



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

# Strategic Digest

Vol. 4 | No. 17 | 01 September 2022

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## Six Months of War in Ukraine

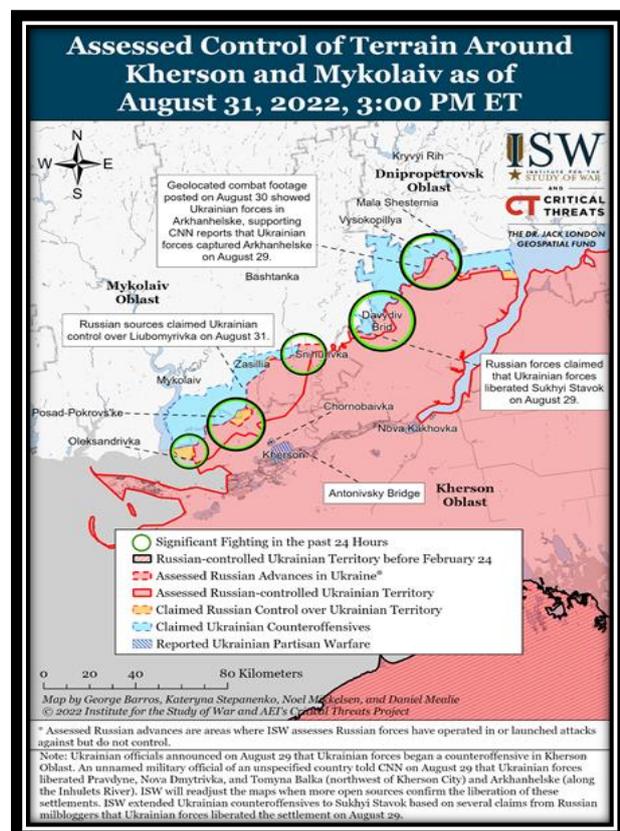
Ukraine celebrated 24 Aug 2022 as its Independence Day in recognition of the 1991 vote by the country's still-Soviet legislature declaring independence from Moscow. The date also coincides with the completion of six months of the war which began with Russia's multipronged attack on Ukraine. The scope of the attack was not immediately clear, but all the evidence pointed to a large-scale operation. Six months later, Russian forces have failed to capture much of the country and the conflict has turned into a war of attrition.

In the early weeks of the war or Phase 1 of the conflict, Russian forces had hoped to make swift progress. Given the military power asymmetry, this seemed assured. They almost surrounded Kyiv and took Kherson, a city in the south. However, soon the progress turned into a quagmire. By the end of March, the pincer movement on the capital from the north-west and north-east had stalled in the face of staunch Ukrainian resistance, jammed-up supply lines and a shortage of manpower.

In Phase 2, with stiffening Ukrainian resistance and lack of progress, Russia quickly announced that its war aims had changed and "The main tasks of the first stage of the operation have been completed." Russia also adopted its operational strategy to defensive operations in the North and South, with focused offensive operations in the east. Russia vacated strategically located Snake Island at end of June, providing Ukraine with a symbolic victory. During this phase, there has been a considerable increase in the supply of western military equipment to Ukraine, while Russia struggled to regenerate its military capability.

By the fifth month of fighting, the war was showing signs of settling into a stalemate. Russia's gains in the east petered out after it took complete control of the town of Severodonetsk in early July. With the frontline remaining largely static, both sides engaged in long-range artillery duels. HIMAR supplied the US helped Ukrainian forces in targeting the Russian ammunition depot located much further away from the front line.

Mid-August marks the third phase of the Ukraine conflict which is still unfolding. With NATO-calibre weapons, fresh tactics and enough financial aid, Ukraine had been



preparing for a counter-offensive in the South for months. Dmytro Marchenko, a Ukrainian general, had indicated that Kherson, the city taken by Russia early in the war, would be liberated by the end of the year.

On 29 August 2022 Ukrainian forces launched ground assaults on Monday in multiple areas along the front in the Kherson region of southern Ukraine, apparently stepping up a counteroffensive aimed at recapturing territory seized by Russia. Ukrainian military officials maintained operational silence and have not revealed any additional details about the counteroffensive as of August 31. The Ukrainian Southern Operational Command stated that Ukrainian forces are continuing to disrupt Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) and are targeting strongholds and ammunition depots throughout Kherson Oblast.

While there have been reports about significant damage to bridges over the Dnipro River, the Russian Ministry of Defence has declared the Ukrainian counteroffensive a failure. More clarity about success or failure will emerge in the coming weeks. Given the fact that the Ukrainian counter-offensive lacks the doctrinally mandated 3:1 ratio of numerical superiority over defending forces, success or failure this operation will be closely monitored by the militaries across the globe.

The intensifying fighting coincided with an announcement by the chief of the International Atomic Energy Agency that a team of nuclear experts would visit the Russian-occupied Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant. IAEA chief Rafael Mariano Grossi along with his team of experts landed in Kyiv on 30 Aug. The IAEA team is expected to begin the inspection of the nuclear power plant on 31 Aug. Mr Grossi indicated that the mission aims to establish a permanent monitoring presence at the plant. Russia has welcomed this suggestion.

### **The Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis – An Update**

China's furious reaction to U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan is increasingly being characterised by analysts and scholars as the 'Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis'. Geopolitical reverberations of the crisis continue to unfold.

Even though China formally announced the end of military exercise around Taiwan on 10 Aug 22, PLA Navy ships and military aircraft continued to cross the median line to erase its notional significance as a marker to divide Taiwan Strait. China has never officially recognised the line that a U.S. general devised in 1954 at the height of Cold War hostility between Communist China and U.S.-backed Taiwan although the People's Liberation Army largely respected it barring few exceptions. This status quo on the median line seems to be fundamentally altered with the Chinese attempt to erase the median line concept from the calculus of cross-strait strategic stability.



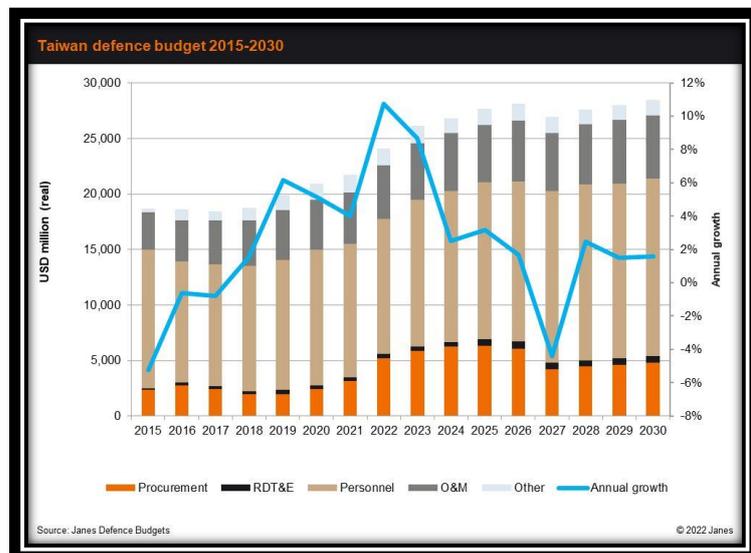
On 15 Aug 2022, a U.S. congressional delegation—consisting of five lawmakers led by Senator Ed Markey—arrived in Taipei disregarding the Chinese angry reaction to Ms Pelosi's visit. While Taiwan's foreign ministry hailed the delegation's visit as another sign of warm ties between Taipei and Washington, in response

China announced “multi-unit joint combat readiness patrols and real-combat drills in the waters and airspace around the Taiwan Island.” As a part of these military drills, PLA Navy Ships and PLAAF aircraft repeatedly violated the median line and Taiwan’s ADIZ.

On 18 Aug 2022, Taiwan reported 51 PLA aircraft operating around the island—the most since August 7 during initial large-scale exercises—and six PLA Navy vessels. On the same day, Washington announced its plan to formal negotiations with Taiwan on a new wide-ranging trade initiative in a bid to deepen economic engagement. China expressed its opposition to the new Taiwan-US trade initiative and vowed: "resolute measures to uphold its national sovereignty and territorial integrity".

In defiance of the Chinese threat, Taipei continues to receive political representatives in a demonstration of solidarity with Taiwan. The Republican governor of the US state of Indiana, Mr Eric Holcomb, arrived in Taipei on 22 Aug on a four days visit and US Senator Marsha Blackburn met with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen on 26 August.

Amid rising tension, Taiwan proposed \$19 billion in defence spending for next year on 25 August. The overall proposed defence budget by President Tsai Ing-wen's Cabinet sets a 13.9% year-on-year increase to a record T\$586.3 billion (\$19.41 billion). That includes an additional



T\$108.3 billion in spending for fighter jets and other equipment, as well as other "special funds" for the defence ministry. Excluding the extra budget for military equipment and funds, proposed defence spending represents a 12.9% year-on-year increase, compared with a 20.8% increase in the overall government budget proposed for next year.

On 28 August, Ticonderoga-class guided-missile cruisers USS Antietam (CG 54) and USS Chancellorsville (CG 62) conducted a transit through Taiwan Strait. PLA tracked the ships during their transit. The Chinese Foreign Ministry termed the transit by the US Navy ships as "provocation aimed at 'freedom of trespassing' and it constitutes deliberate sabotage of regional peace and stability." For the past three years, the US Navy ships have been making at least one passage every month through the Taiwan straits.

On 31 August 2022, Taiwan vowed to exercise its right to self-defence and counter-attack if Chinese armed forces entered its territory. Taiwanese defence officials said China's "high intensity" military patrols near Taiwan continued and Beijing's intention to erase the median line separating the two sides would become the main source of instability in the region. In response to Chinese drones repeatedly flying close to its small groups of islands near China's coast, Taiwan indicated its willingness to counter-attack Chinese drones that did not heed warnings to leave Taiwanese territory.

In all of the previous Taiwan Strait crises, tensions and military activity ebbed and flowed. The first (1954-55) and third (1995) crises lasted approximately eight months and the second (1958) over three. The historical record for the previous crisis and the geopolitical context of the current broadly indicates that the situation is unlikely to settle quickly.

### **The Dynamics of the Israel-Turkey Rapprochement**

Israel and Turkey announced on August 17, 2022, that they will re-establish full diplomatic ties, by posting Ambassadors to the respective capitals. Turkey expelled the Israeli Ambassador in May 2018, in the aftermath of violent clashes between Palestinian protesters and Israeli security forces that led to the loss of nearly 60 lives. These Ambassadors had taken up their posts only in December 2016, after both sides reached an agreement over the killing of Turkish protesters in the 2010 Navi Marmara incident, an aid ship travelling to the Gaza Strip that was stormed by Israeli forces. Israel reportedly paid a compensation of \$20 million to reach the agreement.

Geo-economic and geo-political dynamics have been flagged by analysts as contributing factors in the Israel-Turkey rapprochement. Israel hopes to become a significant gas exporter to Europe while Turkey is seeking to reduce its dependence on gas from Russia and Iran. As for geo-political dynamics, during



the period of strained relations with Turkey, the Netanyahu government developed robust relations with countries like Cyprus and Greece, which have antagonistic relations with Turkey. Most recently, in August 2022, Israel agreed to sell an Iron Dome missile defence system to Cyprus. Turkey is the only country that recognises the breakaway

Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, since 1983.

As part of regional outreach, apart from Israel, President Recep Erdogan has also tried to mend fences with countries like Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Reports note that efforts with Cairo have not been successful so far. Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, though, visited Ankara in June 2022, indicating the bilateral ties have overcome the Khashoggi affair.

As for Israel-Turkey high-level political engagements in the recent past, Erdogan talked with then Prime Minister Naftali Bennet in November 2021 – for the first such interaction in many years. Israeli President Isaac Herzog visited in March 2022 and then Foreign Minister Yosef Lapid (and current prime minister) visited Ankara in June 2022. Lapid’s visit was in the backdrop of concerns regarding reprisal attacks on Israeli tourists, in the aftermath of the killing of an IRGC officer in Tehran in May 2022.

Turkey is insisting that rapprochement with Israel does not mean a dilution of the country’s support for the Palestinian cause. Foreign Minister Melvut Cavusoglu visited Jerusalem and Ramallah in May 2022, wherein he reiterated his country’s support in a meeting with the Palestinian Prime Minister Riad al Maliki. Analysts though note that Turkey’s continuing support of Hamas will be an issue of concern for Israeli policymakers. President Erdogan had earlier termed Israel as a ‘terrorist’ and an ‘apartheid’ state, in response to its military actions in the Gaza Strip.

Another issue that could have a bearing on the future strength of the ties is the outcome of the Israeli elections, scheduled for November 2022. Erdogan himself will face presidential elections in 2023 and the country is going through a difficult economic situation, with inflation very high at nearly 80 per cent. As of now, though, Israel and Turkey have re-established full diplomatic ties, with the development coming nearly two years after the signing of the path-breaking Abraham Accords.