



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

Strategic Digest

Vol. 4 | No. 23 | 01 December 2022

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Ukraine War Update, 16-30 Nov 2022

While the Ukrainian forces have maintained an offensive tempo with Russian forces broadly under a defensive couch, there has been no significant territorial exchange. Despite multiple retreats by Russian forces, Ukraine has only managed to recover 55 per cent of its territory occupied by Russia through the invasion since February.



With the onset of winter, the pivotal phase of war remains at an inflexion point. Having made significant gains in Kharkiv Oblast in the north and Kherson in the south, the Ukrainian offensive faces significant hurdles. Russian forces, now, occupy a compact front with densely packed defences. Russian forces have been seen fortifying their positions

along critical Ground Lines of Communications (GLOCs) in eastern Kherson Oblast against a possible future Ukrainian counteroffensive. Russia has augmented its defensive perimeter in Kharkiv as well. This means the battles ahead will be against the more densely defended territory, on challenging terrain.

Muddy terrain has imposed significant constraints in ground manoeuvre in the last fortnight resulting in significantly less intensity of operation from both sides throughout eastern and southern Ukraine, including in Svatove, Bakhmut and Vuhledar. Fighting along the front lines is likely to pick up once the ground freezes over in the coming weeks, making it easier to manoeuvre without getting bogged down in muddy conditions

As things stand, Ukraine's precision, long-range missiles can now reach deeper into Russian-controlled territory, with nearly everything north of Crimea within range. The Russians are adding new layers of defences outside the southern city of Melitopol, which sits at the crossroads of the main highways in the south, making it perhaps the most strategically important city under Russian control. It is being speculated that Ukraine may try to divide Russian forces in the east and south by driving through Melitopol.

While Russian soldiers are on the defensive on battlefields in the south and east, Moscow has opened what amounts to a separate war - missile and drone strike war - aimed at destroying Ukraine's infrastructure. The fortnight witnessed Russia's largest bombardment of the war aimed at power plants, substations, natural gas

facilities and waterworks. The head of Ukraine's national power grid operator, Ukrenergo, has described the damage dealt to Ukrainian power-generating facilities by Russian missile attacks on 22 Nov as "colossal". Much of Ukraine remained without electricity, heat and water two days after a devastating series of Russian missile attacks against civilian infrastructure.

On 28 Nov 2022, President Zelensky warned Ukrainians to brace for more Russian airstrikes. However, the state energy company, Ukrenergo, said that nuclear power stations, disconnected from the national grid by massive Russian strikes last week, had been brought back online and electrical power could meet 80 per cent of domestic requirements. But it urged Ukrainians to continue conserving electricity to avoid overwhelming a national grid that has been weakened by repeated barrages of Russian missiles and drones.

The Swedish prosecutor who is leading the investigation into the damage to the Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines, meanwhile, has confirmed that the incident was sabotage, and stated that traces of explosives have been found. Swedish authorities have refrained from drawing a definitive conclusion from this finding. Ljungqvist said the investigation was "very complex and comprehensive" and analysis would continue to draw "more reliable conclusions" and determine whether any suspects could be identified. But the evidence so far was of "gross sabotage", he said. Ljungqvist said cooperation between the Swedish, Danish and other national authorities was "working excellently" and that no further information would be provided, to allow investigators to continue their work "in peace and quiet". German authorities are carrying out their investigation, in close cooperation with the Swedish and Danish teams, after Berlin's offer of a formal joint investigation was rejected, reportedly over national security concerns.

Pakistan appoints new Army Chief: Implications for the country and the region

After months of speculation, the senior most among the five top Generals, Asim Munir was selected as the new army chief on 25 November, two days before he was to retire and four days before General Bajwa, the outgoing chief, was to demit office. Going by the Pakistani media, Imran Khan and his men had reservations about this appointment because he had unceremoniously removed Asim Munir from the post of DG, ISI and hence apprehended that under him, the army would make it difficult for him to return to power. This is despite the fact that Imran Khan has been pulling massive crowds in his rallies ever since he lost the prime ministership in February 2022. There was a fear that Imran Khan might oppose Gen Asim Munir's elevation and queer the pitch by delaying the confirmation by the President, who is from his party. However, after commiserating with Imran, the President of Pakistan, Arif Alvi, finally signed the file and all speculations to the contrary were laid to rest.

Now that Gen Munir has finally been appointed as the Chief of Army Staff (COAS), he has many challenges to address. First and foremost, he has to ensure free and fair elections after the present national assembly completes its five-year tenure in August 2023. In the face of growing awareness about the accumulation of wealth by people in uniform (especially on account of

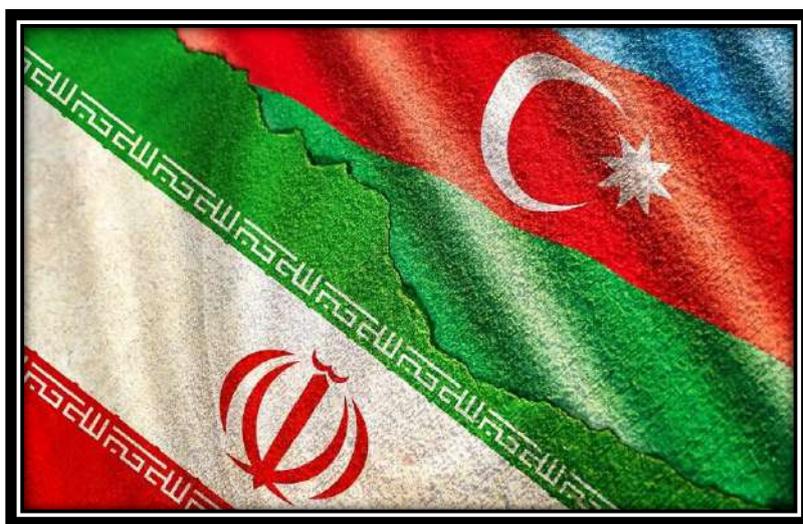


allegations of corruption against outgoing army chief Gen Bajwa and himself), he has to play a critical role in removing the cloud of distrust against the army and restore the confidence of the people in the institution that is regarded as the most important one holding Pakistan together. He will also have to find a way of working with Imran, despite the popular perception that he might not be pleasantly disposed towards him, given his bad experience with him earlier, if he has to ensure the continuation of good civil-military relations. There is also a view in Pakistan these days that the army might be divided over the issue of whether or not to support or oppose Imran Khan. Gen Munir will have to restore unity in the army, perhaps by emphasizing the need for staying neutral in politics. In matters concerning the internal security of Pakistan, as a Hafiz-e-Quran, he can use his reputation to invoke a positive and progressive re-interpretation of Islam and gradually shift away from the army's persisting tactic of using jihadi terrorism as an instrument of Pakistan's security policy. This will help him to tackle the challenge from Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which is mounting its attacks on the army not only in the tribal frontiers but in the rest of the country as well.

As far as external policies are concerned, whosoever comes to power post-elections, it may not be difficult to predict that there will be a restored civil-military consensus driving Pakistan's foreign policy. Now that Imran has changed his tack on the US and the Pakistan army, Gen Munir may not find it difficult to take the reset in Pak-US ties forward. In Afghanistan and the region, there will not be any dramatic shifts apart from a renewed push to the already slowing down of the CPEC engagement with China. Pakistan's India policy is unlikely to witness any dramatic change in the sense that there is no visionary leader in the Pakistani political landscape to redefine the contours of India-Pakistan relations and take it forward. At best, Gen Munir may be expected to restore full diplomatic relations and sustain the ceasefire along the LoC. With this, one can expect the relationship to reach a stage of normalisation where a revival of trade and commerce between the two countries can be discussed as a possible way forward. Overall, Pakistan is expected to limp back to normalcy in its internal politics and there may not be any marked shift in its external policy.

Escalating tensions between Azerbaijan and Iran

The President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, in his address at the 9th Summit of the Organization of Turkic States in Samarkand on 11 Nov 2022, while making a veiled reference to the Azeri population in northern Iran, argued that “education of our compatriots living outside Turkic states in their mother tongue should always be on the agenda of the organization”. He then went on to state that “the state of Azerbaijan pays special attention to the protection of the rights, freedoms and security of Azerbaijanis living abroad. We will continue our efforts so that our compatriots, who were separated from the state of Azerbaijan due to bitter fate, preserve our language, traditions, and culture, remain loyal to the ideas of Azerbaijanism, and never cut ties with their historical homeland”.



Aliyev’s overt support for ethnic irredentist discourse comes on the back of more than one year of recurrent tensions with Iran, which have their origin in the territorial changes at the end of the Second Nagorno Karabakh war between Azerbaijan and Armenia in 2020. The

war resulted in Baku reclaiming significant territory in Karabakh including districts of Zangilan, Jabrayil and Fuzuli near Iran’s border, which had been under Armenian control since the end of the First Nagorno-Karabakh War (1991–1994).

In September 2021, Azerbaijani border police detained two Iranian truck drivers supplying goods to Armenia and ethnic-Armenian-held parts of Nagorno Karabakh via the Goris-Kapan highway, parts of which cross the territory reclaimed by Baku. In addition to the territorial changes threatening Iran’s traditional transit and transportation route, Baku’s call for the opening of the so-called Zangezur Corridor, linking mainland Azerbaijan to its Nakhchivan exclave via Syunik, the southernmost province of Armenia bordering Iran, threatened Iran’s tenuous 40 km border with Armenia.

As part of the November 2020 ceasefire agreement, Yerevan had conceded transit across southern Armenia, but the agreement had provided “only general contours, without specifics” for unblocking regional transportation routes. Baku has interpreted the route in terms of a ‘corridor’ along the southern border of Armenia, where Azerbaijani vehicles will not be subject to customs checks from the Armenian side. Baku maintains that such a corridor will be comparable in

status to the Lachin Corridor, the road connecting Armenia and ethnic-Armenian parts of Nagorno-Karabakh through Azerbaijani territory over which Azerbaijan exercises no control. Baku's calls for establishing an extraterritorial corridor across southern Armenia have been accompanied by irredentist claims on Armenian territory.

In July 2021, Baku did a reorganisation of internal economic regions, naming a new region bordering Syunik "Eastern Zangezur" implying that adjoining Armenian territory was the western part of a lost Azerbaijani ethno-space. Amid Baku's threats to open the corridor by force, Iran's Army and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) conducted a large-scale military exercise along its borders with Azerbaijan in October 2021. Similar exercises were carried out in October this year in Ardabil and East Azerbaijan province aimed at showing Iran's deterrence posture against potential border change by Azerbaijan and also warn Israel, which has a burgeoning defence partnership with Baku. Given Turkey has extended support to the Zangezur corridor that will give it unfettered access to Azerbaijan and Central Asian members of the Organization of Turkic States, Iran's fears are compounded by prospects of Turkey, a NATO member, having direct military access in the Caucasus.

Analysts note that since the defeat of Armenia in the 2020 war, Syunik, which previously enjoyed the proximity to the Armenian-controlled territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, has become the real borderland between Armenia and Azerbaijan. During the deadly clashes in September 2022, the Azerbaijani military targeted up to 23 locations in Armenia including cities such as Goris and Kapan and captured several strategic positions and heights within the Armenian territory, further indicating that the line of contact between the two states has shifted to the recognised inter-state border, which is yet to be delimited. Iran's response was to offer mediation as it called for preserving the status quo at the Iranian-Armenian border, terming it a "historic connecting route." In October 2022, Iranian foreign minister Hossein Abdollahian inaugurated an Iranian consulate general in Kapan, Syunik in a reciprocal move that will see the opening of an Armenian consulate in Tabriz. While affirming Iran's support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Armenia, the minister noted that "Syunik province is one of the main transit corridors from north to south. We consider Armenia as one of the important routes in the North-South corridor."