



MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR
DEFENCE STUDIES AND ANALYSES
मनोहर पर्रिकर रक्षा अध्ययन एवं विश्लेषण संस्थान

Strategic Digest

Vol. 3 | No. 9 | 17 May 2021

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Airstrikes intensify as Israel-Palestine conflict escalates

The Israel-Palestinian conflict entered another violent phase on May 10 after tensions escalated in the aftermath of Israeli security forces acting against protesters in and around the Al Aqsa mosque. Reports note that the protests were against Israeli policies relating to the eviction of Palestinians from neighbourhoods in East Jerusalem and limitations on the number of worshippers at the mosque, among other issues.



After the Israeli action, which led to injuries to over 500 Palestinians, rockets were fired from the Gaza Strip towards Tel Aviv, Ashkelon and even Jerusalem. The Israel Defence Force (IDF) states that as on May 13, more than 1500 rockets of varying sophistication have been fired indiscriminately. While these rockets have not caused much damage, in terms of loss of lives and property, they have forced hundreds of thousands of Israelis to rush to bomb shelters.

Reports note that the much-touted Iron Dome missile defence system batteries are working vigorously to successfully neutralise this rocket threat. During the last major escalation in 2014, *Operation Protective Edge*, the Hamas and other Gaza militant groups like the Palestinian Islamic

Jihad (PIJ) had fired a least 4,500 rockets towards Israel, out of which at least 90 per cent headed towards population centres were destroyed by Iron Dome.

Military operations during *Protective Edge* occurred over nearly two months. It is pertinent to note that the Gaza militants have already fired over one-third of rockets (as against the number of rockets fired during the 2014 imbroglio) towards Israel within the first few days of the present conflict. This does indicate that the Iron Dome batteries could come under pressure if the Palestinian militant groups keep up with their current pace, even if Israel is better equipped with these systems.

The IDF is, of course, taking action against rocket launch pads and terrorist leaders in the Gaza Strip, to prevent the possibility of its active defence capabilities like the Iron Dome from being overwhelmed. On May 12, for instance, the IDF, with inputs provided by the Israel Security Agency (ISA) better known by its Hebrew



acronym, Shin Bet, killed the head of Hamas's military intelligence security department and his deputy, in an airstrike. The commander of Hamas's anti-tank missile unit, and a commander of the PIJ responsible for the rocket attacks, were also killed on the same day.

The IDF has sent notices to reactivate its reserve units, and Israel's top political and military leaders have not ruled out the prospects of a ground operation to neutralise the capabilities of terror outfits in Gaza. While this could result in enormous death and destruction, Israel insists it will do everything in its power to re-establish deterrence.

The international community, while recognising Israel's right to respond to terror threats, has called on it to undertake proportionate response measures, with France, among others, being at the forefront of countries echoing such calls. India's Permanent Representative to the UN, Ambassador T.S. Tirumurti, at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) meeting on May 12, condemned the violence, especially the rocket attacks from Gaza, and called for de-escalation.

Pak-Saudi relations after Imran's Visit

Imran Khan's three-day visit to Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) from 8th to 10th May 2021 drew lot of attention in Pakistani media. This is his seventh visit to KSA and third official visit since he came to power in July 2018. This visit was termed as 'significant' and 'productive' by the Pakistani foreign minister while the Saudi foreign minister termed it as 'an important milestone', even if Saudi media treated it as a routine one.



The visit was certainly important from Pakistan's perspective, the bilateral relations had been marked by dissonance, especially since August 2020 when Pak foreign minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi disparaged Saudis for not being able to lead OIC and the Muslim Ummah against India over the issue of Jammu and Kashmir. In Pakistan

perception, the KSA has been softening their stance on Kashmir and India Saudis due strengthening of trade and commercial relations with India in recent years. The KSA, in turn, asked Pakistan to pay up its loan of \$1bn and asked for speedy repayment of another \$1bn, all part of the \$6.2bn bailout announced earlier by KSA in 2019 to bail Pakistan out of the balance of payment crisis.

Given its dependence on KSA, Pakistan has sought to repair its relations and seek closer convergence rather than complicate matters further. On the Saudi side, the defence and security relationship with Pakistan is too deep to be wished away.

Notwithstanding Qureshi's uncharitable remarks and also Pakistani refusal to back Saudi efforts in Yemen, there was an effort to put the relationship back on track which resulted in Imran's most recent visit at the invitation of Saudi crown prince Salman.

The Pakistan Army played a key role in resetting the ties. The Pak army chief, Qamar Javed Bajwa, had been instrumental in mending fences with KSA in the aftermath of Qureshi's intemperate remarks. He flew in one day prior to Imran's visit to prepare for the meeting and sat through the delegation level talks with Prince Salman.

The details of the eight agreements signed during the visit, indicated that the thrust was on strengthening economic relations, without neglecting the existing defence and security ties. The two countries agreed to establish a Saudi-Pakistan Supreme Coordination Council (SPSCC) and the agreements seek to secure Saudi financing of Pakistani projects in energy, hydropower generation, infrastructure, transport and communication, and water resource development. The Saudis seemed to oblige the Pakistanis further and agreed to repatriate 1100 Pakistani prisoners serving their sentences in Saudi jails, and they allowed the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center (KSrelief) to undertake 118 humanitarian projects for Pakistan worth over \$123 million in food security, health, education, water and environmental sanitation.

Pakistan vernacular media dwelt liberally on Imran's exhortations to work together to combat Islamophobia and deal with the twin issues of Kashmir and Palestine more empathetically. The Saudis, in turn, assured Imran of working to reduce tensions between India and Pakistan while referring to growing relations with India, perhaps as a reminder to India to agree to a dialogue with Pakistan.

Debate over 'War talk over Taiwan' divides Australian Strategic Community

An intense debate on the possibility of war with China over the defence of Taiwan has gripped the Australian security establishment with one side calling such rhetoric irresponsible and another saying it's a wake-up call for Australia's national security.

The debate was triggered when Australian Defence Minister Peter Dutton cautioned that war with China over Taiwan may not be out of the question. Then home affairs secretary, Mike Pezzullo, warned that "free nations" in the Indo-Pacific were again hearing the "drums of war." Subsequently, Australian media reported leaked details of a private briefing by Major-General Adam Findlay, who had argued in 2020 about the high likelihood of war with China. PM Scott Morrison didn't endorse these remarks but said Australia's goal was to "pursue peace and stability" and a "world order that favours freedom".

Australian observers have discounted the possibility of a direct military confrontation with China over Taiwan. Even as escalating bilateral tensions have

added to the heated debate about a looming conflict, China's National Reform and Development Commission recently suspended communication with Canberra under the China-Australia Strategic Economic Dialogue. Beijing also accused Canberra of disrupting the "normal exchanges" and co-operation "out of Cold War mindset and ideological discrimination" after the latter decided to cancel two BRI agreements signed with the state of Victoria.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison has been vocal about the importance of security in the Indo-Pacific region, and joined the US and other nations to call out Beijing's aggressive actions especially against Taiwan. In recent weeks, China sent 25 warplanes through the island's airspace, the largest reported incursions to date, and had an aircraft carrier lead a large naval exercise near Taiwan.

Some analysts say wider international messaging is at play, signalling to Washington that Australia is willing to step up and "share the burden of confronting China" and that "Australia's defence wonks are unhappy with Biden's positioning on China". On the other hand, there is also a prevailing view that "a precedent of signing up to American wars without any parliamentary debate" needs to be done away with since "a large majority of Australians oppose such a war, it's time for our politicians to stand up and say that they do too".