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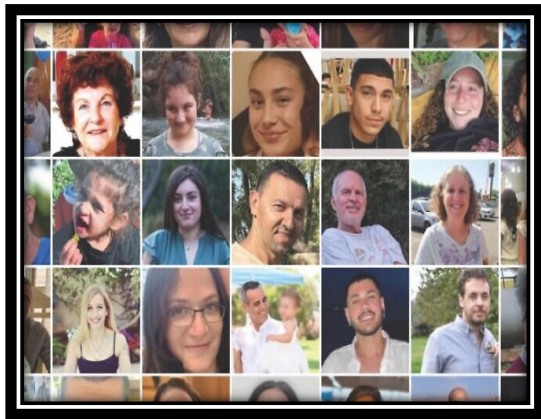
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Israel-Hamas Conflict: Pause in Fighting



Seven weeks into the Israel-Hamas conflict, both the protagonists – Israel and Hamas, agreed to a four day truce on 24 November, in a deal brokered by the US, Qatar and Egypt. The pause in fighting was extended for another three days subsequently. While the initial deal involved the release of 50 hostages, a total of 95 were released by 29 November. More than 130 hostages still remained in Hamas custody. Israel released more than 150 Palestinian prisoners.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) noted that more than 1.8 million out of the total population of 2.3 million have been internally displaced as a result of the Israeli military action in the aftermath of the Hamas terrorist attacks on 7 October 2023. The Israeli Defence Force (IDF) had asked Gazans to move towards the south of the enclave along designated routes on 13 October. The IDF on its part reiterated that northern Gaza is still a war zone and urged Gazans not to return during the ‘temporary tactical pause’. The IDF also gained operational control of the Hamas-operated Gaza Harbour on 16 November.

The IDF arrested the director of the Al Shifa hospital on 24 November and transferred him for questioning to the Israel Security Agency (ISA). The IDF accused the Hamas of exploiting the hospital’s electricity and resources to build and sustain an extensive network of tunnels underneath the hospital. The IDF stated that in the aftermath of the 7 October terror strike, Hamas operatives used the Al Shifa hospital’s underground infrastructure to house and transport Israeli hostages.

Israel’s military action against the hospital had led to calls by the international community to respect medical facilities. Israel, though, showed photographic and video-graphic proof of the infrastructure underneath the hospital which it charged was built and used by Hamas. It also released footage of Hamas operatives transporting hostages through the hospital corridors after the 7 October attack. The IDF noted that a large amount of weaponry and ammunition were also found underneath Al Quds and Al Rantisi hospitals in northern Gaza.

In the more than 50 days of fighting, more than 14,000 Palestinians lost their lives while Israel lost more than 400 soldiers while nearly 300 were hospitalised. 1200 Israeli citizens were killed on 7 October. Even as the WHO has warned of disease spread in Gaza, the pause in fighting led to enhanced inflow of relief and humanitarian aid. More than 750 trucks carrying humanitarian aid entered Gaza since the beginning of the ceasefire on 24 November.

The IDF on 27 November noted that more than 2,000 aid trucks entered Gaza since the beginning of hostilities on 7 October. The aid included equipment for two field hospitals by the UAE and Jordan. The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) was cited as stating that at least 200 aid trucks were needed per day for at least two months to meet the essential needs of the population.

At the Virtual G20 Leaders' Summit on 22 November, Prime Minister Narendra Modi welcomed the release of hostages and called for ensuring the timely and continuous delivery of humanitarian aid. He also noted that there was a need to ensure that the 'conflict does not take on any kind of regional form'. The prime minister noted that while terrorism is unacceptable, the 'death of civilians, wherever they may be, is condemnable'.

The G7 Foreign Ministers meeting on 28 November also called for 'greater humanitarian aid ... on a sustained basis' to the people of Gaza. The UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres speaking on 29 November on the occasion of the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People stated that the people of Gaza were 'in the midst of an epic humanitarian catastrophe'.

Guterres stated that it is 'long past time to move in a determined, irreversible way towards a two-State solution, on the basis of UN resolutions and international law'. Guterres also stressed the inviolability of UN facilities which are sheltering more than one million Palestinian refugees. The UN Chief also pointed out that the UN lost 111 of its personnel in Gaza, the largest loss of personnel in the organisation's history.

As for regional security developments, the Houthis seized the MV Galaxy Leader, a cargo ship, in international waters on 19 November. The ship had departed Turkey and was on its way to India when it was hijacked in the southern Red Sea. The IDF termed it 'a grave incident of global consequence' though it reiterated that it was not an Israeli ship. The G7 Foreign Ministers also reiterated the importance of maritime security and called for the release of the ship and its crew.

Keeping expectations low, US-China manage 'thaw' at APEC meet

The US hosted the 2023 Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in San Francisco after a gap of 12 years. The key takeaway from the summit was the restoration of communication between Beijing and Washington DC after nearly a year. Both sides had kept expectations low indicating that the main goal was to prevent the relationship from deteriorating further.

In their first face-to-face talks for a year, President Biden and President Xi agreed to establish a working group on fentanyl, resume military-to-military communications and cooperate on addressing the risks of artificial intelligence.

Touted as the most significant deliverable was the agreement reached to resume high level military to military communication between the two countries. Washington and Beijing had agreed to move beyond the fallout from then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, which led to a severing of military-to-



military talks and then to heightened tensions caused by a Chinese spy balloon manoeuvring through US airspace.

The resumption of defence talks including the U.S.-China Defense Policy Coordination Talks, agenda-setting meetings at the DASD level, and the U.S.-China Military Maritime Consultative Agreement meetings —is key—as near misses in the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea between ships and planes operated by the US and Chinese militaries have increased. Both sides also committed to resuming telephone conversations between theatre commanders to handle close-call incidents in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait to resolve a crisis if one were to arise.

US observers argued that despite the step forward there was seemingly little progress made on the largest security issue between the two countries: Taiwan. Although the topic was raised, the two leaders appeared to talk past each other. President Biden reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to the “One China Policy” and called for restraint from the PRC. Meanwhile, President Xi emphasized that the United States should “stop arming Taiwan” and support China’s vision for peaceful reunification, which Xi called “inevitable.”

US media reports that securing Xi's promise of Chinese cooperation on stemming the flow of fentanyl to the United States was high on Biden's to-do list for the summit. As per reports, the agreement under which China would go after specific companies that produce fentanyl precursors was made on a "trust but verify" basis. In return, the U.S. government removed a Chinese public security forensic institute from a Commerce Department trade sanction list, where it was placed in 2020 over alleged abuses against Uyghurs, a long-sought diplomatic aim for China.

The Biden-Xi summit produced a limited agreement on AI with a decision to set up formal government-to-government discussions on the technology. Details on the form or substance of those discussions were not made clear. The White House readout stated that the two leaders “affirmed the need to address the risks of advanced AI systems and improve AI safety through U.S.-China government talks.” The Chinese statement was more vague, listing AI alongside issues such as counter-narcotics where the governments should cooperate through existing or new government channels. While global issues such as expanded goals for climate cooperation, Russia’s war in Ukraine and the unfolding crisis in Gaza found mention in the course of the four-hour discussion, but areas of joint effort remain limited.

While the meeting demonstrated the culmination of months of efforts from both sides to normalize dialogue it was clear that neither side made statements or commitments that diverged far from the status quo. While the official meeting readouts from Washington and Beijing included language about the importance of stable bilateral relations for international peace and prosperity, neither pledged commitments to cooperation bilaterally or in multilateral forums on any specific issues. Even the frameworks of how both sides see cooperation going forward seemed to be duelling in their official readouts.

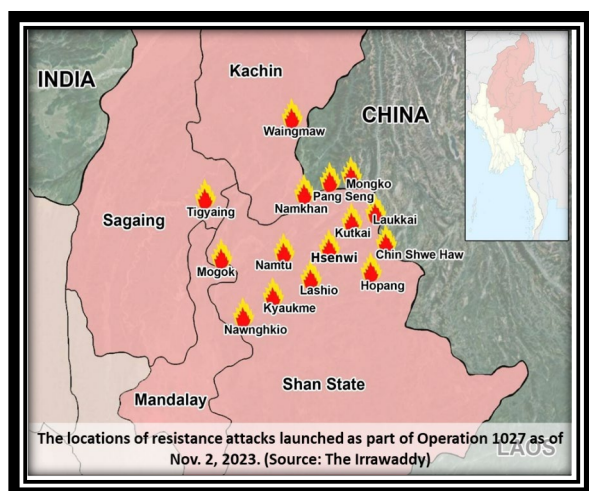
There is a clear interest among APEC members, including U.S. allies and partners, to see the United States and China stabilize ties, but neither side could appear to be conciliatory. In his press conference, Biden was careful to characterize the discussions as candid and constructive, and in response to a question, he once again described the Chinese leader as a “dictator.” Meanwhile, Xi’s visit was covered in China highlighting his aims - earning U.S. policy concessions in exchange for promises of cooperation, an easing of bilateral tensions that will allow more focus on economic growth, and a chance to woo foreign investors who increasingly shun China.

The APEC summit, which ended with a modest Golden Gate Declaration on addressing the climate crisis and ensuring energy security, may have been overshadowed by the Xi-Biden meeting —but proved that diplomacy still has value.

Myanmar's Military Faces Growing Resistance from Anti-Coup Forces

Myanmar's military regime has acknowledged facing intensified attacks from anti-coup forces, who have launched a coordinated offensive since late October 2023. The military spokesperson confirmed that these assaults were carried out by a substantial number of armed rebel soldiers in Shan State, Kayah State, and Rakhine State. The diverse anti-coup forces in Myanmar united against the military junta that seized power in February 2021, have claimed control over several towns in border areas and numerous military outposts.

The military asserted that anti-coup fighters utilized "hundreds" of drones to drop bombs on military posts, resulting in the evacuation of some sites. The recent offensive named ‘Operation 1027’, commenced on October 27, 2023, in Shan State, led by the 'Three Brotherhood Alliance' comprising the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), and Arakan Army (AA) supported by National Unity Government (NUG). The NUG, formed by ousted members of Myanmar's National League for Democracy (NLD) party, operates as a shadow government.



Though fighting has raged in multiple regions of Myanmar since the generals seized power in a 2021 coup, the scale of the new offensive represents the biggest military challenge to the junta's rule, stretching its forces on several fronts. Some analysts have argued that ‘Operation 1027’ is the biggest, best-organized offensive mounted against the military regime since the 2021 coup.

The alliance claims to have seized more than 80 military outposts and large caches of military weapons and ammunition, with the Arakan Army specifically

claiming posts in Rathedaung and Minbya areas of Rakhine State. Along with this, the alliance seized junta positions in Kunlong Town in Shan State between November 1 and 6. The fall of Kunlong also represents a serious military threat to Lashio, where the North-eastern Command is based, and all of northern Shan State. The attacks in Shan State were followed by the Arakan Army opening a new front against the military in its base of Rakhine State on the west coast. Furthermore, attacks by insurgents in Kayah State, bordering Thailand to the east, and the Sagaing region and Chin State, bordering India, have added to the complexity of this operation (1027), causing concern for the military's dominance in Myanmar.

According to some reports, the alliance's primary target of the operation has been the cyber-scramming industry that has flourished in autonomous militarized zones on Myanmar's eastern border since the February 2021 military coup, generating billions of dollars for Chinese gangs working in collaboration with the Myanmar military, its proxies, and other armed groups.

The border state along with China has become even more concerning for China because, on 01 November, anti-coup armed groups seized the border town of Chinshwehaw, a crucial conduit for the \$1.8 billion in annual trade between China and Myanmar. Subsequently, the Myanmar junta launched multiple air strikes in Laiza, Kachin State. Laiza is a remote town on the Chinese border. In response, China has called on Myanmar to 'cooperate' and 'an immediate ceasefire' to maintain stability along their shared border, especially in this region, which is part of Myanmar's restive north. A billion-dollar rail line is planned under Beijing's \$1 trillion Belt and Road Initiative in this area. Meanwhile, the Chinese military launched military exercises along the China-Myanmar border on November 25 for perpetual preparedness to address diverse emergencies, according to PLA Daily.

The situation worsened by the end of November due to the escalating control exerted by alliance forces along the China borders. In the final days of November, reports began to emerge, suggesting that one of the Alliance armed groups (MNDAA) had captured the Kyin San Kyawt border gate, as reported by international news agencies. Kyin-San-Kyawt border gate is one of the five major trading gates in Muse along the Myanmar-China border in northern Shan state. Muse serves as the primary trade portal between Myanmar and China, hosting the 105-mile Trade Zone. Currently, two of these border crossings, including Kyin San Kyawt, are under the control of the MNDAA, along with two others located in different parts of the border, including Chinshwehaw in Laukkai to the east.

Now, there are some corners where discussion has begun about the possible outcomes of this ongoing armed conflict. The junta-appointed president, Myint Swe, claimed that "if the government does not effectively manage the incidents happening in the border region, the country will be split into various parts," an exaggeration of the risk that the ethnic groups will seek independent statehood, which would be economically suicidal. These warnings from the military regime can be seen as a vulnerable position at the moment. The ongoing conflict has also caused a major humanitarian crisis, with a staggering 1.7 million people displaced from their homes.