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Strategic Digest

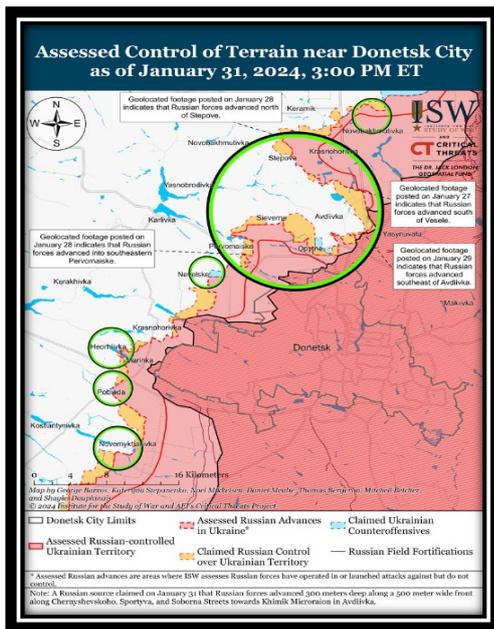
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Over the past month, there have been some positional engagements from both sides in the broader frontline, but with limited advances by Russian troops in areas such as Kremnina, Avdiivka, Bakhmut and Horlivka. However, there are indications that the much-anticipated Russian winter-spring offensive may soon unfold in the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast border area. In a televised interview, Russian President Putin claimed that Moscow's forces "broke through the enemy's defences and reached the outskirts of Avdiivka." Russian forces currently control territory to the north, east, and south of Avdiivka, which had a pre-war population of around 32,000 people. Ukraine, on the other hand, has stated that its forces are successfully

fending off attacks and holding out against Russia's efforts to surround the town. Russia had previously launched a costly bid in October of last year to seize the town, with significant casualties of both men and equipment. The capture of Avdiivka would give Russia a much-needed victory as the second anniversary of its offensive approaches, and with the March presidential election coming up.

With the frontline largely stalemated in the static positional battle of attrition, both sides have been using missiles, drones and aircraft for deep strikes. Russia's escalation of missile and drone attacks has begun to stretch Ukraine's air defence resources. During the past month, Russia was able to deliver greater volumes and attack more often, demonstrating the resilience of its defence industry notwithstanding crippling Western sanctions.

On the other hand, Ukraine has wreaked havoc with Russia's energy infrastructure deep inside Russian territory over the past four weeks. So far this year, Ukrainian drones have struck at least four Russian oil and gas terminals deep inside Russian territory. Kyiv now appears to have developed technically sophisticated attack models that can fly long distances, striking targets deep in Russia's rear.



Notwithstanding successes in Drone warfare, war exhaustion has begun to appear in Ukraine. Further, Washington and its European allies also appear exhausted by their effort. While reports indicate stocks of ammunition and artillery shells are running low for many Ukrainian units on the frontline, further US assistance remained log jammed at US Congress, and European military support faces production

constraints. The EU acknowledged on January 31 that it will supply barely half of the shells it had promised by a March deadline, resolving to deliver almost 600,000 more by the end of the year.

Amidst of worsening situation both on the diplomatic and battlefield, Anxiety at the very top of Ukraine's wartime government has been laid bare, after rumours swept Kyiv on January 29th that the president, Volodymyr Zelensky, was about to fire his armed-forces commander, General Valery Zaluzhny, following weeks of reported tensions. The tensions in their relationship have been festering for some time.

The lack of success in the 2023 counter-offensive, and the interview of General Zaluzhnyi by The Economist in late 2023, caused some tensions in the President-Commander-in-Chief relationship. Additionally, private and public perceptions about Zaluzhnyi's presidential aspirations all appear to have contributed towards this extant civil-military crisis. On January 29, Differences between the two boiled over because of disagreement about the number of troops to be mobilised during the year. Zaluzhny proposed mobilizing close to 500,000 troops, a figure Zelensky viewed as impractical given the scarcity of uniforms, guns and training facilities. Zelensky has also said publicly that Ukraine lacks the funds to pay so many new conscripts.

Given the situation, where Ukraine is in a precarious position on the battlefield, facing intensified Russian assaults in the southeast and uncertainty over whether the United States and Europe will provide more military and financial support, this face-off between the commander-in-chief and military general could not have come at the worst time. Their disagreements aside, Mr. Zelensky would lose military advice from an experienced commander if he were to fire the general. The United States and other allies would need to adjust to working with new military leaders, and the dismissal could fuel worries of instability in Ukraine's wartime leadership.

At present, there exists considerable uncertainty about the eventual outcome of the current quagmire. But if Mr Zelensky keeps his top commander on, he will look weak. If he fires him, the clumsy way it has been handled will only damage confidence in the leadership.

Iran strikes Syria, Iraq and Pakistan

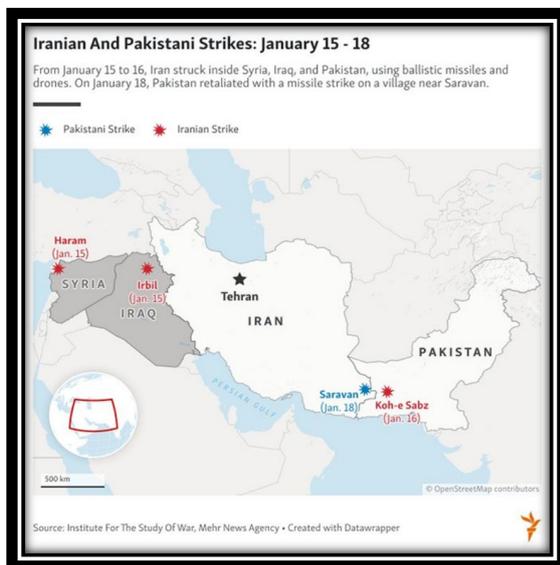
On 16 January, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) carried out a series of missile and drone strikes against targets in Iraq, Syria and Pakistan. The commander of the IRGC Air Force, Amir Ali Hajizadeh noted that "four Khyber rockets (missiles) were launched from southern Khuzestan at ISIS's headquarters in Idlib, and an additional four rockets were fired from Kermanshah, along with seven rockets from East Azerbaijan, targeting the Zionist headquarters in Erbil."

In Pakistan, the targets were two bases of Jaish ul-Adl, in the border town of Panjgur in Baluchistan. Jaish-ul-Adl, an extremist Salafist terror group, had

claimed responsibility for attacking a police station in Rask County in Iran's Sistan and Baluchistan province on 15 December 2023, killing eleven policemen. Iranian-state media described strikes as 'anti-terrorist operations' and the Iranian Foreign Ministry called them part of 'just punishment' against perpetrators of terrorist attacks in Kerman.

Notably, several Iranian leaders have suggested an Israeli role in the recent spate of terrorist attacks inside Iran amid the ongoing Hamas-Israel war. A day after attacks in Rask, Iran's Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi visited the province and argued that the grouplets responsible for the attacks are supported by Israel. Vahidi also stated that "we expect our neighbour (Pakistan) to carry out more intensified control over the joint border as it has become clear that the terrorist groups come from the other side of the border." Iran's Police Chief Brigadier General Ahmad Reza Radan, while visiting Rask declared that Iran reserves the right to respond to terrorism in any territory.

Tehran sees attacks inside Iran and targeting of Iranian positions in Syria as part of US-Israeli efforts to impose costs on Iran for supporting anti-Israeli forces across the region. Though Iran denied any direct role in the October 7 Hamas incursion into Israel, it has mounted a diplomatic campaign intending to isolate and condemn Israel for the humanitarian crisis created by Israeli military operations in Gaza and Iranian-backed forces, which are part of the so-called 'axis of resistance', including Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi paramilitary forces such as Kata'ib Hezbollah, Houthis in Yemen have engaged Israel on multiple fronts. Therefore, apart from retaliating against terrorist attacks inside Iran, IRGC missile strikes were aimed at showing



Iran's deterrence capabilities and warning Israel against taking direct hostile actions against Iran. Iranian military leaders have claimed that advanced versions of long-range precision strike Khyber missile, named after a Jewish fortress conquered by Islamic armies at the beginning of Islam, can reach Israel undetected by its defence system.

Major General Hossein Salami, who served as deputy commander of IRGC until 2019 when he was appointed the Commander-in-Chief, is credited with the revision of Iran's defensive doctrine along

the lines of the "strategy of threat against threat" in the face of threats against the Islamic Republic by Israel and the United States. IRGC has made missile strikes against targets in Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan on several occasions. Iran's first operational use of mid-range missiles was in June 2017, when two weeks after ISIS claimed terrorist attacks in Tehran, the IRGC launched five to six Zolfaghars, solid-fuelled missiles with a range of some 700 km from Kermanshah base at ISIS targets in the Deir el-Zour region of eastern Syria. In September 2018, following clashes

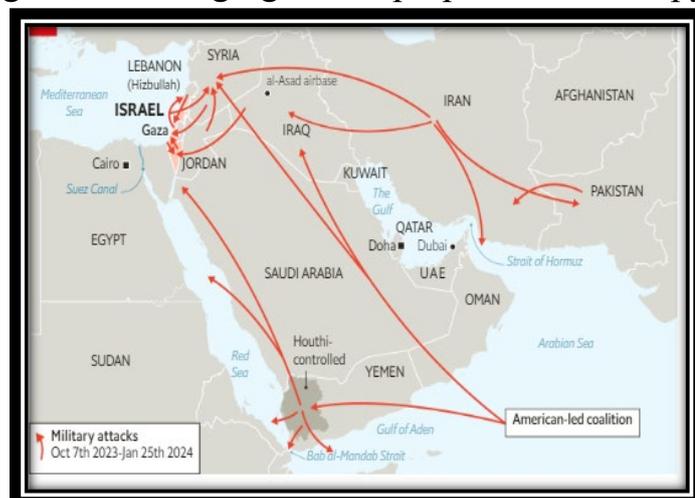
between Iranian border guards and Kurdish dissidents, the IRGC fired seven Fateh-110s, solid-fuelled missiles with a range of 300 km at Iranian Kurdish dissidents based in Koya, in Iraq's Kurdistan region. Again in January 2020, IRGC launched short-range missiles at Ayn al Asad and Erbil Air Bases in Iraq in response to the assassination of the Quds force commander in a US drone attack in Baghdad. In February 2022, after a UAV raid on an IRGC drone manufacturing facility in western Iran, IRGC launched missiles on what it described as an Israeli 'spy centre' near the US consulate in Erbil.

Similarly, in April 2017 when 10 Iranian border guards were shot down by Jaish-ul-Adl using long-range guns, Iran blamed Pakistan for allowing terrorist sanctuaries on its territory. In June 2017, after Pakistan Air Force shot down an Iranian drone in the Panjgur sector on the Pak-Iran border, Tehran did not escalate further instead preferred dialogue and cooperation for managing security along their 900 km long border. This time also, when on 18 January Pakistan made retaliatory air strikes against seven 'terrorist hide-outs' of Pakistani-origin Baloch separatists in Iran's Sistan and Balochistan, both countries opted for a diplomatic off-ramp to diffuse tensions. The very next day Foreign Ministers of the two countries had a phone call where they stressed bilateral cooperation in combating terrorism and border security. Subsequently, on 29 January, the Iranian Foreign Minister visited Islamabad. Iran's objective was to signal to Islamabad the seriousness of Iran's threat perceptions of anti-Iranian groups operating out of Pakistani territory, rather than creating tensions with a neighbour with which it otherwise has beneficial economic ties.

Growing Risk of Conflict Escalation in West Asia

The conflict arc in West Asia has grown considerably. What started as an October conflict between Israel and Hamas has drawn several proxies and state actors. The US-operated al-Asad air base in western Iraq was the target of a massive barrage of rocket and ballistic missile fire on January 20th by Iranian-backed militias in the region. Patriot air defence batteries stopped most of them, but some struck the base, injuring both Americans and Iraqis. The bombardment came after many days of attacks by Iran throughout the region, including against a purported Israeli spy station in Iraqi Kurdistan and at suspected terrorists in Pakistan and Syria. Iran launched a counterattack after Pakistan was attacked, but both countries now appear eager to put an end to additional hostilities.

As Israel is still enmeshed in the Gaza conflict, Tel Aviv has persisted in its covert conflict with Tehran, killing leaders of Hezbollah, a Shia force supported



by Iran, in Lebanon and members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in Syria. Meanwhile, a string of terrorist strikes in Iran, including a double suicide bombing that was attributed to the Islamic State and resulted in almost 100 deaths, has alarmed the country's administration. The Iranian regime is rather uneasy as a result of these occurrences.

The deadly attack on American troops in Jordan on January 30 by militants supported by Iran indicated a possible escalation of the Middle East conflict amid this growing instability. A drone strike on an American base in northeast Jordan resulted in the deaths of three US soldiers and at least 34 injuries. The first time that the United States and Iranian-backed militias faced off in Jordan was because of the strikes that struck Tower 22, a small U.S. military station in northeast Jordan. The targeting in Jordan not only signals a worsening of the crisis in the area but also poses a threat to the Hashemite Kingdom, which is already under duress from the Gaza conflict. The timing of the strike is significant because it occurred after Tehran's first direct use of force in the region's growing turmoil earlier this month.

Before this attack on the US forces, Washington had been showing some restraint and was also trying to find a balance. President Joe Biden has been cautious: he does not want to be drawn into another war in the Middle East, certainly not in an election year. In Iraq and Syria, American forces respond far less often than they are attacked. The American campaign against the Houthis began only after repeated warnings and a UN Security Council resolution condemning the group's attacks on shipping.

Iran has denied involvement in the attack. However, western analysts perceive this incident as a pattern of Iran hiding behind various proxy groups and the shadowy circumstances under which such strikes have been undertaken. Both the United States and Iran assert they are not interested in a wider war and yet the escalating pace and breadth of attacks underscore the need for the United States to assert itself and deter Iran or its proxies from further escalation.

There have been calls for a more aggressive U.S. response in response to this most recent attack on U.S. personnel, given the U.S. losses that have occurred. Republicans have been particularly vocal in favour of direct US strikes on Iran, but Biden administration officials probably don't want to escalate the confrontation. It appears that US planners are working on a response that maintains deterrence while preventing the region from becoming embroiled in a larger battle. Given that the drone strike was purportedly initiated from Syria, the US may decide to retaliate there by going after Iranian individuals, including members of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps. This delicate balancing act highlights the difficulty of dissuading non-state actors from acting on behalf of a state sponsor and attacking American targets with asymmetrical tactics.

Since October 7th the Middle East's three strongest powers have all had to reassess their security doctrines. Israel's military primacy was shaken. Iran's proxies have become a liability for their patron. And America has been dragged back to a region it wanted to leave. None is sure how to proceed. As the Gaza war drags on, a messier regional conflict keeps expanding.