



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

# Strategic Digest

Vol. 7 | No. 02 | 16 January 2025

**Israel Hamas Reach Ceasefire Deal**

**Ukraine War Intensifies as Trump's Inauguration Nears**

**Pakistan-Afghanistan Tension- An Appraisal**

## Israel Hamas Reach Ceasefire Deal

Qatar, Egypt and the United States announced on 15 January 2025 that ‘parties to the conflict in Gaza’ reached an agreement for the release of hostages and prisoners and ‘return to a sustainable calm ultimately achieving a permanent ceasefire ...’ The agreement, spread over three stages, is expected to take effect on 19 January, beginning with a ceasefire and redeployment of Israeli troops outside densely populated areas. It will be followed by the return of internally displaced persons. Israel believes that 94 hostages are still being held by Hamas, out of which 34 are presumed to be dead.

US President Joe Biden stated that US hostages will be among the first lot of hostages to be released. Biden in his statement noted that the contours of this latest deal were first laid out on 31 May 2024 and subsequently endorsed by the UN Security Council on 10 June. The US President attributed the latest agreement to the ‘extreme pressure’ that Hamas was under after 15 months of relentless Israeli military activities, the changed regional situation after the ceasefire in Lebanon and the weakening of Iran. Biden also credited the diplomatic efforts of his administration in securing the deal.

The incoming president Donald Trump, meanwhile, insisted that the ceasefire agreement ‘only happened’ as the result of his historic electoral victory in November 2024. Biden, though, admitted that his administration had worked along with the incoming president’s team to ensure that the US was ‘speaking with one voice’. Reports noted that Trump’s envoy, Steve Witkoff, attended the negotiations in Qatar.



Even after the announcement, the Israel Defence Force (IDF) continued its military operations, leading to the death of over 80 people in the past 24 hours, as per Gaza’s Health ministry. The later stages of the agreement are expected to lead to the reconstruction of the devastated Gaza Strip. The previous ceasefire between Israel and Hamas dates back to November 2023 when 105 hostages and over 200 Palestinian prisoners were released from Israeli jails. The ceasefire did not last long and fighting resumed.

Gaza’s Health ministry states that at least 46,788 Palestinians have been killed since 7 October 2023 and more than 110,000 have been wounded in Israeli military activities. In the Hamas attack on 7 October, at least 1,139 people were killed in Israel while more than 200 were taken as hostages.

Apart from its military activities in the Gaza Strip, the IDF is continuing its military actions against Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthi regime’s military and civilian infrastructure in Yemen. On 12 January 2025, air strikes were conducted on Hezbollah targets in Lebanon, including rocket launch sites. The IDF noted that before the strikes, the threat posed by the targets was presented to the monitoring mechanism of the ceasefire understandings between Israel and Lebanon. The IDF insisted that the threats were not addressed by the Lebanese authorities.

The Israel-Hezbollah ceasefire agreement brokered by the US and France took effect on 28 November 2024. As part of the deal, Lebanese troops are required to dismantle any Hezbollah infrastructure in southern Lebanon while the IDF withdraws south of the de-facto border within two months. The IDF in December 2024 stated that it had confiscated over 85,000 weapons, missiles and military items belonging to Hezbollah and that Hezbollah's military capabilities have been severely degraded as a result of IDF ground operations.

On the Yemeni front, the IDF on 10 January conducted air strikes against Houthi targets on the western coast and inland Yemen, following repeated UAV and surface-to-surface missile (SSM) missile attacks against Israel. A Houthi UAV, for instance, was intercepted on 23 December while a missile damaged a school in central Israel on 19 December. The IDF stated that the Houthis have launched over 300 UAVs towards Israel, over 100 of which were intercepted while approximately 40 SSMs were launched from Yemen towards Israel since 7 October 2023.

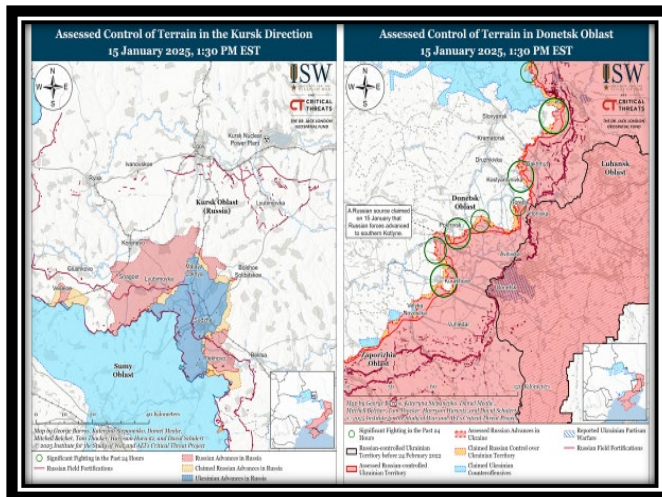
Among the targets hit in IDF strikes on 10 January included power stations and Al Hudaydah and Ras Isa ports on the western coast containing Houthi military infrastructure. Israel insisted that the Houthis were a 'terrorist regime' and a central part of the Iranian axis of terror'. Previously on 26 December, the IDF had struck the Sana'a intl airport, Hezyaz and Ras Kanatib power stations as well as military infrastructure in Al-Hudaydah, Salif and Ras Kanatib ports on Yemen's western coast.

In other developments, in the context of the dramatic collapse of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria in early December 2024, the IDF deployed forces to ensure the safety of Israeli communities of the Golan Heights and Israeli citizens. The IDF insisted that it was not interfering in the internal affairs of Syria but would continue to operate as long as necessary to preserve the buffer zone and defend Israel and its civilians.

### **Ukraine War Intensifies as Trump's Inauguration Nears**

As the inauguration of Trump's presidency nears, both Ukraine and Russia have intensified their efforts to maximize their territorial gains in anticipation of likely mediation efforts from the US. In 2024, Russia steadily expanded its control over the last year and now holds the majority of territory in the four regions it annexed in 2022: Luhansk, Kherson, Zaporizhzhia and Donetsk. Ukraine's strategic decision to open a new front in the Russian territory, the Kursk region, intended to halt Russia's progress in the Donbas region, seems to have achieved limited success. Ukraine captured around 1,300 square kilometres of Russian territory in August. Nonetheless, Kyiv has since lost almost half of the initially seized area.

On 05 Jan, Ukrainian armed forces began a surprise offensive in Russia's Kursk region on Sunday, in an apparent attempt to regain the initiative on the battlefield before Donald Trump's imminent return to the White House. As per Ukrainian sources, Russian and North Korean forces suffered heavy losses during this



offensive. It was initially reported that Ukrainian troops had entered the Russian hamlets of Berdin and Novosotnitskii. However, the Ukrainian offensive soon faltered against stiff Russian resistance.

On the other hand, Russian forces have intensified their efforts to expand their territorial gains along the entire 1,000-km (620-mile) frontline with the city of Pokrovsk being the site of hottest conflict.

The mine, near the frontline city of Pokrovsk, produced coking coal crucial for Ukraine's steel industry. On 13 Jan, a strike knocked out the plant's electricity substation, halting operations. The closing of the mine, located just southeast of the embattled city of Pokrovsk, ended a desperate effort by Ukraine to keep it running until the very last moment. As per reports, Russia has again continued to advance past the south of Pokrovsk. They are also pushing northwest from their positions to wrap around the city's western flank in a move to encircle and capture the city. A Ukrainian official said Russian forces were bypassing the logistics hub of Pokrovsk in eastern Ukraine which they have fought for months to capture and focusing instead on cutting supply lines to it.

On 15 Jan, Russian forces had unleashed a massive missile attack on the Ukraine's energy infrastructure. Air, land and sea-based missiles — including at least one ballistic missile — were launched in the barrage, along with dozens of attack drones. Russia's Defense Ministry confirmed that it had used “precision weapons and strike drones” against critical gas and energy infrastructure in response to an earlier attack by Ukraine on Russia using long-range ATACM. As per reports, energy facilities in the Kharkiv, Lviv and Ivano-Frankivsk regions had suffered damage.

During his Presidential campaign trail, Trump had said that he would get the fighting stopped within 24 hours of taking office. Advisers to President-elect Donald Trump now concede that the Ukraine war will take months or even longer to resolve, a sharp reality check on his biggest foreign policy promise - to strike a peace deal on his first day in the White House. Those assessments dovetail with remarks by Trump's incoming Russia-Ukraine envoy, retired Lieutenant-General Keith Kellogg, who said in an interview with Fox News last week that he would like to have a "solution" to the war within 100 days, far beyond the president-elect's original timeline. Since the election, Trump has walked back his rhetoric further, often simply saying that he would "solve" the conflict, without offering a timeline.

Ukraine As he prepares to step down next week, the outgoing US president, Joe Biden, said on 15 Jan that The United States and its allies “can't walk away” from Ukraine. Biden marvelled that at the start of the war, Putin thought Russian forces

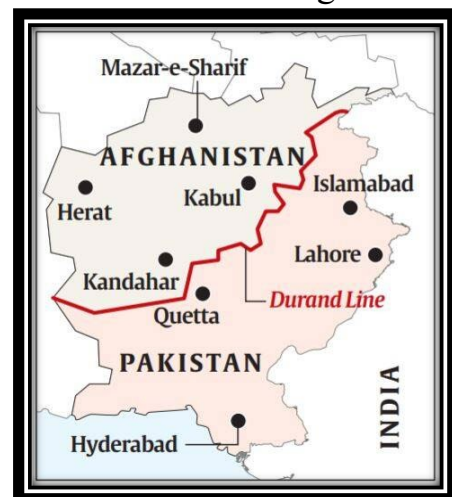
would easily defeat Ukraine in a matter of days. It was an assessment the US and European intelligence officials shared. Instead, Biden said, his administration and its allies have “laid the foundation” for the Trump administration to help Ukraine eventually arrive at a moment where it can negotiate a just end to the nearly three-year-old conflict. “Today, Ukraine is still a free and independent country with the potential for a bright future,” Biden said. Hailing US and international support for Kyiv since Moscow’s 2022 invasion, Biden said that the Russian ruler, Vladimir Putin, has “failed to achieve any of his strategic objectives” but that “there is more to do, we can’t walk away”.

### Pakistan-Afghanistan Tension- An Appraisal

Pakistan-Afghanistan relations for the moment appear to be strained a bit due to certain untoward developments in the recent past. Pakistan considers Afghanistan as its strategic backyard and wants a pliable government in Kabul to not only accommodate its security concerns but also provide space for extraterritorial activities in the region. Pakistan’s desire to enjoy such a privilege is often termed as having a kind of ‘Strategic Depth’ primarily against but in no way limited to India.

Given its role in the “Holy War” in the 1980s and constant support to Taliban 1.0, Mullah Omar led Taliban government provided it the much needed ‘Strategic Depth.’ However, the situation somewhat changed in the post-9/11 period when Gen. Pervez Musharraf agreed to be part of the US Global War on Terror (GWOT). Pakistan’s participation in GWOT, albeit halfheartedly and under immense international pressure, came in direct contrast with the approach adopted by hardliner militant sections within Pakistan who at one point in time were trained and used as cannon fodder against the USSR forces in the region.

An obvious fallout was the emergence of a Pakistani version of the Taliban known as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (PPP) which launched a series of attacks against Pakistan, especially its armed forces. Pakistan, after initial failed attempts to win them over, responded with several high-profile military operations including the Zarb-e-Azb which forced TTP fighters to relocate themselves to friendly Afghan territory. It became quite easy for TTP to target Pakistani armed forces while operating from Afghanistan. Analysts and observers term it as ‘Reverse Strategic Depth’ which TTP enjoys against Pakistan. With Taliban 2.0 capturing Kabul in August 2021, TTP got another shot in the arm which emboldened its rank and file. With this newfound confidence, TTP increased its terror activities inside Pakistan from the safe heavens in Afghanistan. As per the TTP, it conducted 1758 terror attacks in 2024 which killed as many as 1284 people and injured another 1661.



Pakistan, on its part, has repeatedly asked the Taliban government to stop TTP from launching attacks across the border. The Afghan Taliban refused to take any action against the TTP and asked Pakistan to deal with its internal problem on its own. In order to pressure, the Taliban government, Pakistan forcefully repatriated around 0.784 million Afghan refugees. When even this did not produce the desired outcome, Pakistan resorted to airstrikes across the border. On the Eve of Christmas in December 2024, the Pakistan military conducted air strikes against TTP across the border in the Barmal district of Afghanistan.

The Taliban government has confirmed the strikes that killed at least 46 people including women and children. Afghanistan's Defence Ministry spokesperson Enayatullah Khwarazami in a post on X wrote that "The Islamic Emirate will not leave this cowardly act unanswered and considers the defence of its territory and inalienable right." Many in the West in general and region, in particular, believe that the recent air strike has increased the bilateral tension to a new height.

There is no doubt that things are not quite well as far as the bilateral relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan are concerned. However, it would also be an exaggeration to say that the recent air strikes would derail or rupture the relationship completely. A careful consideration of the context and associated facts indicates a mutual understanding between Pakistan and sections of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

It is no secret that the Taliban 2.0 is composed of various sections including the Haqqani group, the Baradar group and the Akhundzada group. Haqqani group has historically maintained quite close links with the politico-security elites of Pakistan. It was not a coincidence that the strikes took place at a time when Pakistan's special representative for Afghanistan Mohamad Sadiq held meetings with Afghan Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi and Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani.

It is pertinent to note that Mohammad Sadiq was Pakistan's Ambassador to Afghanistan during 2008-2014. Given his linkages with people who matter in Afghanistan today and his vast diplomatic experience, he was entrusted, by the politico-security elites, with the responsibility to deal with the emerging situation in a way that addresses Pakistan's security concerns without critically undermining its relations with Afghanistan. It is quite possible that the two sides reached an informal understanding to deal with the evolving situation in a specific way.

Pakistan has a history of having put in place such informal understandings on the ground. During Gen. Mushrraf's tenure, there was an understanding between Pakistan and the United States over the drone strikes inside the country. After every such strike, Pakistan used to "strongly protest" in public against the violation of its sovereignty and territorial integrity. The official protests and warnings of a possible retaliation by Afghans in this case are quite possibly aimed at assuaging the people of Afghanistan. Any retaliation, whatsoever, will come not from the Afghan Taliban but from the TTP.