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Ukraine War Update 01-30 Sep 2024

As of 30 Sep 2024, the Ukrainian city of Vuhledar appeared on the cusp of being controlled by Russia. Ukrainian forces conducted a controlled retreat from the Vuhledar, a town they fought tooth and nail to keep for two years. Ukraine's military said they were withdrawing their troops from Vuhledar to "protect the military personnel and equipment". In addition, Russian forces are pressing up against multiple strongholds including Pokrovsk and Chasiv Yar along more than 100 miles of the jagged front in the eastern Donetsk region of Ukraine.

On the other hand, the Ukrainian offensive in Russia's Kursk region is facing stiff resistance. Ukraine is largely holding onto land it seized in the Kursk region, even as Moscow has begun a counterattack. Ukrainian advances have slowed and clashes are growing deadlier as Moscow deployed reinforcements and increased its aerial bombardments.



Although the Kursk offensive reaffirmed Ukraine's capacity to seize the initiative and outsmart Russian forces, it also extended the front lines and stretched Ukraine's supply lines. The offensive has not compelled Russia to slow its offensive in Donetsk, although some Russian forces have been diverted to Kursk's defence. At the same time, the Kursk offensive has reduced the resources available for the defence of Pokrovsk by Ukraine.

Stabilising the front line will require more firepower. Senior Ukrainian officials have stated that their forces need a layered defence, including artillery, missiles, warplanes and drones, to force Russian troops and weapons away from the front line to make further advances impossible. Ukraine has been asking for permission to use powerful Western missiles to attack military targets deep inside Russia, such as air bases, factories and infrastructure. Russia, in response, has been targeting the Ukrainian military and energy infrastructure through missiles, bombs and drones.

A trio of audacious Ukrainian drone and missile strikes during the month—one against an arms dump in Toropets, 500km inside Russia, on September 18th and two others days later against depots in Krasnodar, 200km away—have illustrated Ukrainian aerial offensive capability. Ukraine's offensive capability could be significantly enhanced if the US decides to lift the restriction on the use of long-range weapons by Ukraine. Even though Britain and France have not imposed any implicit restrictions on their missiles, the Storm Shadow and the SCALP were supplied to Ukraine. However, these missiles have not been used to attack Russian territory apparently because the missiles rely on American technology to reach their targets. The US has exercised this veto to avoid escalation.

In response to Ukraine's appeal to the West to lift long-range weapon restrictions, Russian President Putin has escalated his nuclear rhetoric, telling a group of senior

officials that Russia would consider using nuclear weapons if it was attacked by any state with conventional weapons. Putin also warned that a nuclear power supporting another country's attack on Russia would be considered a participant in aggression, issuing a thinly veiled threat to the West as foreign leaders continue to mull whether to allow Ukraine to use long-range weapons.

On 24 September, the Ukrainian president travelled to the US to make an urgent appeal for more American aid and weapons and also to address the UN Security Council and UNGA. President Zelensky told the United Nations Security Council that "Russia can only be forced into peace" and urged that the Russia-Ukraine war not be overlooked as the world turned its attention to wars in Gaza, Sudan and Myanmar. He had put together a new victory plan in the almost three-year-old war based on the principles and values of the U.N. charter but did not elaborate on its details other than to say that he was organising a peace conference. US President Biden met President Zelensky at the White House on 26 September. During the meeting, the US president announced a "surge" in assistance to Ukraine, including nearly \$8bn in military aid and new long-range munitions. While Ukraine is facing uncertainty over the level of future support from its closest allies, Russia released its draft budget for the next year on 30 September. Draft documents say defence and security will make up 40% of government spending. The latest planned increase in spending will take Russia's defence budget to a record 13.5tn rubles (£109bn) in 2025 which is about 3tn rubles more than was set aside for defence this year. The massive Russian investment in the military has worried European war planners, who have said NATO underestimated Russia's ability to sustain a long-term war.

2024 Quad Leaders' Summit: Key Takeaways

The Quad Leaders Summit in Wilmington Delaware was more than a symbolic farewell to host US President Joe Biden and outgoing Japanese PM Fumio Kishida. The declaration titled "Enduring Partners For The Indo-Pacific" highlighted the deepening cooperation and institutionalisation of the grouping between the United States, Japan, India, and Australia.

Over the past four years, the Quad has worked towards its primary goal of curbing unilateralism from rising revisionist powers like China both in the economic and military sphere and made tangible progress in delivering alternate initiatives across a wide range of areas critical to the Indo-Pacific region.

A key focus of the summit declaration therefore was to highlight the Quad's efforts to ensure the long-term sustainability and endurance of the partnership irrespective of election cycles of its participating countries. This includes securing robust funding through national budgetary processes, deepening inter-parliamentary exchanges, and engaging a diverse array of government agencies and stakeholders. The creation of a bipartisan Congressional Quad Caucus in the U.S. is a notable development that signals the partnership's growing institutionalisation in respective national bureaucracies and systems.

The statement outlines several new and expanded Quad initiatives spanning global health, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), maritime security, quality infrastructure, critical and emerging technologies, climate and clean energy, cybersecurity, and people-to-people ties.



In the realm of global health and health security, the Quad is launching the historic "Quad Cancer Moonshot" to reduce cancer deaths in the Indo-Pacific, as well as enhance pandemic preparedness through joint exercises, capacity building, and increased funding for disease prevention, detection, and response. These efforts build on the success of the Quad Vaccine Partnership.

The Quad's HADR cooperation has evolved significantly, with the partners coordinating their response to recent disasters in the region and working to ensure readiness through the pre-positioning of relief supplies and joint exercises. The focus on sustainable connectivity and quality infrastructure continued with the Quad leveraging its collective expertise and resources to support sustainable and resilient port development, strengthen undersea cable connectivity, and mobilise public and private investment. The Quad Infrastructure Fellowship is also expanding to build regional capacity including in the ASEAN.

Maritime security saw efforts to bolster collective deterrence with the launch of a joint initiative called the Quad-at-Sea Ship Observer Mission. Aimed at enhancing cooperation among the coastguard services of the four Quad nations, the initiative proposes to improve their interoperability in maritime safety and security. Additionally, in response to the growing threats from natural disasters in the Indo-Pacific region, the group announced the establishment of the 'Quad Indo-Pacific Logistics Network'. This network is intended to enhance collaborative efforts in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) by sharing airlift capabilities.

The Quad initiative to strengthen Maritime Domain Awareness through the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) gained momentum, with Australia pledging to collaborate with the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency to enhance cooperation. The group also introduced a new Maritime Initiative for Training in the Indo-Pacific (MAITRI). With India hosting the first workshop in 2025, the initiative is aimed at helping partners in the region fully utilize the resources offered by IPMDA and other Quad initiatives. The key focus is to bolster partners' capabilities to monitor and secure their waters, counter illegal fishing, and deter unlawful behaviour. Quad partners plan to integrate new technology and data into IPMDA over the next year to provide advanced capabilities and information to the region.

The Quad's focus on critical and emerging technologies, such as open radio access networks, artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and semiconductors, demonstrates

its commitment to harnessing innovation for the benefit of the Indo-Pacific. The Quad leaders finalized a Memorandum of Cooperation to address semiconductor supply chain risks and aim to build a secure telecommunications ecosystem with an investment of approximately USD 20 billion. Additionally, the Quad is deepening collaborative research in agriculture and utilizing AI in studying biological ecosystems through initiatives like AI-ENGAGE and BioExplore. The Quad Investors Network (QUIN) is also working to accelerate strategic investments in these key technology areas.

Climate change and clean energy are other priority areas for the Quad, with initiatives to strengthen early warning systems, promote clean energy supply chains, and improve energy efficiency. The Quad's focus on supporting climate-vulnerable countries in the Pacific and Indian Ocean regions shows prioritisation of agendas.

Expectedly Chinese state media has decried the summit as forcing the region into block-style competition, critics of the Quad say the broad agenda takes away from its security mandate which is primarily to deter China. Yet the resounding message from the meeting was one that the Indian leadership has often articulated “The Quad is here to stay, grow and contribute.”

PLA Navy's Enhanced Tempo of Exercises at Sea

Amidst rising tensions in the South China Sea, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) conducted three naval exercises in September. The first exercise 'Ocean 24' was jointly conducted with Russia and extended from 10 to 16 September. The naval drills witnessed massive mobilisation of troops, warships, submarines, support vessels, planes and helicopters. While a large part of the operations was held in the Sea of Japan, the exercises also covered other critical maritime regions including the Pacific, Arctic, Mediterranean, Caspian and Balti Sea. Describing the exercises as part of Russia's efforts to strengthen military cooperation, Russian President Vladimir Putin suggested that the naval exercises intended to counter US efforts to assert global hegemony at the cost of other powers. On a more formal note, the Russian Defence Ministry stated that, the naval exercises aimed to “review the key elements dealing with the combat readiness of the Navy and Aerospace Forces command and control system and units and to check their cohesion”. The Chinese press release informed that “the exercises focused on joint maritime defence, with both sides' forces enhancing their capabilities in handling complex and realistic scenarios”.

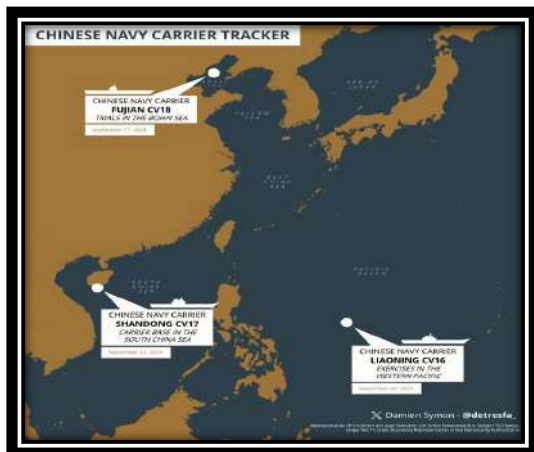
Notably, as a subset of the Ocean 24 exercise, China and Russia also conducted the Northern/ Interaction-2024 exercise in the Sea of Japan from 11-15 September. The forces from the two sides examined their tactical command coordination and joint operational capabilities. Further, the two sides conducted simulated exercises, main gun firing and anchorage ground defence during nighttime. Before the onset of the drills, John Kirby, a National Security Council spokesperson, opined that the drills were long-planned and not a cause of concern. However, Japan expressing

“grave concern” stated that it is difficult to assess the intention and purpose of the joint drills.

Reportedly, Russia and China began another set of naval exercises in the Sea of Japan on 21 September. Russian news agency RIA informed that a joint detachment of warships of the Pacific Fleet and Chinese Navy departed from Vladivostok to conduct the joint Russian-Chinese "Beibu/Interaction - 2024" naval exercise. The naval drills extended for one week and simulated enemy attacks from the air, water and underwater environment. The crew from both countries also conducted artillery firing and several combat exercises using anti-aircraft and anti-submarine weapons. Furthermore, during the exercise, Japan accused Russia of violating its airspace on 23 September. Japan's Defence Minister Minoru Kihara informed in a press briefing that on three occasions a Russian Il-38 patrol aircraft violated the airspace over Japanese territorial waters north of Rebun island, Hokkaido.

Observers noted that the exercises underlined the growing closeness of the two major powers and the deepening of military cooperation between the two countries. While China is helping Russia to achieve its dream of becoming a Pacific power, Moscow seems to be backing China's territorial claims in the South China Sea and elsewhere. Further, given their increasing hostility with the US, these exercises are

also considered to be part of the two countries expanding efforts to push back American presence in the region.



Finally, on the 12th anniversary of the commissioning of China's first aircraft carrier, all three of China's aircraft carriers, namely Liaoning, Shandong, and Fujian, jointly conducted exercises in the final week of September. Briefing the media on this exercise, Senior Colonel Zhang Xiaokang stated that the drills were undertaken in the

West Pacific region, to enhance combat capabilities. Notably, the Japanese Ministry of Defence alleged that the Liaoning aircraft carrier and its escorts entered Japanese territorial waters as the vessel and two accompanying destroyers sailed between Japan's southern Yonaguni and Iriomote islands, and conducted takeoffs and landings of fighter jets and helicopters in waters southeast of Miyako Island. In response to Japan's claims, China stated that the Liaoning aircraft carrier was engaged in a routine training mission in the western Pacific and dismissed Tokyo's allegations that the vessel and its escorts had entered Japanese waters.

While Chinese observers praised the exercises, asserting that the country is making steady yet rapid progress in its aircraft carrier program, including building more carriers with enhanced capabilities, developing advanced aircraft types, training additional pilots, and conducting more far-seas drills, external observers expressed concerns that the latest exercises were part of China's efforts to project its military power, demonstrating the expansion of the Chinese navy.