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Ukraine War @3 - Ukraine Confronts a Grim Future

Israel-Hamas Conflict: Gaza Reconstruction in Focus; IDF Chief Submits Resignation

Australia and New Zealand Alarmed as China Conducts Live Fire Exercise in Tasman Seas

Ukraine War @3 - Ukraine Confronts a Grim Future

The Russian-Ukraine war hit the three-year mark on 24 February. By numerous accounts, hundreds of thousands of Russian and Ukrainian soldiers have been killed or wounded, along with tens of thousands of Ukrainian civilians who have been killed and injured in the Russian ground and aerial attacks. In addition, Ukraine has suffered significant damage to its civilian infrastructure, which by UN estimates amounts to more than US \$170 billion.

In the ensuing three years, the war in Ukraine has repeatedly confounded expectations. While Russia has managed to capture a vast swath of Ukrainian territory, Moscow has not been able to achieve its military objectives of defeating Ukraine. On the other hand, despite their heroic endeavours and modern equipment from the West, Ukrainian forces have not been able to recapture enough territory to put their leaders in a strong position at any subsequent negotiations.

As of 24 February, the Ukraine war appeared to be at something of a stalemate in a state of uncertainty even though a definitive shift in the United States' approach had become discernible with the Trump administration's push for direct negotiations with Russia, without Ukraine's involvement leaves the European



allies with no clear role. Washington also sided with Moscow in a vote at the United Nations that would have condemned Russian aggression on the third anniversary of the Ukraine invasion — breaking with allies to join a small group of nations including North Korea and Belarus.

Just a few days later Ukraine's situation appears rather grim due to a public showdown between US President Trump and Ukrainian President Zelensky. A heated exchange took place on 28 February between Zelenskyy, Trump and Vance at the White House. Trump criticized the Ukrainian leader's attitude during the exchange, while Zelenskyy expressed his expectation of support for his country. Mr Zelensky had gone to Washington with two principal tasks: to protect Ukraine's war effort with a continued flow of weapons and to lay the basis for a peace deal that will last. After a full-blown shouting match in front of the television cameras—with Donald Trump and his vice-president, J.D. Vance, furiously accusing the Ukrainian leader of being ungrateful and of risking a third world war—hopes for a peace deal seem more distant than ever.

Mr Macron, France's president, visited Washington on February 24th; Sir Keir did so on the 27th. Both trips were viewed in Europe as successes: each leader pressed Mr Trump on the issue of security guarantees, and both meetings ended on encouragingly upbeat terms. But the blow-up on February 28th has already caused deep alarm in European capitals. Europe's leaders are due to meet in London on March 2nd to co-ordinate their positions on a potential military deployment to Ukraine after any ceasefire, and how to pay for higher defence spending—talks that now have far greater urgency. But there is no question that

America remains central to Ukraine's war effort. Although Europe provides the majority of aid, 60% to America's 40% on one estimate, Ukraine relies on American air-defence interceptors, as well as a flow of intelligence and spare parts for American weaponry.

Zelensky's domestic standing appeared to be holding steady in the immediate aftermath of the meeting. Zelensky received a public signal of support from the speaker of the Ukrainian Parliament. Opposition figures also backed Zelensky. The road ahead for Ukraine is now unclear but strewn with danger. It seems likely that internal and external actors will increase the pressure on Mr Zelensky to resign, hold elections or both—though how that can happen during wartime without cancelling martial law and thus tipping the country into chaos is not clear.

President Trump's critical stance toward President Zelensky has raised concerns about the future of U.S. military assistance to Ukraine. The possibility of reduced support could weaken Ukraine's defence capabilities against Russian aggression. This shift has been perceived as a strategic advantage for Russian President Vladimir Putin, potentially altering the balance on the battlefield.

With Ukraine facing ammunition and equipment shortages, Russian forces could escalate offensives in key areas such as Avdiivka, Bakhmut, and the Zaporizhzhia region. A lack of U.S. artillery shells, air defence systems, and long-range missiles would allow Russian forces to press forward with fewer risks of counterattacks. Despite the potential for decreased U.S. support, Ukrainians remain determined to continue their fight against Russian forces. However, challenges such as troop shortages and declining morale persist, highlighting the importance of sustained international support for Ukraine's defence efforts.

Israel-Hamas Conflict: Gaza Reconstruction in Focus; IDF Chief Submits Resignation

In the aftermath of the ceasefire agreement that was announced on 15 January 2025 between Israel and Hamas – mediated by the US, Egypt and Qatar, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited Washington on 4 February 2025 and met with the US President Donald Trump. Netanyahu showered praise on Trump as the “greatest friend Israel has ever had in the White House”. He highlighted the three key policy initiatives that Trump took in his first term which were in tune with Netanyahu's long-term policy advocacy. These were the US recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital and shifting its Embassy there from Tel Aviv; recognising Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights; and the US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the Iran nuclear deal.

In the joint press conference, Trump announced that the US would “take over” the Gaza Strip and turn it into the “Riviera of the Middle East”. The US President's plan involves the relocation of the two million residents of Gaza. Trump also subsequently shared an AI-generated video on social media showing himself and Netanyahu at a beach resort in Gaza and Palestinian children

throwing dollar bills into the air, with the video ending with the caption ‘No more tunnels, no more fear, Trump Gaza is finally here’. The video sparked strong reactions on social media for ignoring the plight of the Palestinians and the death and destruction in the Gaza Strip.

The World Bank has estimated that it would take more than USD 50 billion over more than a decade for the reconstruction of Gaza. Egypt, meanwhile, is hosting an emergency summit of the Arab League on 4 March to discuss Gaza reconstruction. Egyptian Foreign Minister Badr Abdelatty insisted on 2 March that Egypt's Gaza reconstruction plan will ensure that Palestinians remain on their land, as against the Trump plan.



At a press conference with the EU Commissioner for the Mediterranean, Abdelatty stated that Egypt would seek international backing and funding for the plan. He also emphasised Europe's crucial role, particularly in the financing of Gaza's reconstruction. Most of the Arab states have rejected Trump's plan, including Jordan's King Abdullah, during a meeting with President Trump on 20 February. Abdullah was the first Arab leader to meet Trump after he took over as president.

The UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Senior Humanitarian Coordinator for Gaza, Sigrid Kaag, told the UN Security Council on 25 February that there can be no question of forced displacement and called on both sides to honour their commitments to the ceasefire deal. She also noted that the post-conflict situation in Gaza was probably the last chance to achieve a two-state solution, a possibility which has been repeatedly dismissed by the Israeli leadership in recent times.

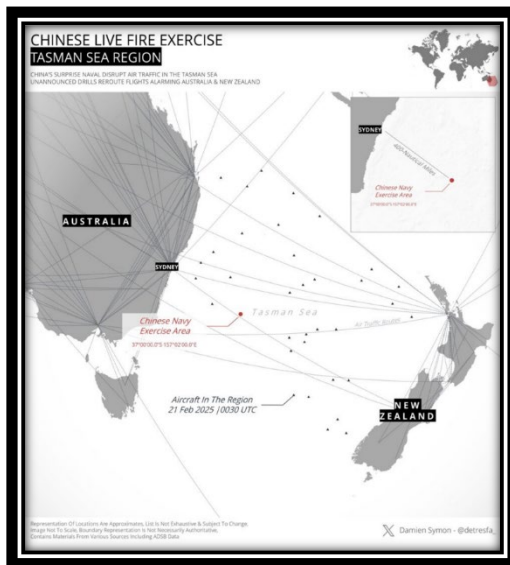
The first stage of the Israel-Hamas ceasefire agreement, meanwhile, ended on 28 February, with uncertainty surrounding the implementation of the next stage of the process. The second stage involves the re-deployment of Israeli troops from densely populated areas and a permanent ceasefire. The Israeli government supported a proposal from the Trump administration's Middle East Envoy, Steve Witkoff, which sought to further extend the first stage of the ceasefire agreement till at least 20 April. Prime Minister Netanyahu, however, stopped the entry of aid into the Gaza Strip on 1 March as Hamas was not in agreement with the US proposal to extend the first phase of the ceasefire agreement. Hamas termed Netanyahu's decision as “a blatant attack on the ceasefire agreement, a war crime, and an act of cheap extortion.”

In other developments, the Chief of Staff of the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), Lt Gen Herzi Halevi, meanwhile, informed the Israeli Minister of Defence Israel Katz on 21 January that he has decided to leave his position on 6 March 2025, “by virtue of my recognition of my responsibility for the IDF's failure on October 7, and at a time when the IDF has significant achievements and is in the process of implementing the agreement to release our hostages.”

Lt Gen Halevi was presented with the Legion of Merit during a farewell visit to the US on 20 February in recognition of the close and successful cooperation between the US and Israeli militaries in the aftermath of the 7 October 2023 Hamas attack. This cooperation was ongoing in the recent past, as seen in the visit of US CENTCOM Commander Gen. Michael Kurilla and the Commander of US Air Forces Central, Lt. Gen. Derek France at the end of January. Gen France visited the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defence system deployed in Israel as well as the Israeli Arrow ballistic missile defence system.

Australia and New Zealand Alarmed as China Conducts Live Fire Exercise in Tasman Seas

In February 2025, China conducted live-fire naval drills in the Tasman Sea between Australia and New Zealand. The exercises, which involved a Chinese task force of warships, caught both countries by surprise. The drills forced commercial flights to divert, as the vessels conducted live-fire activities near busy flight paths linking the two nations. The exercises took place in international waters, which meant they did not violate international law, but the lack of adequate notice raised safety and diplomatic concerns.



The primary point of contention was the short notice provided by China regarding the live-fire drills. Australia learned of the exercises through an emergency radio transmission relayed by a commercial pilot, which prompted aviation authorities to issue a hazard alert. However, neither country received the formal Notice to Airmen (NOTAM), a standard procedure that could give up to a week's notice for activities affecting airspace.

Both Australian and New Zealand officials accused China of not providing sufficient warning, with the New Zealand's Prime Minister, raising the issue during high-level diplomatic talks in Beijing. New Zealand's Defence Minister, Judith Collins, raised alarms about the advanced weapons capabilities of the Chinese task force, including anti-ship missiles, which could potentially target Australia. The drills also occurred in proximity to heavily trafficked air routes, forcing 49 aircraft to divert their paths, and causing panic in Canberra and Wellington. China's Ministry of Defence stating that the drills complied with international law and did not affect aviation safety, also accused Australia of overreacting and "hyping up" the situation. This did nothing to assuage concerns in Canberra where the lack of prior notification and the disruption to civil aviation sparked backlash. It also raised important questions about future protocols for high-seas military operations near sensitive maritime regions.

For Australia and New Zealand, China's actions mark a new phase in their security challenges. This is the first time China has conducted military exercises in the Tasman Sea, demonstrating a potential shift in Chinese naval strategy. The increased frequency of Chinese military operations in the region may continue to test the strategic stability of the South Pacific, pushing Australia and New Zealand to reconsider their defence postures and diplomatic strategies. The PLA Navy's growing presence around Australia and New Zealand, along with its observations of joint military exercises like Talisman Sabre, signals China's gradual expansion of operational reach into traditionally Western-dominated Pacific spaces. This has regional security implications including for the evolving security architecture for the Indo-Pacific.

While China's actions are legal under the UN Convention, the incident does spotlight the need for global consensus on rules of the sea for maritime safety and transparency. The lack of sufficient notification by China of live-fire exercises in international waters raises critical questions about the transparency of military activities in vital maritime corridors. Possible safety risks, especially to commercial flights and shipping necessitate clearer global protocols, especially near other nations' exclusive economic zones.

The incident has also fuelled a fiery political debate domestically on the Albanese government's China strategy. The Coalition, including Opposition Leader Peter Dutton and frontbencher James Paterson, criticized the government's response to China's military drills. They accused Prime Minister Albanese of weakness and failure in dealing with China, highlighting how the drills exposed flaws in the government's stabilisation strategy with Beijing. The opposition expressed concern over the ADF's (Australian Defence Force's) delay in being informed and suggested Australia should have used its intelligence to monitor the situation more promptly. Meanwhile, Defence Minister Richard Marles urged Australians to "take a deep breath", noting that Australia's naval vessels regularly operate close to China under the same legal framework. He defended ADF's response time as appropriate for what he described as a routine military exercise, not an immediate military threat. Foreign Minister Penny Wong also defended the government's strategy of stabilisation, explaining that it does not imply that China will stop actions that Australia disagrees with. She also accused the Coalition of inflaming tensions and using the issue to score political points ahead of elections.

Outside of the regional political debate stirred, the drills by China across the Indo-Pacific are being seen by observers as aimed at testing the United States and regional countries' responses to military threats under Trump 2.0. Given that it just resumed a military-to-military dialogue with Australia after a five-year gap, many are questioning the logic of China's actions. Since the Trump administration remains focused on facilitating peace negotiations between Russia and Ukraine, there is "space for China", analysts believe to engage in more "short-term, not-too-much-pre-announced" military exercises across the Indo-Pacific in the coming months.