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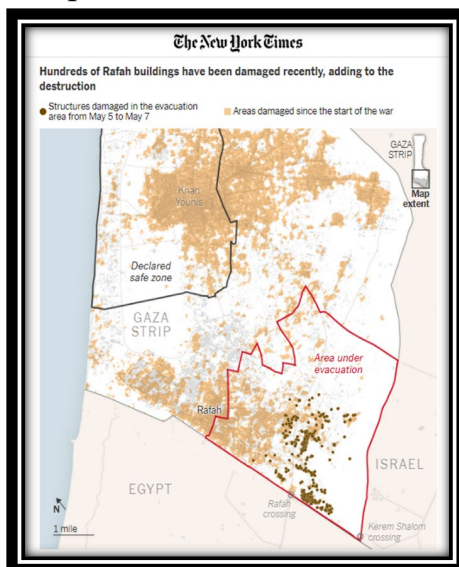
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Israel-Hamas War in the Aftermath of Iron Shield

A week after Operation Iron Shield, the Israeli action to counter the direct Iranian missile and drone attack on its territory, the head of the Israel Defence Force (IDF) Military Intelligence Maj Gen Aharon Haliva tendered his resignation taking responsibility for failure to prevent the dastardly 7 October 2023 Hamas attacks on Israel.

The IDF termed the alleged discovery of mass graves near the Nasser hospital in Khan Younis, southern Gaza in the aftermath of its operations as a ‘disinformation’ campaign and categorically rejected allegations of the IDF being involved in any mass burials in the Gaza Strip. It also termed the video of the Israeli American hostage Hersh Goldberg-Palin released by Hamas as a ‘psychological terror video’. Efforts to provide humanitarian aid to the beleaguered residents of the Gaza Strip appeared to gain momentum when the IDF entered into a collaborative agreement with the US Central Command (USCENTCOM) on 26 April. As part of the agreement, the IDF pledged to provide security and logistics support to the Joint Logistics Over the Shore (JLOTS) facility being built by the CENTCOM on the Gaza coast.

The IDF asserted that humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip had surged in April as compared with March 2024. The IDF noted that there was a 27 per cent increase in the supply of food aid, a 22 per cent increase in the supply of medical aid, a 20 per cent increase in water and a 42 per cent increase in the provision of shelter equipment in April 2024 as against March 2024.



Four IDF soldiers were killed in Hamas rocket barrages near the Keren Shalom border crossing on 5 May, which led to the temporary closure of this important aid corridor. The IDF alleged that the rockets were fired from the Rafah area. The IDF launched targeted strikes against Hamas in eastern Rafah in southern Gaza. It noted that there was evidence that Hamas was exploiting the area around Rafah for terrorist purposes. The IDF

asserted that it would continue targeting Hamas anywhere in Gaza as long as the remaining 133 Israeli hostages continued to remain in Hamas custody.

Colonel Vaibhav Anil Kale (Retd), a Security Coordination Officer in the UN Department of Safety and Security (DSS), was killed on 13 May in an attack in Gaza's Rafah region. The UN has reported that the shots that killed Col. Kale in Rafah came from an Israeli tank. A fact-finding panel has been established by the UN to investigate the matter.

Israel's strikes in Rafah and the threats to launch a full-scale ground operation led to calls by the United States, Turkey, the UN, and the EU among others to not contemplate the military action given the dangers of civilian casualties and a

possible worsening of the humanitarian situation. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu admitted to differences with the Biden administration over Rafah but insisted that Israel must do what is required to counter the Hamas threat. President Biden even warned that the US could withhold the shipment of offensive arms to Israel (currently under Congressional review) if Tel Aviv went ahead with the Rafah operation.

The US CENTCOM Commander Gen Michael Kurilla visited his Israeli counterpart Lt Gen Herzi Halevi on 14 May for an operational update. US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken in a telephonic conversation with Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Galant on the same day expressed his opposition to any Israeli military action in Rafah and stressed the need to ensure the protection of civilians during war.

While the IDF also ordered the evacuation of more than 100,000 Palestinians from the area as it continued with air strikes and limited ground operations, U.N. human rights chief Volker Türk insisted that a full-scale Israeli military operation in Rafah "must not take place". This even as reports indicated that an IDF ground operation against Rafah was imminent given enhanced Israeli troop movement.

South Africa also filed a petition at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on 13 May urging it to instruct Israel to cease its military offensive in Rafah as it could make life in Gaza untenable and therefore violate the 1948 Genocide Convention. South Africa pointed out that the Rafah border crossing was an important corridor to supply humanitarian aid.

On 10 May, the UN General Assembly voted in favour of a resolution supporting Palestinian membership, with 143 nations, including India, voting in favour, 25 nations abstaining, and nine voting against the resolution. The move reflects overwhelming support for full Palestinian membership. The Palestinian Authority was granted 'non-member observer state' status in 2012.

Key Highlights of Xi's trip to Europe

President Xi Jinping undertook a significant five-day Europe tour from 5-10 May, encompassing three countries France, Hungary and Serbia. Notably, his visit coincided with the commemoration of the 60th and 75th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations with France and Hungary respectively and the 25th anniversary of the accidental NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy at Belgrade, Serbia during the Kosovo war. Highlighting the importance of this visit, President Xi was accompanied by senior Chinese diplomats and officials who are associated in various capacities with different diplomatic, political and trade issues in China-EU relations. His entourage included Cai Qi, a fifth-ranking member of the CCP Politburo Standing Committee.; Chinese Foreign Minister and Politburo member Wang Yi; Zhang Shanjie, Head of the National Development and Reform Commission; Wang Wentao, China's Minister of Commerce; Lan Foan, China's Minister of Finance; China's ambassador to France Lu Shaye; Head of General Administration of Customs Yu Jianhua among others.

The first destination of Xi's Europe tour was France where he held meetings with his French counterpart Emmanuel Macron and European Commission President Ursula Von-der-Leyen over two days. The tri-lateral talks addressed various issues like Beijing's trade imbalance with the European Union (EU), greater access for European companies to Chinese markets, concerns regarding China's excess capacity in electric vehicles and green energy, China's sale of dual-use products and technologies to Russia and use of Beijing's influence on Russia to end the war in Ukraine. Observers suggest that the meetings failed to yield significant results. While EU chief Von-der-Leyen vowed to defend the EU's industry against flooding with Chinese goods, President Emmanuel Macron seemed eager to attract Chinese investments to France's Electric Vehicle (EV) industry and avoided reference to the subject. Further, notwithstanding the exchange of diplomatic pleasantries, Xi hardly made any concessions on issues of trade and cooperation with Russia and denied charges of over-production.

Xi's travel to Serbia and Hungary appeared more productive than his visit to France. In Serbia's capital Belgrade, President Xi and Serbian President Vucic while announcing the implementation of the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) signed last year, pledged to deepen bilateral ties by establishing direct air links between the two countries and increasing Chinese import of Serbian agricultural products. Further, in the meeting with Hungarian President Viktor Orban, Xi pledged cooperation on many fronts, including an increase in Chinese investments in the Hungarian transport and energy sector, construction of a high-speed railway connecting the capital city centre to its airport and cooperation in the nuclear sector. Reportedly, Xi also assured a 2.1 billion USD Chinese investment to improve infrastructure connectivity between the Serbian and Hungarian capitals. Both Serbia and Hungary pledged to enhance cultural and people-to-people contacts with China.

Considering Xi's first trip to Europe in five years, in the backdrop of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and Israel's onslaught in Gaza, the strategic community in the West closely followed this visit. The majority of Western observers and commentators opined that Xi's visit was aimed at driving a wedge in the transatlantic alliance. One commentator elaborated that China's visit to France, Serbia and Hungary was not a coincidence but was planned to fuel the sentiments of strategic autonomy, as all these three countries have expressed in the past their dissatisfaction with US political interference. It was also opined that China through enhancing its economic support to the countries lying at the periphery of the European Union is aiming to create a bloc of supporters who will hinder a deeper strategic alliance between the US and EU. Further, some commentators expressed concerns that Xi could be exploiting the fault lines within the EU to undermine the implementation of "de-risking" efforts that would complement US policies.



President Xi's visit to Europe was driven by a combination of both domestic economic concerns and strategic imperatives. On the domestic front, the CCP is grappling with economic slowdown, shrinking manufacturing output and slumping domestic consumption rates. Accordingly, foreign investments and access to Europe's markets are desperately needed to revive economic activity. Furthermore, Beijing considers that the US is increasingly trying to isolate China and contain its rise. In that case, even-tempered amity with the EU is seen as crucial to balance ties with the US. This strategic calculus underscores China's diplomatic manoeuvring in Europe. However, persisting negative perception of China in Europe over Beijing's handling of the Covid pandemic, continuing divergences in security and economic interests, differences over managing climate change and environmental issues and competition in the green technology sector continue to be significant roadblocks in China-EU ties. Therefore, while the EU at times could be seen proffering a different approach from the US, a revival of EU-China cooperation to pre-pandemic levels seems unlikely in the immediate future.

Nagorno Karabakh Peace Process

The highly anticipated meeting between the Foreign Ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan occurred in Almaty, Kazakhstan, on the 10th of May 2024. This two-day event marked the latest and most crucial attempt to find permanent peace between the two nations, specifically addressing the long-standing Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. This conflict, which has persisted since the collapse of the Soviet Union, has been the primary barrier to peace in the South Caucasus region. During the meeting, the two leaders acknowledged the progress made on the delimitation and the agreements reached on this aspect. They also committed to further negotiations on the remaining contentious issues.



Kazakhstan has emerged as a new mediator in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, joining Russia, the European Union, and the United States of America. This development adds a fresh perspective to the peace process, with the Kazakhs bringing their unique approach and potential solutions. This is after the Russians, the Americans, and the European Union attempted to find a solution to the conflict after the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War of 2020. There has been some effort from both the nations of Armenia and Azerbaijan to bring a solution bilaterally as well.

The Russian peace process, which occurred during the second Nagorno-Karabakh, accorded the presence of Russian peacekeepers in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. There were also mentions of the movement of the territory from the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic into the Azeri side. However, the peace deal was unsuccessful

mainly when there was another bout of aggression from the Azeri side in 2023, bringing about a complete change to the republic status and forced displacement of the Armenian population from Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia. This has led to the need for another peace deal to bring about a solution to the conflict.

The West has made noteworthy strides in peace initiatives, garnering positive responses, particularly from the Armenian side. The United States of America has extended an invitation to the foreign ministers of both nations to Washington, DC, in a bid to find a resolution to the conflict. The American Secretary of State Antony Blinken has also taken up the initiative and held separate conversations with both nations' foreign ministers regarding the peace process.

The European Union has taken a more proactive stance, initiating steps such as sending observers to the conflict zone. This move was well-received by Armenia, but the Azeris did not reciprocate similarly; they rejected the involvement of European Union peace observers and requested them to confine their activities to the Armenian side. The other three options for peace have become new options for power competition and power struggles between Russia and the West (the United States and the European Union). Russia is the age-old ally of Armenia, and it has long-term commitments concerning the security of the nation. Russia was also instrumental in the peace process of the first Nagorno-Karabakh war. In the second war, during the first Azeri offensive, the Russians played a pivotal role in bringing about peace, including adding its peacekeepers in the disputed area. The West also made attempts for peace, but at that period, Russia's peace proposal was preferred. The tables turned only after the second Azeri aggression when Russia was unable to maintain peace, and this led to Armenia diversifying, thus creating a space for the West to stamp its influence.

The Kazakhs, have been known for developing interest when it comes to peace mediation. They have made efforts when it comes to peace in Syria through the Astana Format. During the start of the Russia-Ukraine conflict as well, Kazakhstan stated it would be ready to act as a mediator between the two nations. The latest attempt can be seen as Kazakhstan trying to solidify its role as a peace negotiator in the Eurasian region. Overall, there has been some progress regarding the need for peace, but the current delimitation process has created some friction in Armenia's domestic situation. Armenia would need to bring the local populace on its side if there are to be any long-term attempts at peace. Domestic issues would need to be addressed, particularly in the current Armenian scenario, with a disgruntled population expressing its displeasure towards the delimitation. The recent demands for the resignation of the Armenian Prime Minister, in connection with the delimitation and the rising civil disobedience movement in Armenia, could alter any attempts to continue the delimitation process, which the two ministers had discussed in the recent peace meetings.

Azerbaijan's insistence on the Zangezur corridor could create friction, with Armenia apprehensive about the idea. In the short term, the process of permanent peace in the Caucasus would take time, and peace negotiations would continue, but a solution is not foreseeable in the near future.