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As the Israel-Hamas war entered its 12th month, the fate of the hostages was in focus when the bodies of five of them were rescued from Khan Yunis area of Gaza on 20 August. The Israel Defence Force (IDF) Chief of General Staff Lt Gen Aviv Kochavi insisted that the IDF was ‘very determined to fight Hamas, very determined to return all the hostages ... also very determined and persistent in bringing back those no longer alive for burial in Israel’. On 1 September, bodies of six more hostages were recovered, in a joint operation mounted by the IDF and the Israel Security Agency (ISA). Among those included an Israeli American citizen, Hersh Goldberg-Polin. An IDF Spokesperson stated that 101 hostages, including women, children, and the elderly, were being held captive by Hamas. Most reports noted that at least one-third of these hostages may no longer be alive.

The return of the bodies of these 11 hostages led to increased pressure on the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to agree to a ceasefire so that the lives of the remaining hostages could be saved. Thousands of Israelis took to the streets in protest demonstrations against the government. While Netanyahu asked for ‘forgiveness’ for the death of the hostages, he insisted that forward movement in ceasefire negotiations will occur only if the IDF continued to have control over the Philadelphi Corridor, a narrow strip of land that connected the Gaza Strip with Egypt. The fate of President Joe Biden’s ceasefire plan of 31 May 2024, therefore, continues to be uncertain. The three-phase plan called for complete ceasefire, return of hostages and Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and reconstruction activities.

The IDF though agreed to a series of temporary pauses in military operations in September in order to smoothen the delivery of polio vaccines in the Gaza Strip. This was in the aftermath of the discovery of a case of polio in early August, the first case discovered in the Gaza Strip in 25 years. The World Health Organisation (WHO) stated on 13 September that around 560,000 children under ten years old were vaccinated against polio in an emergency vaccination campaign conducted in three phases from 1-12 September in the Gaza Strip.

The IDF’s strikes inside Gaza, meanwhile, continued to generate controversy. The IDF, for instance, struck school buildings which it charged had been converted to Hamas command and control centres. The head of the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), Philippe Lazarini, in the aftermath of one such strike on 21 August, charged that Gaza had become ‘no place for children’ and noted that a ceasefire was ‘beyond overdue’. The IDF Spokesperson in response charged that rifles, explosives, military vests and Hamas intelligence documents were found in the school compound that was targeted and added that the compound was not being used as a school for months.

Even as the IDF was conducting operations in the Gaza Strip, it enhanced its operational profile in the West Bank also. On 6 September, a Turkish-born American human rights activist, Aysenur Ezgi Eygi, was killed at the Beita junction in Samaria, West Bank. An IDF preliminary enquiry noted that it was highly likely that she was hit indirectly and unintentionally by IDF fire not aimed at her. It noted that the incident took place during a violent riot in which dozens of Palestinians burned tires and hurled rocks at security forces. The IDF expressed its 'deepest regret' on the incident.



The Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen C.Q. Brown Jr as well as CENTCOM Commander Gen Erik Kurilla visited Israel on 25-26 August and 9 September respectively for assessments of Israel's security operations, especially on its northern borders. Hezbollah continued to fire hundreds of projectiles onto civilian population centres while the IDF conducted air strikes against targets in Lebanon as well as inside southern Syria. Over 100 Israel Air Force fighter jets took part in a pre-emptive operation against Hezbollah targets on 25 August, the day the US military chief landed in Israel. Over 270 terror targets were struck. In other developments, United Kingdom Foreign Secretary David Lammy on 2 September stated that the UK had suspended 30 out of the 350 arms export licenses to Israel, citing a clear risk that the equipment could be used to commit serious violations of international law. The move was criticised by the Netanyahu government.

China-Africa Forum Summit 2024: New Direction or a Familiar Template?

The ninth edition of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) was held in Beijing from 4-6 September 2024. Over 50 African leaders and UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres were in attendance. The summit took place at a time



when African countries are confronting multiple synchronized headwinds such as high inflation, debt distress, and unconstitutional military takeovers. China's economy is also dealing with falling consumer prices due to weak consumption and investment demands. As usual, all eyes were on the offer of China's financial developmental package to Africa which amounted to 360 billion yuan (\$50.7 bn)

over three years in credit lines and investments. President Xi Jinping astutely utilised the FOCAC platform to counter growing competition in Africa from the West and distinguish between the Western and Chinese approaches to modernisation.

In the 30-paragraph-long Beijing Declaration, 10 partnership actions related to green development, trade connectivity, health, and industrial chain cooperation were identified. Both sides committed to expanding exchanges in governance, modernisation, poverty reduction and promoting “mutual learning between civilizations”. Grand announcements of 60,000 training opportunities for African women and youth, training for 6,000 military and 1,000 police personnel, and invitations to 1,000 members of African political parties to China sound impressive. What was noteworthy is the decision to give 33 African Least Developed Countries (LDCs) zero-tariff treatment for 100 percent tariff lines.

There were four discernable takeaways from the 2024 FOCAC.

Firstly, Beijing’s engagement with Africa at the highest political level has been consistent. They have regularly held the FOCAC summit every three years. Senior Consultation Meetings (SOMs) and consultations between the FOCAC’s monitoring committee and the African diplomatic corps in China have been held. The tenth FOCAC is scheduled to be held in 2027 in the Republic of Congo.

Secondly, Chinese projects in Africa are taking a different shape. In a departure from the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) days of financing large-scale infrastructure projects, China is pivoting to a ‘small and beautiful’ model. This is to ensure that newer investments under BRI are more targeted, greener and less financially risky than previous commitments. Allegations of ‘debt trap diplomacy’, international backlash over non-compliance with ESG norms, and labour standards, and China’s own domestic economic pressures post-COVID-19, led Beijing to be apprehensive about where it is investing. All three of China’s flagship plans – Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI), and Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) – have been embedded into the Beijing Declaration to create a joint path to achieve security and development.

Third, green energy transition was a prominent theme at FOCAC 2024 with President Xi announcing 30 new clean energy projects across the continent. To augment these projects, a special fund for China-Africa Green Industrial Chain is likely to be implemented. An emphasis on increasing Chinese investments in manufacturing in Africa, particularly electric vehicles, was evident at the summit, including collaboration on nuclear science and technology. African governments (for example Zimbabwe in the case of lithium) have been pressuring Chinese mining and renewable companies to refine more minerals on the continent. Amid mounting export restrictions on European and U.S. markets, China is banking upon exporting solar panels, EVs, batteries and green technologies to Africa. Interestingly, China signed an MoU with Zambia and Tanzania to modernize the

TAZARA railway which connects Zambia to the port of Dar es Salaam on the Indian Ocean coast. This is the Chinese alternative to the U.S.-backed Lobito Corridor project which seeks to connect copper and cobalt-rich Zambia with Angola's Lobito port on the Atlantic coast.

Finally, the entire question of China's role in Africa's debt relief was missing from the conversation. The Chinese side astutely shifted responsibility by calling on international financial institutions and commercial creditors to actively participate in the debt treatment of African countries. Despite not being the main creditor in Africa's debt, Chinese lenders account for 12 percent of the continent's public and private debt. At FOCAC 2024, China again waived off interest-free loans, but those loans are a small fraction of Africa's overall debt burden. With G20's Common Framework approach to debt restructuring facing several delays, African governments expected Beijing to play a more proactive role. Unfortunately, China continues to prefer ad-hoc treatments by dealing with the issue of debt relief on a case-by-case basis rather than conforming to a generic approach which would be applicable in multiple cases.

Philippines-Vietnam: Towards Closer Defence Cooperation

The Philippines and Vietnam share common concerns about Chinese expansionism, with the Philippines in the last two years being confronted by increasing aggression and contestation. On 21 June 2024, Hanoi announced its willingness to negotiate its overlapping claims with Manila. Interestingly, this positive announcement came four days after the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) engaged in a violent confrontation with Philippine vessels within the Philippine EEZ, resulting in a Filipino soldier losing his finger. Since then, the momentum for deeper defence cooperation has significantly increased between both countries.

The conclusion of the first-ever joint drills in Manila between 5 and 9 August 2024, between the Coast Guards (CG) of the Philippines and Vietnam, marks a shift in the security dynamics in Southeast Asia. This maritime exercise amid escalating tension in the South China Sea is a follow-up to President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s visit to Hanoi in January 2024. During his visit, several agreements were signed, including one on 'incident prevention in the South China Sea' and another on 'maritime cooperation' between their coastguards.

The visit of Vietnam's Defense Minister, General Phan Van Giang, to Manila upon the invitation of Philippine Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro on 28 August 2024, marks yet another major shift in the security cooperation in Southeast Asia. Both officials signed letters of intent to institutionalise their countries' growing maritime security cooperation by signing



a memorandum of understanding (MoU) later this year. Additionally, Manila and Hanoi also intend to establish a hotline between the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) and the Vietnamese Coast Guard (VCG) to improve collective coordination at sea.

This visit comes in the backdrop of recent developments in the Sabina Shoal which has emerged as a new flashpoint in the ongoing maritime contestation between the Philippines and China. On 21 July, Manila and Beijing reached a provisional arrangement regarding the Philippines' RORE missions. While the details of the agreement were not released publicly, the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) stated that both sides recognised the need to de-escalate. However, just weeks after the Philippines and China struck a deal to try to stop dangerous confrontations at Second Thomas Shoal, Manila has accused Chinese personnel of ramming its boats, blasting them with water cannons and firing flares at its aircraft, around the Sabina Shoal. Tensions at Sabina have been growing since April 2024, when the Philippines sent its coast guard ship the BRP Teresa Magbuana to monitor the area, in response to concerns China may be attempting to reclaim land at the shoal. In turn, China has steadily increased its presence at the shoal with Chinese state media reporting that the Philippines was trying to use the Teresa Magbuana to forge a 'quasi-military-grounding' at the shoal – drawing parallels with the BRP Sierra Madre.

Amidst the escalatory activities conducted by China, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. since taking office has been pursuing a multi-aligned approach that includes establishing defence and security cooperation with like-minded Indo-Pacific nations. On the other hand, Vietnam tries to manage ties with China by keeping the dispute at a bilateral level. However, China's unilateral actions in the South China Sea and its power projection in the Mekong region have strained Vietnam's ability to manage its ties with Beijing effectively. Recent developments include China's attempt to redefine its coastal waters in the Gulf of Tonkin to the Chinese-funded Funan-Techo Canal in Cambodia, which poses potential security risks for Vietnam. These have acted as a catalyst for a proactive shift in Hanoi's foreign policy approach that includes the elevation of its ties to a comprehensive strategic partnership with the US, Japan, and Australia between September 2023 to March 2024.

While the Philippines and Vietnam have overlapping claims, both share concerns about the growing Chinese aggression in the South China Sea. This has factored into Vietnam's willingness to address key outstanding issues as well as enhance defence and security engagement with the Philippines. Hanoi announcing its willingness to hold talks with Manila over their overlapping South China Sea claims is a significant initiative. While talks do not immediately lead to resolutions, they can provide a foundation for a resolution. With the escalation of tension in the South China Sea, both Southeast Asian countries are making it clear that robust cooperation between them is needed if China's expansionist ambitions are to be pushed back or deterred.