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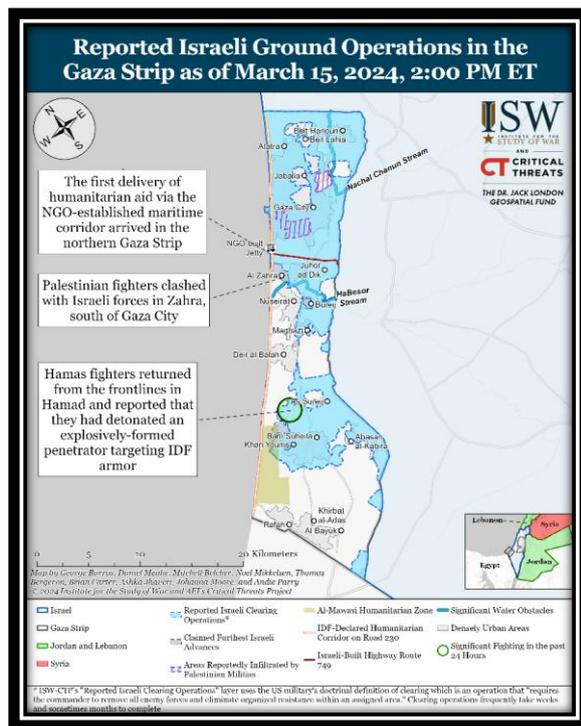
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Israel-Hamas Conflict: International Aid Efforts Gain Urgency

More than 150 days after the brutal 7 October 2023 Hamas terrorist attacks on Israel, military operations by the Israel Defence Force (IDF) in the Gaza Strip continued apace, even as aspects relating to humanitarian assistance to the civilian population gained ascendance. This was especially so in the context of the incident on 29 February when more than 100 Palestinians were killed and several hundreds injured near an aid convoy funded by Palestinian businessmen that was being escorted by IDF troops. The IDF insisted that most of the deaths were the result of a stampede and not due to IDF fire.



An international coalition of countries, including the US, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Egypt, and France air-dropped food and medical equipment into Gaza on 28 February. US President Joe Biden, in his State of the Union speech on 7 March, stated that the US military will build a port in Gaza to enable the distribution of humanitarian aid. Reports noted that the effort could take up to 60 days and involve more than 1,000 troops, none of whom would go ashore into Gaza. These international efforts were in the light of warnings from United Nations officials who informed the Security Council on 27 February that at least half a million people in Gaza were 'one step away from famine' and that there were

overwhelming obstacles to getting aid into Gaza.

Israeli agencies though on 14 February stated that since the beginning of the war, nearly 17,000 tonnes of humanitarian aid and 16,000 tonnes of medical supplies in more than 1400 aid trucks were delivered to Gaza. The IDF Spokesperson Rear Admiral Daniel Hagari on 1 March noted that the IDF "recognises the suffering of the innocent people of Gaza" and added that it was seeking ways to expand the humanitarian assistance. On 4 March, 277 humanitarian aid trucks entered Gaza, the largest number of aid trucks in a single day since the start of hostilities. An aid ship with 200 tonnes of aid that set sail from the port of Larnaca, Cyprus also reached Gaza on 16 March.

Even so, UNRWA in its latest Situation Report on 15 March 2024 noted that over 1.7 million were internally displaced in the Gaza Strip and that access to people in the Gaza Strip and to northern Gaza was 'insufficient'. It added that only 25 per cent of planned aid missions to the northern Gaza Strip have been facilitated by Israeli authorities. In the first two weeks of March, an average of 169 aid trucks per day made their way into the Gaza Strip while the required target was over 500 aid trucks per day. Overall, it noted that since 7 October, at least 31,272

Palestinians have been killed in the Gaza Strip, 70 per cent of whom were reported to be women and children. Another 73,024 Palestinians have been reportedly injured.

The IDF meanwhile continued to highlight the alleged links of the employees of the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) with Hamas. It noted that over 450 UNRWA employees were Hamas terror operatives, some of whom played prominent roles in the 7 October attack. The IDF also conducted an operation against the Nasser Hospital in Gaza on 15 February on the charge that the hospital played a prominent role in the movement of Israeli hostages, more than 130 of whom still remained in Hamas custody.

The IDF continued its military operations not only in the Gaza Strip but also across northern Israel, against Hezbollah targets. On 13 March, the IDF noted that over 4500 Hezbollah targets were struck and that over 300 Hezbollah terrorists were eliminated in the past five months. Over 1,000 air strikes were conducted by IDF fighter jets. On 26 February, a surface-to-air missile fired from Lebanon towards an Israeli unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) was intercepted by the David's Sling aerial defence array.

Ceasefire talks between Israel and Hamas meanwhile were expected to resume on 17 March in Qatar. Efforts to secure a truce before the start of Ramadan failed as Israel refused a permanent ceasefire, a key Hamas demand. Reports noted some of the women and children among the hostages being held by Hamas could be released in return for the release of Palestinian prisoners. Other Hamas demands included allowing displaced Palestinians to return to the northern Gaza Strip. Israel continues to assert that it will resume its military operations against remaining Hamas operatives even in the aftermath of any hostage-prisoner exchange deal.

China's 2024 Two Sessions- Key Highlights

China's Two Sessions (Lianghui) refer to annual meetings held separately by the National People's Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) but at the same time. The 'Two Sessions' are



usually held over a period of two weeks, however, this time the period was significantly shortened. The NPC met from 5-11 March and CPPCC met from 4-10 March. Some of the major issues which dominated the discussions during the meetings were strategies for economic reform, boosting market confidence and

private investment, youth employment, growth of indigenous high-end technology and artificial intelligence.

The key highlight of the 14th ‘Two Sessions’ was the Government Work Report (GWR). The GWR presented by Chinese Premier Li Qiang laid out the economic and social tasks being planned by the government. One of the important tasks identified was the removal of all restrictions on foreign investment access to the Chinese manufacturing sector. This will be done, possibly to attract more foreign capital to stop the continued shrinking of the Chinese manufacturing industry and the emerging trend of re-shoring manufacturing units out of China.

Other, key provisions were setting of GDP growth target at 5 per cent and the urban unemployment rate target at 5.5 percent. While no changes were proposed in the current tax system, the increase in consumer price will be kept around 3 percent. Further, ultra-long-term special government bonds will be issued over several years and RMB 1 trillion (US\$138.9 billion) has been allocated for 2024. Finally, the local government special purpose bonds quota is to be set at RMB 3.9 trillion (US\$541.72 billion).

Besides, setting the economic goals, the GWR also informed about Beijing’s aim to provide a greater boost to the domestic digital and technology sector. The document noted that the government will foster ‘emerging’ and ‘future-oriented’ industries and “step up R&D and application of big data and AI, launch an AI Plus initiative, and build digital industry clusters with international competitiveness”. Reportedly, emphasising this aspect, the government increased the tech budget by 10 percent and Xi Jinping during the Two Sessions meetings urged local governments to transform traditional industries through innovative technologies.

Another major highlight of the events was an increase in Chinese defence military spending amidst low economic growth. The draft budget announced on the first day of the NPC meeting revealed an increase in defence funding to RMB1.665 trillion (USD233 billion) from RMB1.554trn (USD219bn) in 2023. Following the publication of the budget, PLA’s spokesperson Wu Qian contended in the press briefing that the goal of the budget was to strengthen Chinese strategic capacity and PLA’s media platform explained that the “moderate increase” in the defence budget was “reasonable” and made taking into consideration the external security developments. However, observers in the West noted that China’s budget is significantly higher than its neighbours. Therefore, possibly the increase in budget will be spent to enhance the People’s Liberation Army (PLA)’s capabilities for a Taiwan contingency.

At the same time, the Two Sessions indicated little substantive policy change in Taiwan. News reports suggested that Li introduced a more hardline policy by omitting the words “peaceful reunification” from the Government Work Report. However, on the second day of the Two Sessions, Xi reiterated China’s priority of “advancing peaceful reunification” in a session with CPPCC members.

An additional noteworthy aspect was the revision of the four-decade-long State Council Organic law to consolidate the Communist Party of China (CPC)’s hold

on the Party Cabinet which effectively grants more executive control over China's cabinet to Xi Jinping. The proposal for the revision was passed with 2883 (out of 3000 members) voting in favour, eight objections and nine abstentions. The revision calls for the State Council to uphold the leadership of the Communist Party of China” and that the Cabinet must implement the decisions of the party’s leadership and adhere to the political instructions from President Xi Jinping. It was the latest in a series of measures in recent years that have gradually eroded the executive authority of the State Council, helmed by Chinese Premier Li Qiang, which nominally oversees China's 21 government ministries as well as local governments. This year, the last-minute cancellation of Premier Li Qiang’s press conference at the end of the Two Sessions was taken as an indication of the tighter political control that is yet to come with the revision of the State Organic Law.

Philippines and Chinese Vessel Collision at the Second Thomas Shoal

Since last year the number of incidents between the Philippines and China in the disputed waters of the South China Sea (SCS) has been on the rise. In recent months during the standoff, it has become more common wherein Chinese coastguards are increasingly adopting grey-zone tactics against Philippines civilian vessels. On February 5, 2024, the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) accused Chinese ships of blocking their resupply mission near the Second Thomas Shoal. The dangerous manoeuvres and blocking from Chinese Coast Guard vessels led to the collision between the MRRV-4407 and China Coast Guard 21555 which caused minor structural damage to the PCG vessel.



The latest incident took place on March 5, 2024, wherein Chinese and PCG vessels collided off the disputed Second Thomas Shoal during a supply run to the BRP Sierra Madre. According to the Philippines officials; the Chinese coast guard ships and accompanying vessels blocked the Philippine

coast guard and supply vessels and executed dangerous manoeuvres that caused two minor collisions between the Chinese ships and two of the Philippine vessels. While the Philippine Coast Guard vessel BRP Sindangan sustained minor structural damage from the collision, the resupply vessel Unaizah May 4 was further hit by a water cannon being blasted from two Chinese Coast Guard ships, causing injury to multiple Filipino crew members.

The 5th March incident is a consequence of numerous standoffs over many decades which in recent times has sparked a series of confrontations between Chinese and Filipino forces. The BRP Sierra Madre is a Second World War-era

navy warship which has been deliberately grounded by the Philippines military in the late 1990s in the shallow of Second Thomas Shoal and help mark its territory. The BRP Sierra Madre which serves as an outpost for a small contingent of Philippine troops has ensured the reef remains under the Philippines's control since 1999. The Second Thomas Shoal which is fifteen kilometres long and five kilometres wide, is located approximately 105 nautical miles from the Philippines' western island of Palawan and is part of the Philippines' 200 nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

However, through its nine-dash line, China has been claiming sovereignty over most of the SCS cutting into the EEZ of the Philippines and other countries in the region. The Second Thomas Shoal is located very close to the southeastern fringe of Beijing's nine-dash line and serves as a strategic pathway to Reed Bank, which is believed to hold oil and natural gas resources. This has caught China's interest which claims the area and has surrounded the shoal with coast guard, navy, and suspected militia ships to prevent the Filipino forces from delivering construction materials to reinforce the BRP Sierra Madre. Beijing has also repeatedly demanded that the BRP Sierra Madre be towed away by the Philippines, with the reasoning that it sits on the waters adjacent to Ren'ai Reef – the name Beijing uses for the Second Thomas Shoal.

During the Duterte administration, there was a de-escalation of tension between the Philippines and China through the implementation of a series of policies designed to reduce friction in the Spratly Islands in return for Chinese investments. The current administration under President Marcos Jr is taking a fundamentally different position unlike his predecessor, who adopted a non-confrontational approach and a policy of strategic re-orientation away from the United States towards China. On the SCS issue, Marcos Jr before taking office made it clear that he would support the 2016 arbitration ruling and would continue using the ruling to assert the country's territorial rights. However, the string of incidents in the SCS since the beginning of 2023 has altered President Marcos Jr's approach to dealing with China. Given the recurring incidences in the SCS, the Philippines has sought to counter Chinese assertiveness by enhancing cooperation with its traditional security ally the US and other regional powers including India.

China blames the Philippines for the current stand-off and claims that Manila has ignored their proposals to manage the disputes in the South China Sea. China offered a proposal last April to permit Filipino resupply missions to the Second Thomas Shoal with certain conditions i.e. the resupply missions should involve just one ship and not deliver large-scale building materials. However, the Philippines' Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) denied the allegations and stated that some of China's suggestions were workable while others were contrary to their national interests. The DFA clarified that China's proposals could not be accepted without violating the constitution or international law.