



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

Strategic Digest

Vol. 7 | No. 12 | 16 June 2025

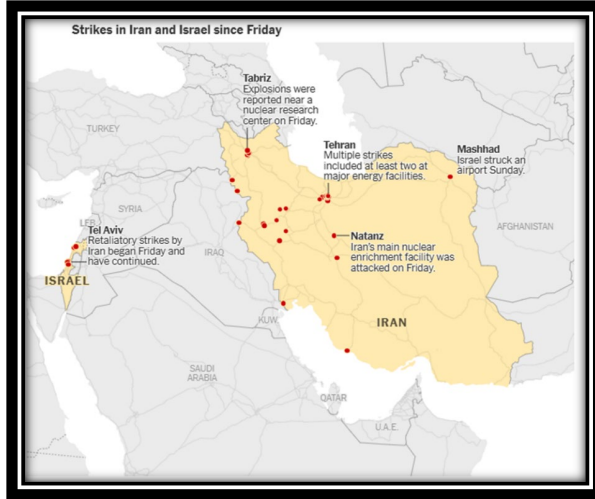
Israel and Iran Exchange Strikes as Full-Scale Conflict Erupts in Middle East

UK Strategic Defence Review – Key Takeaways

China's Strategic Advances in the Pacific, courts PICs in Foreign Ministers' Meeting

Israel and Iran Exchange Strikes as Full-Scale Conflict Erupts in Middle East

On 13 June, Israel launched a series of strikes on Iran's nuclear and military sites and carried out assassinations of top military officials and nuclear scientists by deploying warplanes and drones that had been previously smuggled into the country.



A total of nine nuclear scientists and at least twenty Iranian commanders, including IRGC commander-in-chief Hossein Salami, chief of staff of armed forces Mohammad Bagheri, head of the IRGC Aerospace Force Amir Ali Hajizadeh, and head of the IRGC Quds Force Esmail Qaani, were killed.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu released a video statement announcing the launch of a targeted

military operation dubbed 'Rising Lion.' Netanyahu stated "we will reach all our objectives and we will eliminate the double existential threat," referring to Iran's nuclear program and its ballistic missile capabilities. Making a direct appeal to the Iranian people he said: "This is your opportunity to stand up [to the regime]." He also noted that he ordered plans for the attack last November, soon after the killing of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah.

Initially, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio described the Israeli attack as a "unilateral action," while President Donald Trump claimed that the attacks came after a 60-day ultimatum he had given Iran to "make a deal" on its nuclear programme. However, only hours before the Israeli strikes, Trump had posted on his Truth Social: "We remain committed to a Diplomatic Resolution to the Iran Nuclear Issue! My entire Administration has been directed to negotiate with Iran." The 6th round of indirect talks between the US and Iran was scheduled for 15 March in Muscat, Oman. Iran was expected to present a counter-proposal for a nuclear deal to the United States in response to a US offer that Tehran had deemed "unacceptable." The main contentious issue was Iran's insistence on enrichment on Iranian soil, which Washington had rejected.

On June 11, the IAEA Board of Governors passed a resolution proposed by the United States and its European allies—Britain, France, and Germany—declaring Iran noncompliant with its nuclear obligations. In response, Tehran announced plans to establish a new enrichment site in a designated safe zone, and stated that first-generation (IR-1) centrifuges at the Fordow facility would be replaced with advanced sixth-generation (IR-6) machines. In this context, Israel described its attack on Iran's nuclear facilities as a "preemptive strike." Although Israel claimed that the initial wave of strikes had provided it with "significant freedom of movement," by the evening, Iranian air defenses were activated in Tehran to intercept further Israeli attacks. However, Iran's assertions of shooting down three Israeli F-35 fighter jets have been dismissed by the Israeli military.

Following Israeli attacks, Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, stated that Israel's strikes had "initiated a war" and warned that it would not be permitted to carry out "hit and run" attacks without consequences. On the night of the 13th, Iran launched three separate waves of attacks, firing hundreds of missiles at Israel, which struck an apartment block in Tel Aviv.

In response to these Iranian retaliatory strikes, Israel expanded its targets in Iran to include industrial and energy infrastructure, in addition to air bases and missile production factories across the country. On the night of the 14th, the Israeli military targeted 80 locations in Tehran, which included several residential buildings. Following airstrikes at the South Pars gas field, a fire broke out, leading to a partial suspension of production. Iran's third round of missile strikes resulted in a fire at the Haifa power plant.

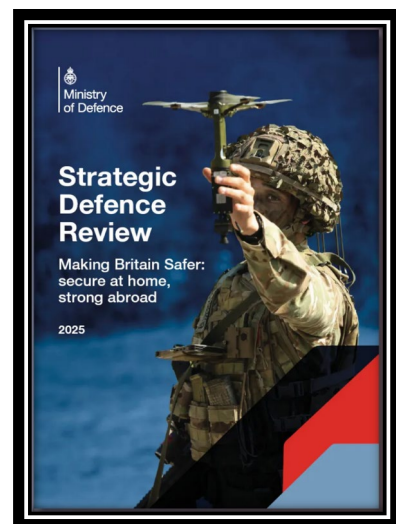
Over three days, Israeli armed forces hit 250 targets across 18 provinces, primarily in western Iran. However, on June 15th, a suicide drone attack was reported at the airport in Mashhad, located in north-eastern Iran.

Following multiple strikes on the sprawling Natanz nuclear complex, the above-ground enrichment plant was destroyed. Additionally, damage to the electricity infrastructure resulted in a loss of power and affected the centrifuges in the cascade hall. However, the level of radioactivity outside Natanz remained unchanged. Israeli strikes at the Isfahan Nuclear Technology Centre also damaged four critical buildings. Furthermore, Israel targeted the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant, which is located deep within the mountains near Qom and houses advanced centrifuges used for enriching uranium to high levels of purity. According to a statement from the IAEA at the UN, the Fordow plant was not impacted.

UK Strategic Defence Review – Key Takeaways

On the 2nd June 2025, the UK Government released its much-anticipated Strategic Defence Review (SDR). At 144 pages long, the Review explores, in-depth, the challenges facing UK defence and national security and provides 62 recommendations on how to respond to these challenges. UK Government has accepted all 62 recommendations of SDR.

A defining feature of the 2025 Review is its sober assessment of the geostrategic landscape. The document concludes that the global system has entered a phase of fragmentation, marked by intensified competition among major powers, breakdowns in multilateralism, and the widespread use of hybrid tactics. SDR argues that these shifts necessitate for the UK a more flexible, forward-deployed, and technologically advanced force posture, alongside deeper engagement with allies and like-minded nations.



The Strategic Defence Review (SDR) not only recognises the armed forces' limited capacity for warfare with a peer or near-peer adversary but sets out a defence reform plan for new capabilities, a 'high-low' equipment mix, reshaped forces and a reinvigorated defence industrial base that will act as an engine for economic growth and prosperity. Given the threat environment, it notes that 'business as usual' is not an option.

The SDR notes the level of the challenge facing the British Army, which is less modernised than the other services and has donated a significant proportion of its equipment and ammunition stockpiles to Ukraine. The army is rebuilding amid an operational environment characterised by rapid technological change, agility, and a transition to NATO's 'deterrence by denial' strategy.

The SDR recommends the army to be 'bolder in its ambition' should aim to 'increase lethality ten-fold', the SDR outlines plans for the service to provide a strategic reserve corps to NATO that would be commanded by the existing Allied Rapid Reaction Corps HQ and comprise two divisions that are enabled by 'corps-level capability'. One of the divisions is to have three armoured/mechanised brigades and a support brigade.

The SDR suggests that the UK should consider expanding its support for the NATO nuclear role. through the RAF, which is partially met by the Alliance's Dual Capable Aircraft (DCA) commitment. The review also indicates that the RAF could acquire the Lockheed Martin F-35A Lightning II, which has been cleared for carriage of the US B61-12 nuclear gravity bomb.

Alongside a reinforcing nuclear role, the review also underscores the requirement for greater conventional offensive and defensive systems to increase deterrence. It identifies a need for greater expenditure on conventionally armed 'deep precision strike' systems, while also flagging the requirement for much improved integrated air and missile defence (IAMD), with the RAF the lead service for the latter. The SDR also recommends that the UK seeks partners to develop 'a next-generation, overhead, persistent intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capability' for its IAMD system.

The most tangible maritime commitments to emerge from the SDR relate to the 'nuclear enterprise'. This includes GBP15 billion of investment in the UK sovereign warhead programme. There is the ambition to build 'up to' 12 new-generation nuclear-powered attack submarines under the AUKUS partnership with Australia and the US. But that is unlikely to be achieved, if at all, much before the early 2050s unless the service lives of the current Astute-class boats are extended. There is also a recommendation for deliberation about a follow-on to the four new Dreadnought-class nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines.

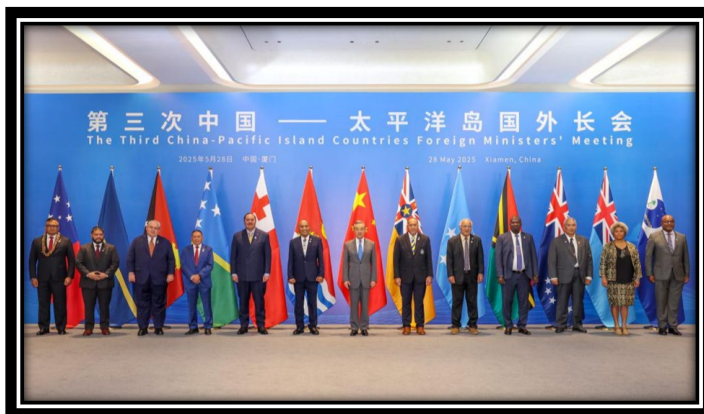
The Royal Navy (RN) is also being pointed to a new leading and coordinating role with other government agencies and the commercial sector in protecting undersea cables and pipelines, offshore installations, and the increasingly complex task of defending SLOC. The SDR envisages 'new hybrid navy' comprising minimally crewed or autonomous mixed surface platforms along with

mixed crewed and unmanned air wings for the carriers. The SDR aims to create ‘a more powerful but cheaper and simpler fleet’.

The most important aspects of the review are less about hardware than reforms. The upper echelons of defence have been reshuffled to empower the chief of defence staff and create a powerful new national armaments director. A new cyber and electromagnetic command will oversee the protection of military networks and electronic warfare. Procurement will be overhauled “from top to the bottom”, with details to come in a defence industrial strategy this year.

Various commentators have argued that the ambitious plan for force development outlined in SDR appears underfunded. The review was conducted ‘within the budgetary context of a transition to 2.5% of GDP’ from 2027. An ambition is also noted to spend ‘3% of GDP on defence in the 2030s if economic and fiscal conditions allow’.

China’s Strategic Advances in the Pacific, courts PICs in Foreign Ministers’ Meeting



The 2025 China–Pacific Island Countries (PICs) Foreign Ministers’ Meeting, held in Xiamen on May 28–29, marked a significant milestone in Beijing’s strategic outreach to the Pacific region. As the third iteration of this summit—and the first to be hosted in China—it marks a carefully

orchestrated step in a broader geopolitical manoeuvre to position China as an indispensable partner to the region, both in contrast to the waning influence of the United States and as a force for climate resilience and economic development.

At the heart of the meeting was China's six-point plan aimed at "building a community with a shared future between China and the PICs." A key component of this plan was the announcement of 100 "small and beautiful" climate projects over the next three years, focusing on disaster management, fisheries, health, and maritime cooperation. These initiatives are designed to address immediate local needs, reinforcing China's image as a proactive partner in contrast to perceived inconsistencies in U.S. climate policy. Additionally, China pledged \$2 million to climate-related efforts and introduced a disaster response mechanism, aligning with the Pacific's top security concerns.

A notable development was the explicit inclusion of Taiwan as "an inalienable part of China’s territory" in the joint statement—a first in such forums. However, the statement stopped short of endorsing reunification, opting instead for language suggesting "understanding and support." This nuanced phrasing reflects

China's growing assertiveness and the Pacific Island nations' cautious approach to Beijing's stance on Taiwan. The absence of Taiwan's remaining allies—Palau, Tuvalu, and the Marshall Islands—from the summit further indicates China's diplomatic efforts to isolate Taipei.

The Xiamen meeting was a carefully choreographed exercise in narrative dominance. By hosting the event in mainland China for the first time, Beijing was able to deploy the full pageantry of state diplomacy to Pacific representatives—many of whom were visiting China in person for the first time. The event also conveniently coincided with a period of strategic uncertainty over U.S. commitment to the Pacific. The U.S. decision to impose high tariffs, reduce foreign assistance, and disengage from multilateral climate efforts has left a vacuum that China says it is committed to filling while “presenting itself as a responsible, predictable, and generous partner.” The joint statement also acknowledged China's Global Development, Global Civilization, and Global Security Initiatives, signalling Beijing's broader ambitions to influence governance and security frameworks in the Pacific. The framing of its development initiatives under the Global Development Initiative, and the emphasis on “mutual respect” and “non-interference,” speak to Beijing’s pitching appeal to PICs wary of Western conditionality or geopolitical entanglement.

China's outreach has not gone unnoticed by regional powers such as Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and the United States. While China's proposals have largely avoided overt security agreements, the emphasis on “police cooperation,” “law enforcement dialogues,” and “maritime partnerships” suggests a gradual normalization of China's security presence in the Pacific. This shift in China's approach—from economic statecraft to multidimensional strategic engagement—poses challenges for U.S. allies and partners, who must now reassure Pacific nations of their long-term commitment and offer tangible, coordinated alternatives to Chinese engagement.

The September 2025 Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) Leaders’ Meeting, set to be hosted by the Solomon Islands, will be a critical juncture. With the Solomon Islands already leaning heavily towards Beijing, there are concerns that China may seek to sideline Taiwan entirely from the PIF, eroding one of Taipei’s last multilateral footholds. This development underscores the ongoing geopolitical contest in the Pacific and the complex balancing act Pacific Island nations face in navigating the interests of major powers.

The 2025 China–PICs Foreign Ministers’ Meeting is a watershed moment not for what it produced in terms of immediate agreements, but for what it revealed about Beijing’s long-term vision for the Pacific. China is steadily weaving itself into the fabric of Pacific regionalism through targeted development, diplomatic charm, and strategic messaging. In contrast, the absence or missteps of the United States only sharpened the appeal of China’s model. For regional powers invested in preserving a free and open Indo-Pacific, countering this momentum will require more than episodic aid or rhetorical support—it will require a sustained, principled, and responsive presence.