS

Moscow is trying to maintain the tempo of its offensive operations. Russian troops are "regaining the initiative on the front in the northeast and east," although "the territorial gains so far remain small. Fighting along the front line is primarily bogged down by winter weather. It has been 22 months into the conflict, and the fighting still rages on and is becoming a frozen conflict. The US and EU have provided financial assistance for Ukraine through military, economic, humanitarian aid, energy, and emergency assistance. However, Hungary, which has close ties with Russia, has opposed the EU's financial contribution of Euro 18.5 billion and membership in the EU. Also, the aid of \$61 billion for Ukraine has become increasingly politically contentious in the U.S., with the Republican-controlled House refusing to pass President Joe Biden's request unless he makes significant concessions on immigration.

The primary land war of combined arms has seen the application of artillery, infantry, armour, and air support integrated with drones, loitering munitions, tactical missiles, electronic warfare, secure communications rockets, satellite communication and even social media into their arsenals deciding the outcome of nearly the entire frontline. The ability to launch precise strikes on troop formations over long distances has brought home the need to disperse formations into smaller units. Ukraine's most recent successful attack against the Russian Black Sea Fleet illustrates the "trap" that Moscow's warships find themselves in. Ukraine has wielded an asymmetric advantage. Rather than pursuing the unrealistic goal of achieving air or naval superiority, Ukraine has focused on denying Russia this ability by maintaining freedom of action in both domains. However, Ukraine will need air superiority F-16s aircraft, anti-mining capabilities, more drones, electronic warfare suites, and reserves as early as possible to sustain the conflict.

Top US, Chinese Military Officials Hold 1st High-Level Talks In Over A Year

https://www.business-standard.com/world-news/top-us-chinese-military-officials-hold-1st-high-level-talks-in-over-a-year-123122200150_1.html

In a significant development, the highest-ranking US and Chinese military officials engaged in dialogue on Thursday, ending a year-long silence that had raised concerns within the Pentagon, CNN reported. General CQ Brown, Jr, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, initiated a video conference call with his Chinese counterpart, General Liu Zhenli of the People's Liberation Army of China.

COMMENTS

In a significant development, the US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Air Force Gen CQ Brown, Jr on December 21, 2023 held talks over a videoconference with his Chinese military counterpart, People's Liberation Army (PLA) Gen Liu Zhenli. Gen Liu is the Chief of the Joint Staff Department of the Central Military Commission (CMC), the military body responsible for China's combat operations and planning.

This high level military meeting comes as a follow up meeting between the US President Joe Biden and his Chinese counterpart Premier Xi Jinping, held in California last month, almost after a year. At the [California meeting](#), the two leaders, despite their differing stance on the Ukraine-Russia conflict and the Israel-Hamas war, seem to have agreed to pursue competitive collaboration without being in conflict. They agreed to prioritise restoring the military-to-military communications and ease tensions between the two sides.



Source: Benar News

The break in communication between the US and Chinese military leadership has persisted for over a year, triggered primarily by the US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022 and alleged Chinese spy balloon having traversed over the US Air airspace in February this year. China of late, in retaliation, has been conducting military drills around the Taiwan island, having launched its largest ever war games around the island leading to heightened tensions.

This year, tensions have also escalated with the Philippines, which has accused the Chinese Coast Guard and other Chinese vessels of dangerous actions at Second Thomas Shoal and Scarborough Shoal. Relations between the two countries have steadily grown more tense in recent months, due to China's anti-US rhetoric as well as the US efforts to curb China's access to advanced US semiconductor technology.

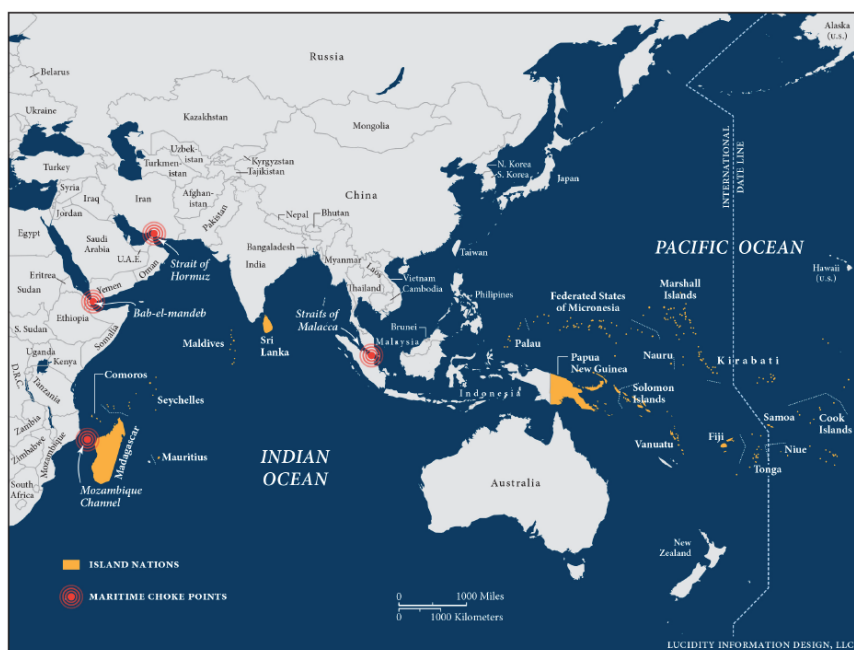
USA

On the military front, over the last two years, the US forces claim that there have been more than 180 risky air interceptions of US military aircraft by the Chinese Air Force (PLAAF) fighter aircraft. In one case (October 2023), PLAAF fighter aircraft came dangerously close to a USAF B-52 Stratofortress, at night.

During the videoconference, Gen Brown is known to have reiterated the importance of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) engaging in substantive dialogue to reduce the likelihood of misunderstandings. They discussed the importance of working together to responsibly manage competition, avoid miscalculations and maintain open and direct lines of communication. Liu on his part has been known to have said that Chinese armed forces will resolutely defend its sovereignty and its territorial integrity. Liu said that the key for the US and China is to develop a healthy, stable and sustainable military-to-military relationship and it was for the US to have a better understanding of China. He also urged the US to respect China's territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests in the South China Sea (SCS). China feels that the US continues to strengthen its military presence in the region with an aim to maintain its hegemony and in a way stokes confrontation.

The US and China have certain major differences over the future of democratically ruled Taiwan, going for its planned Presidential election on January 13, next year. China accuses the US government of deliberately hyping up the military threat from China for electoral gain of the present ruling party in Taiwan. The US also has major differences over territorial claims in the South China Sea. Enhanced military and diplomatic level engagements of US with its allies in the Indo Pacific region, especially in the past two years indicate a renewed initiative to fine tune deterrence posture by strengthening war fighting capabilities in collaboration with its allies.

Geography of the Indo-Pacific Islands



Source: Carnegie Endowment For International Peace

Diplomatic relations between the two nations were at its lowest over the past year. Notwithstanding the differences on various fronts diplomatic relations now seem to be on a bit of a recovery path. The US has taken certain diplomatic initiatives like the November 2022 visit by the Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III to meet the Chinese Defense Minister. Antony Blinken visiting in June 18/19, in 2023 and Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen visiting on July 8, 2023 followed by Henry Kissinger's visit on July 10, 2023 indicates a strong resolve on part of both nations to move ahead despite differences.

It is to be understood that even with some restoration of military communications, forging truly functional dialogue between the two sides would take time. The US expects the opening of communication channels between the Commander of US Indo-Pacific Command and the PLA's Eastern and Southern Theatre Commands. China as a matter of strategic design seeks ambiguity in defence relations in order to constrain the US military provocations in the region. The latest military level meeting can be described as a positive development. The two sides seem to be implementing what had been announced by Biden and Xi earlier in November. These steps seem to have soothed the nerves on both sides and brought a sense of ease and comfort between the two big powers and their respective allies. Better military-to-military communication would hopefully usher in a sense of stability in an otherwise turbulent economic order. For India and others, it signals a sense of stable geopolitical environment offering opportunities to foster trade in the region.

Pakistan's Army Chief Comes to Washington

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/12/13/pakistan-army-chief-visit-washington-asim-munir/>

Pakistani Army chief Asim Munir visited Washington, at a time when the U.S.-Pakistan relationship is unsettled. Bilateral ties are relatively stable and crisis-free, but the future is uncertain: Washington and Islamabad have struggled to find new anchors for their partnership since U.S. forces left Afghanistan in 2021. A visit from the leader of Pakistan's powerful military offers opportunities for a reset, but policy divergences may make that difficult.

COMMENTS

In a significant development, on December 12, 2023 the Pakistani Army Chief General Asim Munir undertook his first official visit to the US, more than a year after assuming command. He held a set of meetings with key senior officials of US hierarchy, including US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Secretary of Defence General Llyod J. Austin, Deputy Secretary of State Victoria Nuland, Deputy National Security Adviser Jonathan Finer and Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff General Charles Q Brown. He also met UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres during which he reaffirmed Pakistan's stance on Palestine. He also urged the UN Security Council to mobilise the international community for an immediate halt to hostilities in Gaza, preventing a humanitarian tragedy.

Gen Munir also interacted with the Pakistani diaspora and urged them to invest in their homeland. Pakistan diaspora comprises of wealthy individuals serving in the US as investors, physicians, IT professionals, engineers, university professors, financial experts and economists. Interestingly, the Pakistan Army Chief also called upon Gen Michael Erik Kurilla, the US Central Command (Centcom) Commander to discuss cooperation in regional security matters and explore avenues of joint training. He also visited Centcom's headquarters at Tampa Bay, Florida.



Source: The Print

Implications for India

As per the Pakistan Army, discussions with US officials highlighted counter terrorism cooperation and defense collaboration as a key area of mutual interest, both parties emphasised their commitment to strengthening interaction and expanding the scope of mutually beneficial engagements during these meetings.

Pakistan follows a policy of employing terrorism as an instrument of government policy. Terrorism has strong security implications in the region. India's demand for extradition of Hafiz Saeed, the mastermind behind the Mumbai attacks is long pending. Pakistan has been citing lack of bilateral extradition treaty as the reason for not handing him over. In the meantime, his son Talha Saeed, a senior leader of Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), involved in recruitment, fund collection, planning and execution of attacks in India and Afghanistan is known to be filing for elections in Pakistan. Commenting upon the latest visit of Gen Munir, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Arindam Bagchi brought out that Indian concerns for Pakistan's support to terrorism and its support to cross-border attacks is well-known and that India expects that the US and Pakistan would also take counter-terrorism seriously.

The timing of Gen Munir's visit is of significance, presently Pakistan is reeling under tremendous economic pressures bordering close to default situation in debt repayment, having to drastically cut back fuel and power subsidies. It is highly dependent upon the US for its economic revival from the dumps, IMF assistance and respite from the FATF. At the same time it has to precariously manage coalition government that has an immediate task of holding important national general elections the next year. Gen Munir, is believed to have assured the US that Pakistan's alignment with China is not at the cost of its ties with the US. Also, with the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, its bilateral relationship with Pakistan seems to have come down in priority, however, the US seems to be having a rethink about its strategic interests.

At this juncture, the US is realizing that the evolving geopolitical situation demands that its policymakers review its relations with Pakistan, especially at a time when great power competition is intensifying across South Asia, it considers it to be in its interest to develop a mutually beneficial and sustainable relationship with Pakistan. India needs to be watchful to closely monitor that the US may not be playing Pakistan against India to meet its own geopolitical ends.

Chinese Military Purge Exposes Weakness, Could Widen

<https://www.reuters.com/world/china/sweeping-chinese-military-purge-exposes-weakness-could-widen-2023-12-30>

A sweeping purge of Chinese generals has weakened the People's Liberation Army, exposing deep-rooted corruption that could take more time to fix and slow Chinese leader Xi Jinping's military modernization drive amid geopolitical tensions. China's top lawmakers ousted nine senior military officers from the national legislative body on Friday, state media reported, a step that typically precedes further punishment for wayward cadres. Many of these were from the Rocket Force - a key arm of the PLA overseeing tactical and nuclear missiles. The purges are a setback for Xi who has pumped billions into buying and developing equipment as part of his modernising efforts to build a "world-class" military by 2050, with Beijing's outsized defence budget growing at a faster pace than the economy for some years.

COMMENTS

Beijing withheld the reason behind the generals' removal. According to some observers, there appears to be evidence of corruption concerning the PLA Rocket Force's equipment purchase. "We'll see more heads roll. "The elimination that revolved around the Rocket Force remains ongoing," stated Alfred Wu, an associate professor at Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

Wei Fenghe, the former leader of the Rocket Force and minister of defence, has also disappeared. In August, a spokesman for the defence ministry responded to a question regarding his whereabouts by saying that the military would not tolerate corruption. Li Shangfu, his replacement, vanished for months as well until being unexpectedly fired in October without giving a reason. He has been the department head of equipment before. He had one of his deputies removed from parliament at that time.

Long-term observers predict that the persistent issue of corruption in the Chinese military will continue because certain underlying issues, such as officer pay disparities and a lack of transparency in military spending, have not been resolved. Former Shanghai University of Political Science and Law assistant professor Chen Daoyin predicted that Xi would be discouraged from taking a major chance on conflicts with other armies during the next five to ten years as a result of the current crackdown.

Chen, who is currently a political pundit residing in Chile, said, "He drank his Kool-Aid and thought the military can really 'fight and win battles' as expected by him before realising how rampant corruption was." "However, if the generals are only concerned with padding their own wallets, how can their hearts be in combat? Xi is now aware of how empty their declarations of allegiance to the military and the party are. This would probably give him a little confidence boost."

China Unveils ‘Groundbreaking’ EW Weapons Design That It Claims Beats Tech In US & Russian Fighter Jets

<https://www.eurasiantimes.com/china-unveils-groundbreaking-ew-weapons-design-that/amp/>

In a major technological leap, a team of scientists from China has claimed to have revealed the design of a groundbreaking electronic warfare weapon that could reshape the dynamics of future military operations.

COMMENTS

According to Chinese media outlet SCMP, based in Hong Kong, the cutting-edge weapon is described in a peer-reviewed document that was published in the Journal of the University of Electronic Science and Technology of China. It is intended to launch several focused beams of electromagnetic waves from a single antenna. With the use of this technology, targets in the air, water, or on the ground can be simultaneously targeted, possibly interfering with their activities. According to the report, the weapon's potential to function at high power and emit electromagnetic waves across a wide frequency range has been proved through excellent findings from laboratory experiments on a miniaturized version of the weapon. The weapon possesses a notable ability to overcome sophisticated anti-jamming techniques, such as frequency hopping, hence offering a substantial edge in electronic warfare.



Source: The EurAsian Times

The study team thinks that the dynamics of battle will change as a result of this new technology. According to the released paper, the battlefield of the electromagnetic spectrum will see an increase in competitiveness in the future. It envisions scenarios in which countries—particularly less developed ones—may lose sovereignty over their territory, which would lead to a loss of authority over the air and sea. First, they would lose control over the electromagnetic spectrum. In order to negotiate high-intensity confrontational settings, the researchers contend that electronic countermeasure devices with multifunctional and multi-target capabilities are essential.

Amid Dhaka's Keeness to Join China led RCEP Block, India Reassess Proposed Trade Pact with Bangladesh

<https://bmbusinessnews.com/economy/amid-dhakas-keenness-to-join-china-led-rcep-block-india-reassess-proposed-trade-pact-with-bangladesh/>

India is reassessing its plan to ink a commerce pact with Bangladesh, cautious of Dhaka's intention of becoming a member of the China-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and Chinese items coming into the nation by circumvention. Bangladesh is in talks with the 15-member RCEP bloc and is more likely to take a name about becoming a member of it after the elections on January 7.

India had pulled out of the RCEP Pact in 2019 after negotiating for seven years, citing considerations on commerce deficit with China, circumvention of guidelines of origin and the way the bottom price of customs obligation was unaddressed. "Bangladesh has reduced its overall imports and is thinking of joining the RCEP. We are cautious about it. We are watching the implications on trade and industry," mentioned an official. Bangladesh is India's greatest commerce companion in South Asia.

The two sides had decided to start negotiations on a bilateral Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, with the goal to implement the pact by the time Bangladesh graduates out of its least developed nation (LDC) standing in 2026. The official added that Bangladesh already will get preferential advantages beneath the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) of which India can also be a member.

"Bangladesh has a major import squeeze. Cotton yarn and edible commodities have been hit, but we are not pressuring them to import more," mentioned one other official. India's exports to Bangladesh in April-October FY24 had been \$6.04 billion and \$12.21 billion in FY23. Imports had been \$1.15 billion within the first seven months of 2023-24 and \$2.02 billion in final fiscal. The European Union has prolonged preferential entry to Bangladesh's exports. This is critical because the EU suspended the advantages beneath the Generalised System of Preferences to India's exports of textiles, chemical compounds, leather-based, plastics, metals and equipment.

COMMENTS

The RCEP includes 10 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) members, in addition to Australia, China, Japan, South Korea and New Zealand. In case Bangladesh joins the RCEP, it is likely that thereafter any trade agreement between India and Bangladesh is likely to benefit Bangladesh more and add to their advantage. Therefore, in such a scenario, the Indian trade pacts with Bangladesh may undergo few functional modifications.

Myanmar Ethnic Minority Fighters Seize Town from Military

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/myanmar-ethnic-minority-fighters-seize-town-from-military/article67645538.ece>

Ethnic minority fighters battling Myanmar's Junta said on Saturday they seized a trading hub in Shan State, days after China said it had mediated a temporary ceasefire. The three allied groups - known as the Three Brotherhood Alliance - say they have captured military positions and border hubs vital for trade with China, posing what analysts say is the biggest military challenge to the Junta since it seized power in 2021. On Thursday, Beijing announced a temporary ceasefire between the alliance and the Myanmar military. There have been peaceful spells in MNDAA held areas, but clashes have continued in areas controlled by the TNLA and the AA. The TNLA said they captured Namhsan on Friday after launching an attack in the area more than two weeks ago. "We got the town," Brigadier-General Tar Bhone Kyaw told AFP.

The TNLA posted video footage on Facebook showing leaders of the group visiting the town and talking to Junta soldiers taken prisoner. Brigadier General Zaw Min Tun, a spokesperson for Myanmar's Army, also told state run TV channel MRTV on Friday that fighting was continuing around Namhsan. According to TNLA's Tar Bhone Kyaw, the Myanmar Army also lost the 105 Mile Trade Zone, a major trading conduit on the border with China in Muse township, Shan state. In total, the three-group alliance says they have seized 422 bases and seven towns from Myanmar's Army since October 27. The alliance's offensive has galvanised other opponents of the Junta and clashes have spread to the East and the West of Myanmar.

COMMENTS



Source: The Times of India

Despite some Chinese intervention to resolve the conflict in the recent past and signaling by Myanmar Junta for some engagement with the rebel groups, increased battlefield pressure continues on Myanmar Military, due to successful offensive action of rebels in various parts of Myanmar. The rebels are likely to continue their offensive action against Myanmar Military, so as to strengthen control over more areas in Myanmar and project themselves in control on ground to the international community.

Myanmar Army Fails to Regain Control of Town Close to Manipur From Pro-Democracy Forces

<https://thewire.in/world/myanmar-army-fails-to-regain-control-of-khampat-from-pro-democracy-forces>

After a week-long conflict with pro-democracy forces, the Myanmar Army has failed to seize control of the strategic town of Khampat in the country's Sagaing region. Khampat, located in the Kabaw Valley, is located close to Manipur. In November, the anti-Junta groups had taken control of Khampat. In a statement released by Myanmar's government in exile, the National Unity Government (NUG), the NUG led People's Defence Forces (PDF) and the Kachin Independence Army jointly seized control of the town after a four day fight with the Junta troops.

A PDF personnel had told Myanmar Now that the resistance forces had "taken control of the entire town which included army camps, police stations and Junta administrative buildings." On 18 December, a report in The Irrawaddy quoted the NUG and the Chin National Organisation to say that the Junta troops retreated from Khampat on 16 December after suffering heavy casualties. "The Junta soldiers retreated in small groups. Their morale was low," Salai Lian Pi, a spokesperson for the Chin National Organisation of the Upper Chindwin Region, told The Irrawaddy.

"We are following them and ask residents of the area to stay away from Junta troops," he had added. The news report said the army had to face "an allied resistance by PDFs of the Sagaing Region, the Chin National Defence Force, PDF-Zoland, and Chin Defence Force-Tonzang." With the fight between the military and the pro-democracy forces escalating since October 27.

COMMENTS

Khampat has historically been under the rule of the Burmese kings and the Manipur principality. During the division of territory between a British-ruled Manipur and the Burmese, the Kabaw Valley had gone to Myanmar. In the ongoing conflict in the region, the failure of Myanmar Army to regain control of Khampat is an operational loss, which is likely to have an adverse effect on their further operations, at the same time providing continued operational advantage to the rebel forces in the Kabaw Valley.



Source: The Wire

Poll Preps Enter Next Phase in Pakistan

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2451140/poll-preps-enter-next-phase>

The preparations for the upcoming general elections entered the next phase after the deadline for the submission of nomination papers for 7 national and 14 provincial assembly seats in the Rawalpindi district concluded on Sunday (24 December 2023)

COMMENTS

As Pakistan wrestles with the economic and political turmoil, February 8th 2024 is set as the date for the general elections to decide the future of governance in Pakistan. The journey to then, however, is not going to be simple as the contending parties play out their strategies and decide upon their alliances unravelling the political manoeuvring that will follow. The 266 general and 70 reserved seats of the National Assembly of Pakistan and more than 600 seats of the provincial assemblies are up for election. The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) had received 28,626 nomination papers from the candidates till 24th December that included 7713 applications for the national assembly and 18546 for the provincial assemblies.[1] The ECP is busy scrutinising the nomination papers and will release the list of candidates on 11th January 2024. The candidates will have the option to withdraw until 12th January and the ECP will allot the electoral symbols on 13th January. The major political leaders who have already filed their nominations include former three-time PM Nawaz Sharif, former PM Imran Khan, former President Asif Ali Zardari, and former Prime Ministers Shehbaz Sharif, Raja Pervaiz Ashraf and Yusuf Raza Gilani, and Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) Chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari.

The caretaker government has been at the helm of affairs of the country under the leadership of PM Anwar-ul-Haq Kakar since the Shahbaz Sharif government was dissolved ahead of schedule on 9th August 2023. During this while, a great deal has occurred like the efforts being made by the caretaker government to mend the economic fracture of the country and the military establishment diving into the economic recovery efforts too, the increasing number of terrorists attacks in the north western provinces, the attempts by Pakistan to woo the Chinese even more and the return of Nawaz Sharif to Pakistan. It has been a decade of immense political instability in Pakistan leading to growing social and economic problems for the country and its citizens. The relationship between the civil and military institutions have witnessed fluctuations that have not been good for the nation.

The disagreements on various national and international policy issues led to the discontentment in the civil-military relations becoming visible by 2016. In July 2017, Nawaz Sharif got sentenced to seven years in jail and 10 years of public office disqualification following the Panama Papers leaks, forcing him to spend four years in self-exile in London. The 2018 general elections witnessed political engineering by the military establishment influencing the outcome and Imran Khan coming to power as an instrument of the establishment to address the political and

[1] ANI. "Pakistan Election Commission receives over 28000 nominations for upcoming elections". The Times of India, December 25, 2023. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/pakistan/pakistan-election-commission-receives-over-28000-nominations-for-upcoming-elections/articleshow/106273511.cms?from=mdr>

socio-economic fault lines.

However, soon, the popularity of PTI grew and it started going against the military diktat. The growing discontentment and contestation led to decision paralysis in important national and foreign policy matters. Citing the poor performance in economic and social indicators during the four years of Imran Khan's governance, the opposition parties, united under the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) alliance, presented a no-confidence motion against Imran Khan in April 2022. A political drama ensued but eventually Imran Khan was removed as the PM of Pakistan and Shehbaz Sharif, with his cabinet, was sworn in to take his place a few days later. The blue-eyed of the establishment had turned into the black sheep. Imran Khan accused the US of interference and role in this change of regime. There was even an assassination attempt on Imran Khan for which he accused the current government and the military apparatus. He was then indicted in a slew of cases. Khan tried to rally popular support for him against what he felt was injustice. Following Imran Khan's arrest, his supporters attacked 20 military installations on 9th May 2023 which deteriorated the situation even further for him. The Shehbaz Sharif government was seen to operate closely with the establishment with minimal disagreements. The caretaker government, too, follows suit. Imran Khan remains incarcerated in various cases and, as of now, remains ineligible to contest elections.



Source: Live India

The major political parties that are contesting the elections include the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), the Muttahida Qaumi Movement Pakistan (MQMP), the Jamiat Ulama-e-Islam Fazl (JUI-F) and the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI). The PTI, led by Imran Khan, that was once supported by the military, is now being hunted by it. However, Imran Khan does enjoy considerable popular support still despite being ousted from power.

It was, probably, his fight against the military establishment, the bureaucracy and the judiciary that garnered him the following that shot up further after his assassination attempt. However, since being ousted from power, PTI has weakened as many senior leaders have left the party. Two regional parties have also emerged from PTI, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf Parliamentarians (PTI-P) party in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and the Istehkam-e-Pakistan Party (IPP) in Punjab. Therefore, with no prominent leadership, and Imran Khan himself, as of now, being unable to contest due to disqualification, PTI does not seem to hold very strong in the upcoming elections.

The PPP has been voted to power five times since its creation. The current chairman of the party is Bilawal Bhutto Zardari. Post losing elections to PML-N in 2014, PPP has tried to warm up to the military establishment and was part of the coalition PDM government after ousting Imran Khan in a no-confidence motion in April 2022.

The PPP has a stronghold in Sindh and some influence in Punjab but not in other provinces. It may be reluctant to partner with the PTI offshoots, PTI-K and IPP, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab respectively and, therefore a PPP and PML-N collusion may not be out of the question.

The PML-N, in the current scenario of political volatility in Pakistan, appears to be the strongest contender. Nawaz Sharif, the cat with nine lives, already a three-time Prime Minister and a political survivor, returned to the country in October 2023 to make a comeback on Pakistan's political scene. With changes to the law enacted by the PM government, his brother and the former PM, Shehbaz Sharif operated smartly and maintained cordial relations with the military establishment. Though at odds with the military while being in power from 2014 to 2017, PML-N is being seen as the new favourite of the establishment, all courtesy the younger Sharif brother.

Since his arrival back into the country, Nawaz has been campaigning hard and forming alliances with other regional parties to ensure that PML-N leads the vote tallies. The objections to the eligibility of Nawaz Sharif for contesting the elections in view of the Supreme Court judgement under which he was banned from holding any public office were laid to rest too when the Returning Officer accepted his nomination papers arguing that the parliament during the coalition government led by PML-N had introduced changes in the law, limiting the disqualification period to five years or the jail term awarded to any convicted individual and that Nawaz Sharif has already been acquitted in the Avenfield and Al-Azizia cases.[2]

So, what are the probable outcomes of the general elections in Pakistan to be voted for on 8th February 2024? The political scene of Pakistan has always been the one that is unpredictable and could be full of surprises. What is most probable and most expected is that the PML-N would win the elections and form the government as the PTI is in no condition to give it any competition and the PPP too does not hold sway in the majority of the country. But the growing anti-military sentiment in the country could get capitalised by those supported by Imran Khan.

At the same time, one does want to ask the question as to whether the military establishment would want such a clear outcome that it may pose a likely threat of the repeat of the Imran episode. Or would it try to influence the outcome by keeping the PPP, the next most probable option, in its corner to avoid such a possibility.

The possibility of the military establishment not letting the elections go through and imposing a military rule is very unlikely as it will cause Pakistan and the establishment itself to lose credibility as the world watches closely. The efforts of the COAS in the various meetings during his recent visit to the US would be laid to waste and the economic support from its friendly countries including China and the IMF would cease and spiral Pakistan down into an economic abyss very difficult to recover from.

[2] "Nawaz Sharif sails through nomination papers hurdle, objections rejected". National Herald Tribune, 29 December 2023,

Sri Lanka Pauses Foreign Research Vessels' Docking For A Year

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/south-asia/sri-lanka-pauses-foreign-research-vessels-docking-for-a-year/articleshow/106163737.cms?from=mdr>

Sri Lanka has decided to impose a one-year moratorium in allowing foreign vessels to conduct research in the island nation's territorial waters from January, foreign minister Ali Sabry has said, amid frequent docking requests from Chinese surveillance ships.

COMMENTS

The frequent visits by the Chinese research ships in Sri Lankan waters have been a cause of serious concern for India since a considerable time now as these ships are believed to be dual purpose that can conduct scientific research as well as gather intelligence of military value. In October 2023, Sri Lanka permitted the Shi Yan 6 to carry out two-day joint research with the scientists of Sri Lanka's National Aquatic Research Agency (NARA). Earlier in August 2022, Sri Lanka allowed the Chinese vessel, Yuan Wang 5, claimed by the US State Department to be a part of the PLA Strategic Support Force, to dock at the Hambantota port. These ships are equipped with advanced electronic gear, sensors and antennae and capable of gathering intelligence such as tracking satellites, rockets and ICBMs, and carrying out seabed surveys that would be critical to PLAN's submarine operations in the region.[3] India has been regularly objecting to Sri Lanka granting these permissions as these operations pose national security concerns for India. China, yet again, sought permission for another of its vessels, Xiang Yang Hong 3, to visit Sri Lanka from January 5th to February 20th, 2024.

The Sri Lanka government has, however, taken a decision to impose a 12-month moratorium on permitting foreign research vessels to operate in its waters to conduct research and has communicated the decision to all the relevant countries. Apparently, Sri Lanka has taken this decision to develop its own marine research capabilities so that it can participate in future foreign research expeditions as an equal partner, as per the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Ali Sabry.[4] Sri Lanka is also facing its elections in 2024 and such requests create diplomatic tensions and put the government under a lot of pressure, therefore, the decision to impose the moratorium as per another senior Lankan minister.[5]

China being its biggest lender, Sri Lanka is not in a position to annoy it which an outright refusal to the permission for Chinese vessel's visit would have resulted in. However, what is also evident is that Sri Lanka does not want to irk India either by not heeding to its just concerns. The moratorium seems a way diplomatic enough for Sri Lanka to not get into an altercation with either of its partners over this issue in the current economic and political landscape. Also, though only temporarily, this step by Sri Lanka reduces one concern for India to worry about.

[3] Geo-Strategic Scan (16-31 October 2023), Volume 10, Issue 2, pp 22, https://cenjows.in/pdf-view?url=2023/11/Geo_Strategic_Scan_updated_2_CENJOWS.pdf&pID=21576

[4] Singh, Vikrant. "Sri Lanka's big blow to China: Year-long moratorium on entry of 'spy ships'". Wion News, December 19, 2023. <https://www.wionews.com/south-asia/sri-lankas-big-blow-to-china-year-long-moratorium-on-entry-of-spy-ships-671275>

[5] Chaudhury, Dipanjan Roy. "Sri Lanka considers permission freeze for Chinese 'spy' ships". The Economic Times, December 18, 2023. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/sri-lanka-considers-permission-freeze-for-chinese-spy-ships/articleshow/106102661.cms>

India To Expand Defence Ties With Tanzania To Boost Presence In Indian Ocean

<https://www.livemint.com/politics/india-to-expand-defence-ties-with-tanzania-to-boost-presence-in-indian-ocean-11704096339698.html>

India is planning to deepen its defence cooperation with Tanzania to enhance its strategic presence in the western part of the Indian Ocean. Besides boosting maritime cooperation, New Delhi is looking at defence equipment sales, particularly in armoured vehicles.

COMMENTS

Background

The successful hosting of the Defence Expos twice in Dar es Salaam saw participation of several Indian defence companies. India's ambitious plan to ramp up defence exports to \$5 billion by 2025 makes it a top choice for Tanzania as it looks to diversify its defence partnerships and sources of military equipment. India's Army Chief General Manoj Pande had met Tanzania's defence minister and senior members of its military during his October visit to the East African nation. The two sides held their joint exclusive economic zone surveillance exercise in July this year.

Analysis

The maritime collaboration with Tanzania, including joint surveillance exercises and hydrographic surveys, reflects India's broader geopolitical strategy. China is also an additional factor in India's outreach to Tanzania as Beijing has traditionally been the African country's top defence partner. India's concerted efforts to engage with nations in this region, such as Tanzania and Kenya, underscore shared security concerns like piracy and illegal fishing. The initiatives align with India's broader strategy to augment its presence in the western Indian Ocean, a region vital for its maritime trade routes.



Source: The Print

DRC: The UN Prepares The Early Departure Of The Blue Helmets

<https://www.africanews.com/2023/12/19/drc-the-un-prepares-the-early-departure-of-the-blue-helmets/>

Despite concerns about violence in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the UN Security Council is expected to launch on Tuesday an early but gradual withdrawal of peacekeepers from the country from the end of 2023.

Despite this situation, the Congolese government has been calling for months for an "accelerated" withdrawal of Blue helmets, from the end of 2023 and not the end of 2024. If the draft resolution is adopted as planned on Tuesday, the Council will decide "to begin the gradual, responsible and sustainable withdrawal" of the mission, in accordance with a withdrawal plan concluded in November between Kinshasa and MONUSCO. The first phase plans the complete withdrawal of peacekeepers from the province of South Kivu by the end of April 2024, a withdrawal which will begin "before the end of 2023". The possible continuation of the withdrawal will have to be determined on the basis of an evaluation report of the first phase, which the Council expects by the end of June 2024. The UN peacekeeping force (MONUC, then MONUSCO) has been present in the country since 1999. For several years, the Security Council had already begun a cautious disengagement, setting broad parameters for transferring responsibilities from the Blue Helmets to the Congolese forces. With the aim of starting to withdraw by 2024.

COMMENTS

The withdrawal of UN peacekeeping forces from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) marks a significant shift in the security landscape of the region.

Regional Implications: The departure of UN peacekeeping forces may create a security vacuum, potentially leading to increased instability and conflict. The risk of conflicts spilling over into neighbouring countries, affecting regional stability. Potential impact on humanitarian efforts and the safety of civilians.

Opportunities for India: As security improves, India can explore economic opportunities in sectors such as infrastructure, mining, and energy, contributing to the development of Congo. India can engage diplomatically to facilitate dialogue among regional actors and promote sustainable peace in Congo. Besides this offering training programs and capacity-building initiatives for the Congolese security forces to enhance their ability to maintain stability. The withdrawal of UN peacekeeping forces from Congo presents both challenges and opportunities for India. By actively engaging in diplomatic initiatives, contributing to peacekeeping efforts, and exploring economic prospects, India can play a pivotal role in shaping the future security dynamics of the region while advancing its own strategic interests.

Sudan In 'Total Panic' As Paramilitaries Move South

<https://www.africanews.com/2023/12/25/sudan-in-total-panic-as-paramilitaries-move-south/>

"The Rapid Support Forces (RSF) have looted everything: cars, Lorries and tractors," laments a resident of a village in the state of al-Jazira, speaking on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals from the paramilitaries as they push southwards in war-torn Sudan. The bloody war that has pitted the Sudanese army against the RSF paramilitaries in Khartoum for the past eight months has forced half a million people to seek refuge further south, in this agricultural state that was until recently spared the violence. It has also displaced 7.1 million people, including 1.5 million in neighbouring countries, said Stéphane Dujarric, spokesman for the UN Secretary-General, on Thursday, describing it as "the world's largest displacement crisis". The United Nations Security Council expressed "concern" at the intensification of violence in Sudan, while "strongly condemning" attacks against civilians and the extension of the conflict "to areas hosting large populations of displaced persons".

COMMENTS

Regional Implications. The Sudan crisis, marked by political unrest and conflict, has significant regional implications, particularly as the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) paramilitary units move southwards within the country. This movement has the potential to escalate tensions and impact neighbouring regions, creating a ripple effect with wide-ranging consequences. One of the immediate concerns is the destabilization of neighbouring countries. As RSF paramilitary forces extend their reach southwards, there's an increased risk of cross-border conflicts and spillover effects. This not only jeopardizes the security of nearby nations but also challenges regional stability, as governments scramble to address the influx of refugees and the potential for the conflict to spread across borders. Economic ramifications also loom large on the regional scale. The Sudan crisis has the potential to disrupt trade routes and economic activities in nearby regions. Instability often leads to a decline in investor confidence, affecting not only the national economy of Sudan but also the economies of neighbouring countries that are closely linked through trade and regional partnerships.



Source: The Guardian Nigeria

AU-Led Peace Support Operations Get Major Financial Boost

<https://www.africanews.com/2023/12/22/au-led-peace-support-operations-get-major-financial-boost/>

The Security Council unanimously adopted Thursday (Dec. 21) a resolution on the financing of the African Union-led peace support operations (AUPSOs). Resolution 2719(2023) was authored by the A3 group made up of Gabon, Ghana, and Mozambique. Peace, security and stability have been key objectives of the AU, as part of efforts to facilitate the regional integration agenda but its Achilles heel remains the lack of adequate resources to support and sustain these operations. Also addressing the Council in New York, Ambassador of Mozambique Pedro Comissário Afonso said, "this framework resolution, just adopted, translates our objective to address the concerns of Africa that have been pending for many years." "Challenges that comprise conflicts, insurgency, progressive Africanization of terrorism and the proliferation of extremist armed groups," he added. The AU chairperson Moussa Faki Mahamat hailed Friday (Dec.22) a historic development "that demonstrates the growing partnership between the African Union and the UN." Since 2007, the financing of AU-led peace support operations (AUPSOs) has been an issue in the relationship between the UN and the AU in general, and between the Security Council and the AU Peace and Security Council (AUPSC) in particular.

COMMENTS

The resolution signals a shift towards empowering African nations to take ownership and lead in addressing conflicts within the continent. It enhances the AU's role in maintaining peace and security, promoting a more regionally-driven approach.. By supporting the AU's peace support operations, there is potential for quicker and more contextually relevant responses to regional conflicts which will enhance the regional stability. The resolution can contribute to increased stability in conflict-prone areas, reducing the risk of conflicts spilling over into neighbouring countries. Additionally the Financial support from the UN enables the AU to mobilize resources effectively for peace support operations. However, the success of this resolution depends on effective implementation mechanisms and overcoming potential challenges such as logistical issues, coordination problems, and political complexities within the AU.



Source: Complexity for Peace Operations

Indo-German Collaboration Sets Eyes On Africa

<https://www.livemint.com/news/world/indogerman-collaboration-sets-eyes-on-africa-11703270164799.html>

New Delhi: India and Germany are set to expand collaborations with a third developing-country partner, involving the African states of Ethiopia and Madagascar. So far, New Delhi and Berlin have jointly worked on project developments in Peru, Ghana, Cameroon, and Malawi. Existing initiatives involve promoting farming opportunities for the women in Malawi and using agri-tech solutions for potato production in Cameroon. "The objective would be to build on individual strengths and experiences in development cooperation to offer sustainable, viable and inclusive projects to third countries in addressing development challenges and achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and SDG-related climate targets, including through multilateral institutions where India and Germany are members, such as the International Solar Alliance (ISA)," the two sides said in a joint declaration of intent released in May 2022. The Indo-German partnership is so far focused on climate and sustainability solutions for partners nations, but Germany is now interested in broadening the programme to incorporate healthcare projects and sponsoring health-related research and development in Africa, Jochen Flasbarth, state secretary at Germany's federal ministry for economic cooperation and development, told the media in New Delhi.

COMMENTS

Implications and Opportunities for India

It will assist mutual sharing of expertise in agricultural practices, crop management, and sustainable farming techniques. Technology Transfer Introduction of German agricultural technologies to enhance productivity and efficiency in Indian and partner countries' agricultural sectors. Establishment of joint innovation hubs for research and development, fostering technological advancements. Training programs and skill development initiatives to empower local communities with the latest technological tools thereby enhancing capacity building.

Economic Opportunities for India

Enhanced market access for Indian agricultural products and technologies in Ethiopia and Madagascar.

Investment Opportunities

Encouragement of Indian businesses to invest in sustainable development projects, creating economic ties and opportunities. It signifies a commitment to fostering global partnerships that contribute to economic growth, technological advancement, and sustainable practices, reinforcing India's role in international development. This collaborative effort not only benefits the involved nations but also showcases the potential of global partnerships in addressing pressing issues related to agriculture, technology, and sustainable development and strengthening diplomatic ties through shared development goals.

Japan Weighs Allowing Patriot Missile Transfers To Aid Ukraine

<https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Defense/Japan-weighs-allowing-Patriot-missile-transfers-to-aid-Ukraine#>

Japan will consider allowing the U.S. to supply Japanese-made Patriot missiles to Europe and elsewhere, in a move that could indirectly help Ukraine in its war against Russia. The Japanese government will update guidelines on defense exports as early as Friday, allowing shipments of missiles and other equipment made under license to countries where those patent holders are based. Currently, only components of licensed equipment can be sent to the U.S.

COMMENTS

Until a decade and a half ago, it would have been unthinkable that a country like Japan whose article 9 renounces war, would undergo immense shifts in its security policies. However, article 9 has been reinterpreted and it has enhanced the role of the Japanese Self Defence Force. In April 2014, the Government of Japan established the "Three Principles on Transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology". These principles provide a clear framework for the transfer of defence equipment and technology abroad that is appropriate for the current security context. The old "Three Principles on Arms Exports and Their Related Policy Guidelines" were replaced by the new guidelines. Furthermore, Japan has started acquiring aegis destroyers, helicopter carriers etc. This shows that Japan is shifting from a defensive defence system to an offensive one. Under the leadership of the former Prime Minister Late Shinzo Abe, Japan came up with the concept of "Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)". FOIP emphasized on free and open seas with freedom of navigation, rule-based order mostly to counter China's expansion in the region.

However, given the current circumstances, Japan's security concerns may also be connected to the Russia-Ukraine War. Japan has already attended two summit meetings of NATO in Madrid in 2022 and Vilnius 2023 along with other Indo-Pacific countries, Republic of Korea, Australia and New Zealand.

However, these countries have already signed "Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme (IPCP)" agreements between 2012 and 2014, as a part of creating a formal alliance with NATO much before the conflict in Ukraine. But today with the war and China's expansion, NATO and these countries prefer working together on cyber security, space, new technologies, maritime security etc. Tokyo has recently passed its new proposals agreed by a working group led by Komeito, the coalition partner, and the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Under these new proposals Japan intends to relax its regulations on the arms trade by allowing shipments of all defence equipment made under foreign licences to the nations where the patent holders are located. This relaxation in arms trade is observed for the first time since the formation of its "Three Principles on Transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology" in 2014.

Furthermore, this would encourage Japan to permit countries to transfer the equipment they acquire to a third country or region with prior authorization of Japan. However, Japan does not permit transfer of weapons to a third country or region which is directly embroiled in hostilities. This implies that the United States may supply Patriot missiles manufactured in Japan to

JAPAN

European nations to restock the ammunition and weaponry that have been expended as a result of aid to Ukraine. U.S. defence contractors Lockheed Martin and RTX, formerly Raytheon Technologies, created the Patriot missile. In Japan, Mitsubishi Heavy Industries manufactures them under the licence. The Japanese policymakers believe that these alternatives will reinforce Japan's alliance with the United States and increase its contribution to world security.

Restocking U.S. inventories with Patriot missiles manufactured in Japan would allow Washington to keep supplying Ukraine and other nations. As a result, Japan can assist Ukraine inadvertently. The working group also suggested that Japan would permit the export of lethal weaponry if there was a requirement for missions that fit into one of the five categories such as: rescue, transportation, vigilance, surveillance or minesweeping; or for self-defense. Tokyo justifies its export to nations like Ukraine by focusing on the fact that it has been invaded in a way that is illegal under international law.

As mentioned above, Japan's alliance with NATO, allows it to approve the supply of its Patriot missiles through a third country i.e., the US. Tokyo is expected to make a final decision on this by 2024. Missiles may be supplied to nations like Poland, which shares a border with Ukraine and has been building up its armaments in response to the conflict along with many other European nations. It's not just Japan but close alliance with NATO has also encouraged South Korea to sign early agreements to supply weapons to Europe. Poland has placed large orders for K2 Black Panther tanks, K9 self-propelled howitzers, and FA-50 fighter planes with South Korean arms manufacturers. Warsaw used to resort to the United States for large arms sales, but since South Korea could fulfil orders more quickly than the American companies, Warsaw shifted its focus to South Korea.[1] It was estimated that in 2022, Seoul sold arms worth \$13.7bn to Warsaw.[2] There is hardly any check on supplying these weapons by the US and Poland to Ukraine.



Source: AP News

[1] Joshua Posner and et al. (2023) "In Ukraine war arms race, US stalls as Israel, Turkey and South Korea surge", Politico, [Online: web], Accessed: 1 January 2024, URL: <https://www.politico.eu/article/israel-turkey-and-south-korea-big-winners-in-the-ukraine-war-arms-race/#:~:text=Poland%2C%20a%20frontier%20state%20with,should%20factor%20in%20this%20year>.

[2] Jean Mackenzie, (2023), "Ukraine war: Pressure builds on South Korea to send arms to Kyiv", BBC, [Online: web], Accessed: 1 January 2024, URL: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-66043946>

JAPAN

In addition to Japan and South Korea, the Australian government has been quite keen on supporting Ukraine by providing military assistance. The Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese stated:

“This contribution will provide Ukraine with some of the best capabilities in the world, while investing in Australia’s sovereign defence industry and technology sector. I’m proud to confirm the E-7A Wedgetail has arrived in Germany to commence its important mission. .”[3]

The Australian government has offered an additional \$20 million in military aid to Ukraine with the help of its local defence industry. Australia is contributing by supplying portable x-ray machines, a 3D metal printer, counter drone systems and de-mining equipment to the defence system of Ukraine’s. It is estimated that the supply of heavy artillery, “Bushmaster protected mobility vehicle”, critical ammunition and contributions to the Ukraine Humanitarian Fund are worth \$910 million assistance provided by Australia to Ukraine.[4]

The kind of military assistance these East Asian countries are offering to Europe due to the Ukraine conflict indicates that they are securing their cooperation with NATO if there is a breakout in the Taiwan Strait. East Asia lacks a regional military alliance like NATO. Therefore, these countries believe that a stronger relationship with NATO countries will offer them military support during a crisis situation.



Source: East Asia Forum

[3] Ministry of Defence, (2023), “Australian Capabilities to continue Supporting Ukraine”, Government of Australia, [Online: web], Accessed: 1 January 2024, URL: <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/media-releases/2023-10-25/australian-capabilities-continue-supporting-ukraine#:~:text=The%20Australian%20Government%2C%20with%20the,of%20military%20assistance%20to%20Ukraine>

[4] Ibid

India, South Korea Explore Joint Projects in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh

<https://www.livemint.com/news/world/india-south-korea-explore-joint-projects-in-sri-lanka-bangladesh-11703743932442.html>

NEW DELHI: India and South Korea are discussing joint development projects in neighbouring countries such as Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, according to persons aware of the matter. While talks are still in early stages, the development is significant as it reflects a renewed focus on bilateral relations between India and South Korea, with Seoul seen expanding its strategic interests beyond East Asia.

COMMENTS

India and South Korea have emerged as natural partners in the region with a commitment to shared growth in the region. Exploring joint developments for Bangladesh and Sri Lanka can be viewed in light of Seoul's engagement with South Asian countries and extending the former President Moon Jae-in's 'New Southern Policy' (NSP). Seoul is exploring beyond East Asia and the promising development projects in South Asian countries like Sri Lanka and Bangladesh is precisely a display of the incumbent government's vibrant foreign policy. Previously, the Indian and South Korean leadership had met along the lines of the G20 Summit in New Delhi and a bilateral meeting between Prime Minister Modi and President Yoon Seok Yeol is anticipated.

Bangladesh and Sri Lanka see this prospect of development projects as welcoming. On a bilateral level, both the countries have maintained a cordial relation with South Korea and India. South Korea has highly invested in the Meghna Bridge Project on the Bhulta-Araihazar-Bancharampur road (R-203) and the supplying of treated water from Meghna River to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Shilpa Nagar (BSMSN). [1]

The Government of Korea established the Economic Development Cooperation Fund (EDCF) on June 1, 1987 with the purpose of promoting economic cooperation between Korea and developing countries. South Korea also wishes to support large-scale infrastructure projects in South Asia especially in the digital and healthcare sector, by utilizing the Economic Development Cooperation Fund (EDCF).[2] Last year, South Korea and Sri Lanka had welcomed renewed focus on expanding ties by expanding investment and trade ties between the two countries. [3] India has collaborated with Japan and the US for development projects in the Bangladesh. As the Quad partners work to offset Chinese influence, a deep-sea port being built in southern Bangladesh is emerging as a key strategic asset for Japan and India. [4]

[1] Tribune Report, "Korea Wants to Develop Bangladesh's Infrastructure, Proposes 2-Policy Change," Dhaka Tribune, August 29, 2023, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/foreign-affairs/323823/korea-wants-to-develop-bangladesh-s>.

[2] "S. Korea Discusses Wider Economic Ties with India, Bangladesh," Yonhap News Agency, May 4, 2023, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20230504007900320>.

[3] Prabhath, "South Korea Pledges Its Support for Sri Lanka's Economic Recovery," September 19, 2023, <https://www.news.lk/news/political-current-affairs/item/35703-south-korea-pledges-its-support-for-sri-lanka-s-economic-recovery>.

[4] Staff Writer, "Bangladesh Deep-Sea Port Promises Strategic Anchor for Japan, India," Nikkei Asia, April 12, 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Bangladesh-deep-sea-port-promises-strategic-anchor-for-Japan-India>.

KOREAN PENINSULA



Source: Twitter

China was supposed to build a port in Sonadia, another desirable location on the Bay of Bengal, but development of the port of Matarbari will place a facility supported by Japan directly north of Sonadia. The \$553 million investment in the Adani Ports-led container terminal project in Colombo has been made official by the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC). [5]

The NSP is an expansion of South Korea's need to balance its strategic and economic ties in the face of competition from China, its biggest trading partner, and the United States, its closest friend. Seoul seeks to protect itself from the risks associated with trade and potential strategic conflict between the two superpowers by strengthening its relations with India and Southeast Asia, especially in the economic sphere. In addition, it aims to strengthen its relations with India and Southeast Asia in line with their increasing strategic and economic significance as well as to further its middle power diplomacy.

Both India and South Korea have been diversifying their presence in the region through creating alternative supply chain and countering an assertive China's presence in the region. With these potential projects on the horizon, both India and South Korea are poised to play a significant role in regional development that will further shape the engagement of both countries in moulding the future of the Indo-Pacific's economic and technological landscape. Apart from these stated development projects India and South Korea have been collaborating and cooperating on trade, defence and cutting-edge technologies specifically for semiconductors and EV batteries. The South Korean Indo-Pacific Strategy in 2022 reiterated India's place as a 'special strategic partner'. Strategic communications and cooperation through the ROK-India Comprehensive Economic Partnership (CEPA) has gained momentum after South Korean Foreign Minister Park Jin's visit to India in April 2023.

As for India, cooperating with like-minded countries for growth and development in the region echoes its Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI). These partnerships for India carry common goals for wealth creation, welfare promotion and cooperative win-win strategies in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and beyond. A multipolar Indo-Pacific is advocated by India's approach. It has kept a balance in the area that aims to be neutral toward all parties. Its strategy has been praised for being inclusive and non-confrontational, which works to its advantage. With details of these development projects yet to be confirmed, these discussions between New Delhi and Seoul are in tandem with their larger strategies for the region with the aim of regional security and cooperation in hindsight.

[5] Kallol Bhattacharjee, "India Is Proud to Be the Biggest Development Partner of Bangladesh: PM," The Hindu, November 1, 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/pm-modi-sheikh-hasina-jointly-inaugurate-rail-power-sector-projects-between-india-bangladesh/article67483705.ece>.

Trade Deals: India Hopes To Conclude Talks With EU, UK In 2024; Looks At Latin America To Expand Volumes

<https://www.cnbctv18.com/economy/trade-deals-india-hopes-to-conclude-talks-with-eu-uk-in-2024-looks-at-latin-america-to-expand-volumes-18647621.htm>

In ongoing discussions with mineral-rich nations, India is nearing the completion of an agreement to secure exploration and development rights for five lithium blocks in Argentina, as disclosed by a senior official. The pact is poised to be formalized between Khanij Bidesh India Ltd. (KABIL), a joint venture dedicated to strategic mineral activities abroad, and Catamarca Minera Y Energética Sociedad Del Estado (CAMYEN), a state-owned mining and energy company in Argentina.

India Set To Acquire Five Lithium Blocks In Argentina Spotted By KABIL

https://www.business-standard.com/economy/news/india-set-to-acquire-five-lithium-blocks-in-argentina-spotted-by-kabil-123122400535_1.html

India is on the brink of finalizing an agreement to acquire five lithium blocks in Argentina for exploration and development, with negotiations reaching their "final stages," according to a senior official. This development comes amid India's ongoing discussions with other nations abundant in critical minerals.

COMMENTS

After a pause of nine years, India and the EU recommenced trade talks in 2022. The negotiations had earlier stalled in 2013, primarily due to differences in customs duties concerning automobiles, alcohol products, and the movement of professionals. In 2023, India embarked on the year with newfound optimism, fueled by two significant trade deals with Australia and the UAE, both inked in 2022. It appeared that India had overcome its hesitations toward trade agreements and was poised to engage in modern Free Trade Agreements. As 2023 nears its end, pivotal negotiations with the UK, EU, and Canada remain unresolved.[1]

Ongoing differences persist between India and the UK, encompassing issues such as tariffs on alcohol, rules of origin, and duty concessions for electric vehicles. Although India's External Affairs Minister expresses optimism about reaching a mutually beneficial agreement, both nations emphasize the necessity for any deal to align with their respective national interests.

Former Commerce Secretary Anup Wadhawan, characterizing wines and processed items as sensitive for India and areas of ambition for the UK, calls for a balanced approach that addresses India's concerns while considering British interests. Meanwhile, India-EU trade talks, revived in 2022 after a nine-year

[1] Sharma, Abhimanyu. "Trade Deals: India Hopes to Conclude Talks with EU, UK in 2024; Looks at Latin America to Expand Volumes." CNBCTV18, December 26, 2023. <https://www.cnbctv18.com/economy/trade-deals-india-hopes-to-conclude-talks-with-eu-uk-in-2024-looks-at-latin-america-to-expand-volumes-18647621.htm>.

hiatus, face hurdles related to disparities in customs duties on automobiles, alcohol products, and movement of professionals. Despite strong political intent for a Free Trade Agreement (FTA), concerns over investment protection from the EU and India's reservations about the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism pose challenges. [3] Wadhawan highlights the significant issue of the carbon tax, emphasizing the need to avoid rendering the FTA redundant or compromising trade. He urges nations to temper their ambitions and sensitize themselves to each other's concerns, advocating for FTAs with countries exhibiting complementarity. In this context, he sees potential growth avenues in an FTA with Africa.

Navigating these complexities requires political decisions from India's leadership to surmount obstacles with the EU and the UK, while the prospect of a trade deal with Canada appears bleak. Simultaneously, India explores deeper trade ties with Latin America, engaging in discussions with MERCOSUR (Southern Common Market) nations—Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay—to broaden the existing preferential trade agreement. In 2004, India and MERCOSUR entered into a Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA), enabling New Delhi to strengthen its economic connections with one of the globe's most substantial trade blocs. As part of the agreement, India and MERCOSUR have mutually decided to provide tariff concessions, varying from 10% to 100%, on 450 and 452 tariff lines, respectively, as outlined by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry. [2] As India strategically focuses on Latin America, there has been a substantial boost in diplomatic and economic efforts. India's trade with the region has surged significantly, rising from \$2 billion in 2000 to surpassing \$50 billion in 2023. This upswing is primarily attributed to strengthening economic ties with pivotal nations such as Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina.

In a noteworthy development, India is on the brink of securing exploration and development rights for five lithium blocks in Argentina. This marks India's second venture into critical minerals on the international stage, following a partnership with Australia in 2022. The imminent deal is in the final stages of negotiation between Khanij Bidesh India Ltd. (KABIL) and Catamarca Minera Y Energética Sociedad Del Estado (CAMYEN), an Argentine state-owned mining and energy company. Demonstrating a strategic commitment to ensuring a domestic supply of critical minerals, the Indian government intends to invest approximately Rs 200 crore over the next five years for exploration. [4] The proposal is currently awaiting approval from the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs. India initiated its inaugural auction for critical minerals on November 29, aiming to bolster its supply chain. Two lithium blocks located in Jammu and Kashmir and Chhattisgarh are currently open for bidding. The Reasi district, as per government assessments, holds approximately 5.9 million tonnes of lithium reserves, while the specified mineral quantity for the Chhattisgarh blocks is not outlined in the auction documents. Argentina, with 21% of the world's lithium reserves concentrated in the Lithium Triangle, emerges as a crucial partner for India. The acquisition aligns seamlessly with India's drive for self-sufficiency in fulfilling the demands of clean energy, particularly for electric vehicles. The exploration and development agreement marks a pivotal stride toward realizing India's ambition of becoming a manufacturing hub for electric vehicles by 2070.

[2] Ibid
[3] Welcome to department of commerce, Government of India. "MERCOSUR Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA) Negotiations - MCommerce." Mcommerce, November 11, 2020. <https://commerce.gov.in/international-trade/trade-agreements/indias-current-engagements-in-rtas/mercosur-preferential-trade-agreement-pta-negotiations/>.
[4] Kumar, Nitin. "India Set to Acquire Five Lithium Blocks in Argentina Spotted by KABIL." [www.Business-Standard.Com](https://www.business-standard.com/economy/news/india-set-to-acquire-five-lithium-blocks-in-argentina-spotted-by-kabil-123122400535_1.html), December 24, 2023. https://www.business-standard.com/economy/news/india-set-to-acquire-five-lithium-blocks-in-argentina-spotted-by-kabil-123122400535_1.html.

India Flags Off First Winter Expedition To The Arctic

<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-flags-off-first-winter-expedition-to-the-arctic-9072581/>

Union Minister of Earth Sciences Kiren Rijju said on 18 December that India will undertake annual winter expeditions to the Arctic as he flagged off the country's maiden winter expedition to the region.

Assessing China's and Russia's Arctic Ambitions

<https://thediplomat.com/2023/12/assessing-chinas-and-russias-arctic-ambitions/>

A Eurasian empire, Russia has a precise view of its natural pre-eminence in the Arctic. The Kremlin views the Arctic as Russia's backyard and claims the authority to gatekeep military, commercial, and scientific passage and activity. Beijing under Xi Jinping has deliberately re-envisioned China not only as an Arctic stakeholder but a "near-Arctic" power. The CCP framed China's entry into the region as mutually beneficial to the littoral Arctic states, highlighting potential commercial endeavours and scientific research. Officials codified this concept in 2018 through the "Ice" or "Polar Silk Road" (PSR) – part of its globe-spanning Belt and Road Initiative.

COMMENTS



Source: 9 News

The Arctic region is undergoing significant changes due to various commercial, scientific, and military activities. These activities have the potential to foster cooperation or competition over resources and territorial jurisdiction. In the wake of recent geopolitical developments, such as the annexation of Ukraine, there is an opportunity to engage in constructive dialogue and collaboration to address concerns and promote shared interests in the Arctic's abundant natural resources.

Russia has been playing a crucial role in the Arctic Council and has been actively working towards the development of the region. Given its significant stake in the region, it has been investing in various infrastructure projects aimed at ensuring its stability and protecting it from potential threats.

The 'Bastion Defense' strategy, spearheaded by Putin, is a positive step in this direction, which seeks to safeguard the region and foster mutually beneficial partnerships with other nations in the area.[1]

[1] Mercy A. Kuo, "Assessing China's and Russia's Arctic Ambitions", The Diplomat, 20 December 2023. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/12/assessing-chinas-and-russias-arctic-ambitions/>

ARCTIC

Russia's Arctic LNG-2 Project is an ambitious infrastructure initiative aimed at expanding its energy and trade capabilities. However, the imposition of sanctions by the USA as a penalty for the ongoing conflict impacted all the stakeholders involved including China which holds about 20% of the stakes with China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC).[2] Russia and China have formed a valuable partnership that utilizes a network of public-private enterprises. This collaboration allows Russia to maintain connections with Asian maritime networks while avoiding isolation from Western markets. Additionally, it expands China's influence in the northern region and bolsters its geopolitical clout.

The partnership between Russia and China in the fields of science and naval capabilities is proving to be highly beneficial for China, especially as it relies on imports for 40% of its LNG.[3] By tapping into Russia's unexplored oil and gas reserves, China can secure a reliable supply of energy resources and pave the way for its Polar Silk Route (PSR).

On a parallel front, the partnership between China and Russia is still under a magnifying glass of the Arctic Council and observer states, including India. While the joint efforts can bring positive outcomes, there is a need for the rest of the countries with their vested interests to be mindful of the potential security threats that can lead to territorial disputes, sabotaging the infrastructure, and grey-zone conflicts in the polar region.

India, like China, is a non-arctic state and commenced its maiden winter expedition to the Arctic on 18 December 2023. The expedition is vital as it will allow the team to conduct research in winter to help understand the challenges associated with atmospheric sciences, astrophysics, climate change, and sea and ocean circulation.[4] India has actively gone above what is required of it in topics pertaining to the Arctic by leading the expedition and creating a new marine trade route between Europe and Asia.

The aforementioned cooperation initiatives provide a chance for Russia and India to collaborate on a wide range of issues and mutual interests surrounding the Arctic. India must create more mutually beneficial relationships with the Arctic nations, beginning with Russia, in order to satisfy its resource and energy demands. It should also boost its investments in the region, as it did with Russia-based Novatek in 2023 for LNG supplies.

[2] Reuters, "The Russian Arctic LNG 2 project targeted by U.S. sanctions", Reuters, 26 December 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/russian-arctic-lng-2-project-targeted-by-us-sanctions-2023-12-26/#:~:text=Arctic%20LNG%2D2%20is%20led,each%20holding%20a%2010%25%20stake>

[3] Alec Smith, "China's Arctic Strategy 2024: A 12-Month Assessment", Grey Dynamics, 31 December 2023. <https://greydynamics.com/chinas-arctic-strategy-2024-a-12-month-assessment/>

[4] Vanita Srivastava, "Why Indian scientists are on a winter voyage to the Arctic", Nature India, 29 December 2023. <https://www.nature.com/articles/d44151-023-00203-z>