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# Strategic Digest

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**Israel's War in Gaza- An Update**

**President Xi's Visit to Malaysia and Cambodia**

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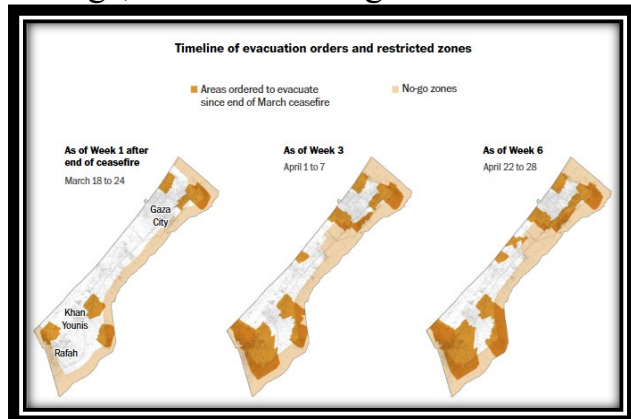
## Israel's War in Gaza- An Update

Israel's military strikes and ground operations, which resumed on 18 March 2025 following a deadlock over ceasefire terms, continued throughout April. Israel sought to extend Phase One of the previous agreement for further hostage and prisoner exchanges. Hamas insisted on proceeding to Phase Two, involving a complete Israeli withdrawal and a permanent ceasefire. Hamas refused to release the remaining hostages, its primary leverage, without clear guarantees. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, constrained by domestic political considerations, has refused to permanently end the war, opting instead for military means to rescue the hostages. Reportedly, among 59 hostages, 36 are presumed to be dead.

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) has intensified operations, targeting Hamas infrastructure and hideouts, worsening the civilian toll, and the aid blockade has aggravated the humanitarian crisis. Between 18 March to 17 April, IDF struck over 1400 targets, including weapons depots, rocket launch sites and operatives. On 5 April, Israeli forces announced control over the Morag corridor between Khan Yunis and Rafah in southern Gaza. Rafah and its surrounding neighbourhoods, about one-fifth of the Gaza Strip, has been incorporated into a buffer zone along the Israel-Gaza border, cutting it off from Egypt. The death toll in Gaza until 30 April has increased to 52,400 people. In April, three IDF soldiers and one police officer died in clashes in Gaza. Hamas launched 10 rockets into southern Israel on 7 April, injuring nine people. The Houthis fired ballistic missiles on 23 and 27 April, targeting northern Israel and Nevatim Airbase near the Dead Sea respectively. Since 18 March, Houthis have reportedly launched over 20 ballistic missiles and drones at Israel.

Protests in Israel have escalated due to public frustration with the government's handling of the hostage crisis. An April poll showed support for prioritizing hostages' return rose from 62% in January to 68% in March 2025. On 1 April, the Hostages Families Forum criticized Defence Minister Israel Katz for prioritizing military offensives over hostages. Calls to end the war have emerged from Israel's security establishment, questioning the strategy against Hamas. On 10 April, nearly 1,000 Air Force reservists urged the government to prioritize hostages, followed by similar appeals from IDF Unit 8200 members and former Mossad officials. Prominent Israeli writers also signed a petition on 13 April demanding an end to the war and a roadmap for Gaza. The government dismissed these security officials, with Katz accusing them of undermining a "just war" and Netanyahu referring to them as a "marginal group" backed by foreign interests.

Egypt and Qatar have intensified diplomatic efforts for a new ceasefire. On April 7, Egypt proposed releasing nine hostages, including US-Israeli Edan Alexander, in exchange for a 70-day ceasefire, humanitarian aid to Gaza, and the release of

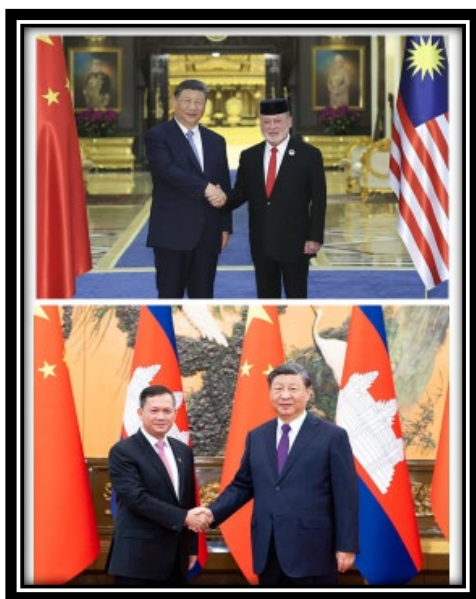


2,500 Palestinian detainees. On April 11, Israel countered with a plan for 10 hostages in exchange for 120 Palestinian prisoners, a 45-day ceasefire, and negotiations for a permanent end to the conflict. Hamas rejected the Israeli proposal on April 17, demanding a truce that ensures an end to the war and Israeli withdrawal, while offering to release five hostages. On April 22, Qatar and Egypt presented a new plan for a five-to-seven-year truce, complete release of Israeli hostages, IDF withdrawal, and cessation of fighting. Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas has called for Hamas to take responsibility for Gaza and disarm.

The statements by top Israeli leaders are further complicating talks with Hamas over ceasefire and hostage release. Defence Minister Katz on 16 April announced that IDF troops will indefinitely remain in the security zones in Gaza, Lebanon and Syria. On 28 April, Prime Minister Netanyahu announced continuation of Israeli military control over Gaza and prevent the Palestinian Authority (PA) to replace Hamas' rule. He also praised US President Donald Trump's "voluntary relocation" plan.

To gain support for Israel's military efforts, Netanyahu visited Hungary and the U.S. Hungary hosted him on April 3, despite an ICC warrant for alleged war crimes. On April 7, he met with Donald Trump to discuss tariffs, the Iran nuclear issue, Turkey's role in Syria, and the situation in Gaza. Trump reaffirmed U.S. commitment to freeing hostages and proposed a U.S.-led "peace force" in Gaza, discussing the relocation of Palestinians as a potential solution. Netanyahu aimed for a new hostage deal while seeking to eliminate Hamas and offering Gazans the choice to evacuate. In early April, the U.S. bolstered Israel's defenses by delivering a second THAAD missile system and two Patriot missile batteries.

### President Xi's Visit to Malaysia and Cambodia



President Xi visited Malaysia and Cambodia from 16-18 April which was part of his three-country tour to Southeast Asia. After completing his two day visit to Vietnam, President Xi arrived in Kuala Lumpur on April 16. The visit took place at a time when Malaysia faces a 24 percent tariff being imposed by the US, which threatens the survival of its large numbers of manufacturers and exporters. In the speech delivered during the state dinner in honor of Xi's visit, without naming the US, the Prime Minister criticized it for abandoning "the principle of shared responsibility". PM Anwar also stated that US actions whereby "market access is being weaponized" is a sharp contrast to China, which has been "rational, strong and reliable partner" that Malaysia values.

In a Joint Statement issued by President Xi and PM Anwar both sides laid out their joint commitment towards building a “High-Level Strategic Malaysia-China Community with a Shared Future”. The most notable article of the Joint Statement was Article Nine, which stipulated “both sides agreed to establish the Joint Foreign and Defense Dialogue Mechanism to further expand channels for high-level strategic communication and platforms for political security cooperation”.

The establishment of a Joint Foreign and Defense Dialogue Mechanism was amongst the signed thirty-one agreements signed during the visit. Other agreements included cooperation in the areas of digital economy, artificial intelligence, agriculture, and green development and the expansion of the “Two Countries, Twin Parks” industrial initiative. Malaysia as the current chair of the ASEAN, PM Anwar emphasized the grouping’s commitment to free trade. On the South China Sea issue, the Joint Statement mentioned the progress made in the official launch of the Bilateral Dialogue on the Management of Maritime Issues in the South China Sea. This bilateral mechanism launched in October 2024, is an important step for both sides to manage the dispute, enhance communication, and explore opportunities for maritime cooperation.

Cambodia was the last leg of President Xi’s three nation tour, where he arrived at the capital Phnom-Penh on 17 April. This was President Xi’s first visit to Cambodia in nearly a decade, and aligned at a time when the country was facing a 49 percent US tariff, that pose a major threat to its US \$ 2.3 billion garment sector. Cambodia being one of the closes regional partner for China, the visit by President Xi was to reinforce their “ironclad friendship”. During the visit President Xi and Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet jointly announced the elevation of bilateral ties to an “all-weather China-Cambodia community with a shared future in the new era”.

The upgraded relationship envisions deeper political trust, enhanced security collaboration, more robust people-to-people ties, and higher-quality, mutually beneficial economic cooperation. Central to this vision is the expansion of the “Diamond Hexagon” cooperation framework, which prioritizes six key pillars: political cooperation, production capacity, agriculture, energy, security, and people-to-people exchanges. This framework complements Cambodia’s Pentagonal Strategy and aligns with the implementation of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

During the two day visit both sides signed thirty-seven agreements that covered areas such as advanced manufacturing, agricultural supply chains, artificial intelligence (AI) cooperation, and industrial upgrading, with flagship initiatives like the Industrial and Technological Corridor and the Fish and Rice Corridor. Both sides also reaffirmed their commitment towards advancing the Cambodia-China Free Trade Agreement. Of the thirty-seven agreement signed, five relate to the Funan Techno Canal project. While no details were revealed regarding the financing, the five agreements relating to the project signed on April 17, reaffirmed China’s strong support for the project, recognizing its strategic importance for boosting trade efficiency and regional logistics.

In terms of security Cambodia and China reaffirmed their commitment to the UN Charter and to a regional security architecture based on common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable principles. They emphasized peaceful dispute resolution, particularly in the South China Sea, and pledged to work together under the GSI to advance regional peace, non-interference, and mutual respect. Further, both sides agreed to strengthen cybercrime cooperation, expand military-to-military exchanges, and hold more regular defense dialogues under a new framework of “2+2” (foreign and defense ministers) meetings.

President Xi’s Southeast Asia visit amidst the escalating US-China trade war became a highly strategic trip. The core aim was to forge a common ground to counter US tariffs and send signals of China’s commitment as a reliable trading partner. The outcomes in the form of agreements indicate China’s intent to further exert its influence on the region.

### Japan’s PM Shigeru Ishiba visits Vietnam and the Philippines

Japan’s Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba visited two Southeast Asian countries: Vietnam from April 27-April 29 and the Philippines from April 29-April 30 which shows Japan’s utmost desire to strategically anchor itself in the region amid adverse regional situation and China’s assertiveness. U.S. President Donald Trump's broad tariffs and a rise in trade tensions between the United States and China have shaken the rapidly expanding bloc, and this is Ishiba's third trip to Southeast Asia since assuming office in October.

Party General Secretary To Lam met with PM Ishiba while he was in Vietnam, and the Japanese leader also met with President Luong Cuong and National Assembly Chairman Tran Thanh Man. The two presidents conducted a joint press conference and signed several cooperation agreements between the two nations' ministries and agencies. At the Vietnam-Japan Cooperation Forum, they also gave significant addresses on semiconductors, high technology, strategic sectors, and the green transition. PM Ishiba also met Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh.

The visit of the Japanese Prime Minister came almost two years after the elevation of Japan-Viet Nam relations to the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. During the visit, both parties conveyed their satisfaction with its overall growth. Both nations reaffirmed their commitment to upholding free trade and international trade rules amidst global economic uncertainties and the threat of U.S. tariffs. With a total of \$78 billion invested by Japanese companies in the Southeast Asian nation, Vietnam serves as a significant assembly location for major Japanese manufacturers, such as Honda, Canon, and Panasonic.





Vietnam's top leader, Tô Lâm, also encouraged further Japanese investment in infrastructure, referencing a proposed \$67 billion high-speed railway project between Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, though this was not formally discussed. Leaders of both the countries also agreed to set up a vice-ministerial level foreign affairs and defence dialogue framework and the first meeting of the dialogue is likely to take place in Japan this year.

Following his visit to Vietnam, Prime Minister Ishiba travelled to Manila for a two-day trip aimed at strengthening security and economic ties and met President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. As they struggle with territorial issues with China, the leaders of Japan and the Philippines have promised to strengthen their security ties, including more intelligence sharing.

The two leaders decided to commence negotiations for implementing the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement. The agreement would permit the supply of food, fuel, and other essentials when Japanese forces came to the Philippines for cooperative training. While the Philippines has ratified the agreement, it is still awaiting approval from Japan's legislature. Ishiba emphasised the need for strong cooperation to maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific and a rules-based international order. The visit coincides with joint military exercises (Balikatan Exercise) involving the Philippine and U.S. forces, with Japan's inclusion as a full participant underscoring the growing trilateral defence ties.

Additionally, Leaders of both countries also addressed the impact of the onslaught of tariffs imposed by U.S. President Donald Trump and China's responses to the global economy and free trade system.

PM Ishiba also toured the "Teresa Magbanua," a 97-meter-class patrol boat that Japan loaned to the Philippine Coast Guard as part of a yen loan scheme. He conveyed his gratitude to the Philippine Coast Guard officers involved in maritime safety operations. He also oversaw the technical advice that Japan Coast Guard officers sent from the Japan Coast Guard's Mobile Corporation Team supplied to the Philippine Coast Guard.

The Philippines has received a dozen patrol ships from Japan in recent years, mostly to defend its territorial claims in the South China Sea. Japan intends to construct a minimum of five additional patrol vessels for the Philippines. Additionally, it has given the Philippine military radars and other defence gear.

Ishiba's visit follows Chinese President Xi Jinping's trip to Southeast Asia last month, where he signed more than 100 cooperation accords while visiting Vietnam, Malaysia, and Cambodia. Ishiba's visit has showcased Japan's reassurance to the Southeast Asian nations that despite its alliance with the US, Japan's strategic bilateral focus would remain unhindered in the region. Japan is also seeking to reinforce its security as well as economic ties with the regional countries amid tensions rising over trade and territorial disputes. Joint security cooperation between Japan-Vietnam and Japan-Philippines is in their mutual interests. Japan is regarded as a reliable partner in Southeast Asia since Japan has maintained its diplomatic stability.