



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

Strategic Digest

Vol. 6 | No. 16 | 16 August 2024

IDF Eliminates Key Hamas and Hezbollah Leaders

US Australia 2+2 AUSMIN talks- Key Points

A Panoply of Joint Maritime Drills in the South China Sea

IDF Eliminates Key Hamas and Hezbollah Leaders

The Israel Defence Force (IDF) eliminated key Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran on July 31 while Hezbollah's senior-most military commander Fuad Shukr was killed in an air strike in a Beirut neighbourhood on July 30. These were some of the most high-profile targeted killings that the IDF executed since the start of the October 2023 military conflict with Hamas.



Haniyeh was in Tehran to attend the inauguration of President Masoud Pezeshkian. Haniyeh along with Ziyad al-Nakhalah, the Secretary General of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) met with Supreme Leader Khamenei on July 30. The IDF in a post on X cryptically stated the following: 'We can only assume the topics of conversation included how to

spend more Iranian money to kill Israelis while wishing Hezbollah's Nasrallah could join them'.

Reports noted that Haniyeh was killed as a result of a bomb blast inside an Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) safe house in Tehran. Previously on July 13, the head of the Hamas military wing, Mohammed Deif was eliminated in an IDF air strike on a compound in the southern Gaza Strip. Shukr, meanwhile, was held to be responsible for the Majdal Shams rocket attack on July 27 that led to the death of 12 children playing on a soccer field. The IDF Spokesperson Rear Admiral Daniel Hagari charged that an Iranian Falaq-I rocket was used in the attack on Majdhal Shams, a majority Druze area in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.

The threat of regional escalation intensified when a UAV fired by the Houthis struck an apartment building in Tel Aviv on July 19 in which a civilian was killed and several people were injured. RAdm Hagari insisted that Israel was fighting a multi-front war against Hamas in the Gaza Strip, militia groups in Iraq and Syria, as well as the Houthis in Yemen, along with "Iranian proxies and Iran itself". In response to this UAV strike, the IDF fighter jets struck the Al Hudaydah Port in Yemen on July 20.

The IDF noted that the Houthis have fired more than 220 projectiles against Israel in the past nine months. The IDF operation against the Yemeni port was labelled as 'Operation Outstretched Arm' given that the port was over 1,800 km away from the Israeli territory. The IDF charged that the port served as the 'entryway for Iranian weapons for the Houthi terrorist regime' and affirmed that it is capable of operating anywhere required and will strike any force that endangers Israelis.

Even as the IDF highlighted that it had eliminated half of the leadership of Hamas's military wing, including six brigade commanders, over 20 battalion commanders and approximately 150 company commanders apart from striking over 60,000 terrorist targets inside Gaza, IDF strikes in the Gaza Strip continued to generate controversy given high civilian casualties. On July 15, for instance, an IDF strike on a school in the Nuseirat refugee camp killed more than 30 people. The IDF insisted that it undertook the strike based on precise intelligence and that it took numerous steps before the strike to mitigate the risk of harming civilians, including by the use of aerial surveillance and precise munitions.

In another IDF strike in the Gaza Strip on August 10 which targeted the Al-Tab'een school, more than 100 people were killed. The IDF insisted again that approximately 20 Hamas and Islamic Jihad militants were operating from the compound stuck at the Al-Taba'een school. Later on August 13, it noted that 31 terrorists were confirmed to have been eliminated in the strike.

Hamas described the strike as a "horrific crime and a dangerous escalation" in Israel's "war of extermination against the Palestinian people". France and the United Kingdom among other countries condemned the strike and called for an immediate ceasefire. When the Director of UNRWA Affairs in Gaza wrote on X that the 'humanitarian situation in Gaza is 100% human-made' on August 12, the IDF noted that it was '100% Hamas-made' and that it could be resolved by the Hamas releasing Israeli hostages and 'putting down their guns.'

In other major developments, US CENTCOM Commander Gen Michael Kurilla visited Israel three times during the past month, on July 17, August 5 and August 9 for operational assessments. UK Chief of Defence Staff Adm Sir Tony Radakin also visited Israel on August 2 for a meeting with Lt Gen Herzi Halevi, the IDF Chief of Staff.

US Australia 2+2 AUSMIN talks- Key Points

Declared an "unbreakable alliance" by US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, the US Australia 2+2 consultations or 'AUSMIN' talks saw both sides build on a long-term trend of increased rotations of American forces to Australia, notably with moves to upgrade Australian military bases and pre-allocate US army equipment down under. Australia's foreign affairs minister, Penny Wong, and the defence minister, Richard Marles,



travelled to the US for annual talks with the US secretary of state, Antony Blinken, and secretary of defence, Lloyd Austin.

China, climate change, strategic competition in the Pacific, and the AUKUS nuclear submarine project, were naturally slated to be the focus. However, the Australian and US representatives also used the meeting to share their fears of escalation in the Middle East and to ramp up their calls for a Gaza ceasefire.

In his opening remarks, Austin said the two allies faced shared security challenges including "coercive behaviour" by China. The joint communique conveyed concerns over Chinese military activity around Taiwan and China's excessive maritime claims in the South China Sea. They "noted grave concern about China's dangerous and escalatory behaviour toward Philippine vessels lawfully operating within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone".

Thus putting into context announcements on the increase in the presence of rotational U.S. forces in Australia. Australia and the United States are already working to upgrade air bases in northern and western Australia, which are closer to potential flashpoints with China in the South China Sea than Australia's capital of Canberra. Australia will begin co-manufacturing guided weapons with the US next year to boost supply for allies in the Indo-Pacific and increase a US military presence in the country, including bomber aircraft, the two nations said after annual defence talks. Austin clarified that this would translate into "more maritime patrol aircraft and reconnaissance aircraft operating from bases across northern Australia. It will also mean more frequent rotational bomber deployments." There are no U.S. military bases in Australia, but the northern city of Darwin hosts a U.S. Marine Rotational Force six months each year and the U.S. is building facilities for its marines and visiting air squadrons within Australian bases.

Austin said Washington and Canberra were "doubling down" on defence industrial cooperation and were working to finalize, by December, two memorandums of understanding: on a plan to manufacture Guided Multiple Launch Rocket Systems (GMRLS) in Australia by 2025, and "advance" the "co-production, co-sustainment and co-development" of the Precision Guided Strike missile known as PrSM. The US and Australia had agreed to jointly work on PrSM as far back as 2021.

Media reported further US announcements that the two sides were collaborating on cutting-edge hypersonic technologies adding there has been "significant progress" in design and ground testing under the joint Southern Cross Integrated Flight Research Experiment (SCIFiRE) initiative. Marles separately noted plans to develop a memorandum of understanding between the US Defense Innovation Unit and its counterpart in Australia, the Advanced Strategic Capabilities Accelerator.

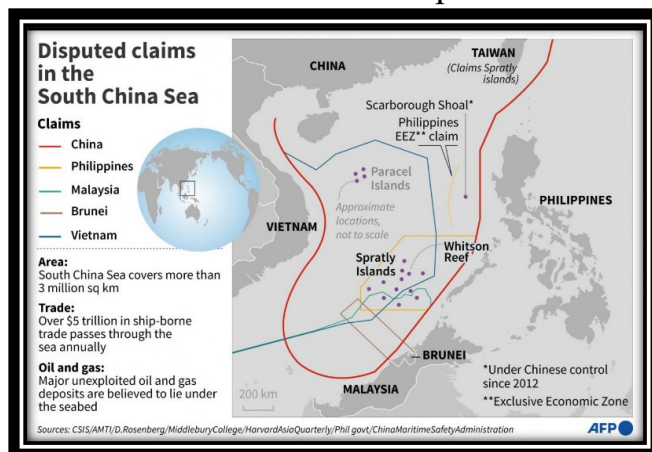
Collaboration with regional partners like Japan, India and the Philippines was highlighted in the context of working together to boost intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities in the Indo-Pacific.

While AUKUS was touched briefly in the media discussion, Penny Wong reiterated that despite a US election looming there was bipartisan U.S. political support for the programme. However Australian observers added that “the downplaying of AUKUS in the communique could be interpreted as an attempt to take the heat of the AUKUS debate in Australia, which has reached a fervour pitch, at times devoid of facts.” It is argued that though it represents greater alignment in the alliance on pillar one, “the pressure will ramp up in coming years to deliver the infrastructure groundwork in preparation for phase one – the rotation of US and UK submarines through Western Australia.”

Meanwhile, the talks generated media buzz when MOFA Taiwan released a statement welcoming the talks and “unwavering support for cross-strait peace and stability expressed by the foreign and defence ministers of Australia and the U.S.” Expectedly, China’s state-run tabloid Global Times lashed out warning Australia to be vigilant as “These moves, under the banner of “security cooperation,” are aimed at positioning Canberra at the forefront of Washington's geopolitical strategy and constitute a provocation in the Asia-Pacific region.”

A Panoply of Joint Maritime Drills in the South China Sea

The latest incident involving a Chinese aircraft executing a dangerous manoeuvre and dropping flares on a Philippines aircraft in the contested Scarborough Shoal on August 8, 2024, has become part of a regular pattern. Such incidences are becoming more frequent given that Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) and island areas in the South China Sea (SCS) have become highly contested. China’s coordinated use of its sea power in the SCS is resulting in Southeast Asia countries re-evaluating their respective maritime strategy.



This includes joint maritime exercises which have become more frequent amongst the navies of allies and partner nations. The first half of August 2024, has witnessed several joint maritime drills which also involved new partners. This would provide valuable opportunities to train, exercise and

develop tactical interoperability. Amidst, escalating tension with China in the SCS, the Philippines is strengthening its partnerships with other Indo-Pacific neighbours. This includes deals to increase base access, weapons transfers and the intensification of joint military exercises especially in the SCS. On July 31, 2024, the US Navy and Armed Forces of the Philippines conducted their fifth Maritime Cooperative Activity (MCA) exercises in the SCS. The MCA is designed to enhance interoperability between the two militaries and further advance combined capabilities in the maritime domain. The first MCA exercise between the two naval forces was held in November 2023.

As a consequence of increasing maritime confrontation between the Philippines and China in the SCS, the MCA has become more regular and frequent. During the fourth MCA exercise held on April 7, 2024, Australia and Japan also participated along with the US and the Philippines. The statement released by the Japanese Embassy in the Philippines outlined the scenarios involved in the MCA which included anti-submarine warfare training, tactical exercises, link exercises, and photo exercises. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) Southern Theater Command (STC) announced that it was conducting joint naval and air patrols in the SCS on the same day of the MCA exercise. In an apparent swipe at the other drills being held the STC stated that, "All military activities that mess up the situation in the South China Sea and create hotspots are under control".

In the MCA exercise held in July, units participating included the US Navy Independence-class littoral combat ship USS Mobile (LCS 26), assigned to DESRON 7 and operating under DESRON 15, and the Philippine Navy Gregorio del Pilar-class patrol ship BRP Ramon Alcaraz. The activity was held inside the Philippine EEZ, in the waters west of Palawan in which a series of exercises were held aimed at enhancing communication and operational coordination between the two navies.

The Philippines and Japan also held their first joint military exercises in the SCS on August 2, 2024. This follows the signing of the landmark Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) on July 8, 2024, which allows the deployment of forces on each other's soil and also facilitates the implementation of cooperative activities, such as joint exercises. The exercise which brought two vessels from each side, included a communication exercise, tactical maneuvering, and a photographic exercise. The Philippines, the US, Australia, and Canada also held joint sea and air drills on August 7-8, 2024, in the SCS within Manila's EEZ. In response to the joint drills, on the same day as per the STC, it carried out air and sea combat patrols near the Scarborough Shoal to test strike capabilities. Further on August 9, 2024, a bilateral exercise was held between the Philippines and Vietnamese coast guard in the SCS. This was the first time joint drills were held between the two countries which came after President Marcos Jr visited Hanoi in January 2024. During the visit, both countries agreed to enhance collaboration between their coast guards and set up a communication hotline to handle maritime incidents.

The widening geo-political tension and contestation in the SCS is predominantly being shaped by China attempting to alter the status quo through its coercive activities at sea. China which poses both sovereignty and security challenges could undermine international laws governing maritime disputes. The nature of China's challenge in the SCS is pressuring the navies of Southeast Asian countries to address the multitude of operational demands in order to counter Beijing's behaviour. Therefore, to protect their maritime sovereignty and economic rights under conditions of asymmetry, Southeast Asian countries are expanding cooperation amongst themselves and with their allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific.