



Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies NSW

# April 2024 Current Geostrategic Issues Report

## The War in Ukraine

By 24 February 2024, as the war entered its third year, a strategic stalemate pertained. Both sides were exhausted and were facing severe shortages of defence matériel and combat personnel, but Russia was recovering faster. Russia is now on the strategic offensive on land, while Ukraine has largely secured the western half of the Black Sea.

The land battle is the main game. With both sides pursuing positional warfare, Ukraine remains on the defensive along the full length (1300km) of the line of contact with Russian ground forces in the Donbas, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson sectors. Fierce fighting has continued along the entire front line with Russian forces inching forward, especially in the Donetsk Oblast where the Russians seized Avdiivka on 17 February. It was Russia's first significant victory since seizing Bakhmut on 20 May 2023. Russian forces are now focusing on Chasiv Yar, 20km west of Bakhmut, where fierce fighting has been raging this past week. Shortages of artillery ammunition are impeding the Ukrainian defence.

Ukraine has made further progress in its Black Sea campaign. Some 80 ships, about a third of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, have now been destroyed by Ukrainian missiles and drones since the war began. The headquarters of the Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol on the Crimean peninsula was destroyed in a missile strike last September. The fleet has been redeployed to Novorossiysk in Russia on the Black Sea's east coast, but still within range of Ukrainian missiles and drones. Russia is now considering moving the fleet to a new naval base it is constructing further south in Abkhazia — a territory of Georgia which Russia occupied in 2008. It may still be within the reach of Ukrainian missiles and drones, but Ukraine would think twice before, in effect, attacking Georgia.

These naval successes have enabled Ukraine to maintain the export of grain by sea, which has been vital for Ukraine's struggling economy and for food security in Africa and the Middle East. Indeed, in March, Ukraine donated 7,665 tonnes of wheat to Sudan where 25 million people are facing starvation.

Meanwhile, Russia has continued harassing missile and drone strikes on Ukrainian cities, both in retaliation when embarrassed on the battlefield and to degrade Ukrainian civilian morale. Ukraine, in response, has launched missile and drone attacks on Russian cities near the Russia-Ukraine border and has deployed hundreds of long-range drones to attack infrastructure targets deep inside Russia.

There also have been extensive Russian missile strikes on Ukraine's energy grid. Ukraine, in response, has begun attacking Russian oil refineries, shutting down around 14 per cent of Russia's refining capacity, thereby impacting Moscow's highly lucrative trade in refined products. On 2 April, Ukraine attacked Russia's third-biggest oil refinery (Taneco – capacity 340,000 barrels

per day) some 1,300km beyond the front line. Ukrainian-made drones also hit a Russian plant producing long-range Shahed attack drones, causing significant damage; and attacked an air base at Morozovsk in the Rostov region, destroying six and damaging eight Russian warplanes.

Russia has ramped up its manufacture of defence matériel and is receiving missiles, drones and other matériel from Iran and North Korea. Further, Russia, with its much larger population, is much better placed to address its personnel problems than is Ukraine which has lowered its draft age from 27 to 25 years to address its shortage of defence manpower.

Ukraine continues to face war weariness among its supporters in Europe and the United States. Europe has largely depleted its war stocks and is considering placing its defence industry on a war footing. NATO's secretary-general has proposed that Europe establish a fund sufficient to maintain Ukraine's war effort for five years, but the idea has received a mixed reception among member countries. American support for Ukraine remains hostage to party politics in the United States Congress.

The 2024 Russian presidential elections were held throughout the Russian Federation, including the annexed territories in Ukraine, on 15-17 March. President Vladimir Putin was returned with 88 per cent of the vote. Hence, Russia's war policies are not expected to change.

Unrelated to the war, on 22 March, Islamic State – Khorasan Province (IS-KP or ISIS-K), the Afghan arm of ISIS, attacked a packed concert hall (Crocus Hall) outside Moscow. Some 144 people were killed and 551 injured. Both the United States and Iran alerted Russia to a security threat (a major “terrorist operation”) ahead the ISIS-K attack, but the warnings seem to have been ignored.

### **Conflicts in the Middle East**

Hamas, the fundamentalist Sunni Islamic organisation that governs Gaza, launched a series of coordinated raids on Israeli towns and villages near the Gaza border on 7 October 2023. Employing the tactics and tools of terrorism, the raiders killed some 1200 Israelis, mostly civilians, and then withdrew taking 253 hostages back into Gaza, some 130 of whom remain in captivity. This has led to conflict in Gaza, on the West Bank, on the Lebanon-Israel Border, in Iraq and Syria and in the Red Sea.

### **Gaza**

Israel began a ground offensive on 27 October with a view to destroying Hamas and rescuing as many hostages as possible. Initially, the IDF focused on northern Gaza, especially Gaza City. Once the north had been subdued, the IDF then moved to southern Gaza, especially Khan Yunis. The IDF then focused on central Gaza and now intends to assault Rafah (in the far south on the Egyptian border), the last remaining Hamas stronghold. Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu has ordered the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) to draw up a dual plan for the evacuation of some 1.3 - 1.7 million residents and internally-displaced Palestinian citizens from Rafah, followed by a ground assault. The US is strongly opposed to this proposal. The UN points out that an evacuation on the scale that would be necessary would be nigh impossible. Netanyahu, nevertheless, is pressing ahead.

Pressure from the international community, especially the US, in early March forced Israel to suspend its Rafah offensive plans while ceasefire negotiations were conducted. President Biden declared that Benjamin Netanyahu would ‘cross a red line’ if he undertook the Rafah offensive. The US, though, continues to honour a 2016 multi-billion dollar annual funding agreement to

provide Israel with military logistics support for 10 years. President Biden has warned Israel that even this aid would be jeopardised should the Rafah offensive proceed.

On 25 March, the UN Security Council, with the US abstaining, passed a resolution demanding an immediate ceasefire for the month of Ramadan, the immediate and unconditional release of hostages, and the urgent need to expand the flow of aid into Gaza. Little came of it on the ground in Gaza.

Ceasefire talks, however, have continued in Cairo and Qatar (mediated by Egypt, Qatar and the US) with a view to a six-week truce during which some Israeli hostages and Palestinian prisoners would be exchanged and humanitarian aid would be delivered to Gaza's starving civilian population. By 10 April, there had been no breakthrough in the talks and Israel seemed determined to proceed with its Rafah offensive. To this end, it began withdrawing its forces from Khan Yunis and Gaza City (to which it had been forced to return by renewed fighting, now suppressed) in preparation for the Rafah offensive.

The humanitarian situation in Gaza by 10 April was extreme. Gaza remained besieged by Israel; more than 33,000 Gazans had been killed and 75,000 wounded since the war began; health and social services had failed; civil infrastructure had been destroyed; and the population was on the brink of famine. Aid convoys were able to enter Gaza only with extreme difficulty. The worst affected areas seemed to be in northern Gaza to which the US and Jordan began delivering food aid by air (parachute) in early March. On 10 March, Europe initiated a Mediterranean maritime aid corridor from Cyprus (Larnaca) to the coast of Gaza to ship in food, water, medicine, and temporary shelter.

By 10 April, only two shiploads had been delivered. During distribution of the second shipload, a World Central Kitchen (WCK) convoy was attacked by Israeli drones and all seven WCK aid workers were killed, including one Australian. This brought the number of aid workers killed since the conflict began to 196. Israel has admitted its error, its initial investigation revealing that IDF personnel thought the convoy included one or more Hamas gunmen. This has not satisfied the international community and Australia has appointed retired Air Chief Marshal Mark Binskin AC as its special advisor to review the Israeli findings.

Australia, along with other Western nations, had halted temporarily its aid to UNRWA (UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) in Gaza while Israeli claims of UNRWA staff participating in the 7 October Hamas assault on Israel were investigated. Satisfied with UNRWA's response, first Canada and now Australia have restored their UNRWA funding.

Australia's foreign affairs minister, Penny Wong, said on 9 April that international recognition of Palestinian statehood could help 'build momentum towards a two-state solution', which is 'the only hope' for peace between Israelis and Palestinians in the long term. Further, recognition of a Palestinian state would undermine Hamas and improve diplomatic relations with other countries in the region.

### **Gaza Update**

On Friday 12 April, an Australia aid worker, Tess Ingram, working with UNICEF, was travelling in a three-car convoy to deliver aid to Palestinians when the convoy came under small arms fire while stopped at an Israeli check point. The convoy had been cleared in advance with both sides and it was not known who fired the bullets. The convoy was delayed at the check point for several hours

and, consequently, had to return to base without delivering the aid. There were no reports of injuries.

### **Wider Conflicts**

Israelis are also clashing with Palestinians on the West Bank, with Hezbollah on the Lebanese border and with Yemen's Houthis whose missiles can reach Israel. The danger of triggering a wider war in the Middle East involving Iran directly remains and threatens to draw in the US and its allies. Indeed, US forces in Iraq and Syria have been coming under increased, but sporadic, missile attack from Shia militia thought to be acting as proxies for Iran. Iran itself, however, has been careful not to become directly involved against the US and the US similarly has been careful to avoid direct conflict with Iran. Nevertheless, Iran did attack terrorist bases in Iraq and Pakistan in January, drawing a protest from Iraq and retaliation in kind from Pakistan.

### **West Bank.**

On the West Bank, over which the IDF provides security, clashes between Palestinian youths, Israeli settlers and the IDF have continued over the past month. According to UN data, since 7 October, some 440 Palestinians (110 of them children) and 15 Israelis have been killed. This loss of life has attracted international concern. Adding to that concern, Israel has announced plans for a further 3,500 settler homes in the West Bank and Jerusalem.

### **Lebanon.**

The militant Shia organisation in southern Lebanon, Hezbollah, is part of the Lebanese government and does not want war with Israel at this time. Nevertheless, it has been assisting Hamas by exchanging sufficient artillery and rocket fire with the IDF since 7 October to keep substantial IDF forces pinned on Israel's Lebanese (northern) border and forcing the evacuation of Israeli settlers from the border area. For its part, Israel, using surgical missile strikes, has assassinated several key Hezbollah leaders in Lebanese towns well away from the border. Should war break out on its northern border, the IDF would find Hezbollah a far stronger and more capable opponent than Hamas. Nevertheless, as soon as the situation in Gaza has been resolved, Israel seems determined to drive Hezbollah forces well back from the border area – to create a Hamas-free buffer zone on the Lebanese side so as to allow Israeli settlers to return to their homes along the border in relative safety.

On 30 March, three United Nations military observers, including one Australian, and a Lebanese translator, were wounded while on foot patrol along the border when a shell exploded near them. The observers were part of the UN Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO), which supports the UN peacekeeping mission in southern Lebanon, UNIFIL. Lebanon said the IDF used drones to strike the patrol, but the IDF has denied this. The UN is investigating.

### **Iraq and Syria.**

Since the main US withdrawal from Iraq in 2019, some 3000 - 5000 US forces have remained stationed in Iraq and Syria to help prevent a resurgence of ISIS. These forces have been coming under missile and drone attack from Iran-aligned terrorist groups that wish to expel the US from the region. On 28 January, three US Army Reserve engineers were killed and some 40 more US service members were injured, eight seriously, in a drone attack on a US logistics base, Tower 22, in Jordan. The US retaliated against Kataib Hezbollah and other Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-aligned groups in Syria and Iraq and further retaliation has been promised. Iraq has

strongly objected to these US actions and is continuing negotiations with the US for the withdrawal of all US forces from Iraq.

Israel also has a history of targeting leaders of Iran-aligned militias in Syria as opportunity presents, but has not previously attacked a diplomatic mission. On 1 April, an Israeli air strike on the Iranian embassy in Damascus destroyed the Iranian consulate building adjacent to the embassy and killed at least eight people, including Brigadier-General Mohammad Reza Zahedi, a senior commander in Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) – specifically its Quds Force, its elite foreign espionage and paramilitary arm. Iran has vowed to respond 'harshly' to the attack, leading to renewed concerns about the war spreading. Indeed, the Middle East is now on high alert for an Iranian retaliation.

### **Yemen and Red Sea.**

Yemen's Houthis are Shia rebels supported by Iran, who now govern much of western Yemen bordering on the Red Sea. Incensed by Israel's attack on Gaza and in support of Hamas, since November they have been using Iranian-supplied missiles and drones to attack commercial shipping in the Red Sea, the Bab el-Mandeb strait and the Gulf of Aden – in effect closing the Suez Canal through which some 12 per cent of global maritime trade travels.

More than 60 merchant ships have been attacked to date. The danger to crews and cargoes and increased insurance costs have forced shippers to avoid the Suez Canal and to choose the longer route via the Cape of Good Hope. Possibly as a result, there have been fewer attacks recently. Eight significant attacks were reported between 16 February and 15 March, including on the bulk carrier MV True Confidence on 6 March, of whose 23 crew three were killed and four were injured. These are the only deaths reported to date.

On 27 March, it was announced that the Houthis had reached a political deal with Russia and China to provide safe passage for vessels under their jurisdiction.

An international naval coalition led by the US has been seeking to provide protection for commercial shipping in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The naval ships continue to successfully intercept many of the missiles and drones fired at the commercial vessels, but unless the Houthi bases are destroyed, the Houthi attacks are likely to continue. To this end, US and UK air force and naval strikes on Houthi rebel launching sites, arms caches, headquarters and the like in Yemen are continuing, but a ground assault on the bases does not appear to be in prospect. |

### **Iran-Israel Update**

Iran has retaliated against Israel for the latter's attack on Iran's embassy in Damascus on 1 April, destroying the consulate building and killing several senior officers including a key Quds Force general. An attack on an embassy, in legal effect, is an attack on that country itself, hence Iran chose to attack Israeli territory last weekend. Some 300 missiles (both cruise and ballistic) and long-range drones (Iran is 1,700km from Israel) were fired from Iran at Israel on Saturday (13 Apr 24). The timing had been well flagged in advance, and Israel's "Iron-Dome" air defence system, and allies in neighbouring territories – United States, Britain, France and Jordan – had little trouble in intercepting nearly all of them – many before they reached Israel. The only casualty announced so far is a seven-year-old Bedouin girl who was critically injured in southern Israel. Some observers see the perceived 'failure' of the air-raid as embarrassing for Iran. Another explanation

is that it was deliberate on Iran's part – the raid was a token gesture by Iran with a view to preventing further escalation.

The ball is now back in Israel's court. President Biden has told Prime Minister Netanyahu that he opposes any further escalation, yet says the US has Israel's 'back'. If some reports are to be believed (and I hope they are wrong), Netanyahu appears to feel that a direct showdown with Iran will be necessary at some time, so it might as well be now when Israel is ready but no one else is.

Israel's response on 19 April was muted; there are hopes such a token will suffice.

### **Monthly Strait of Hormuz Update**

Associated with this attack on Israel, Iran moved to close the Strait of Hormuz at the entrance to the Arabian Gulf with Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps commandos seizing a Portuguese cargo ship, the M.S.C Aries, in the strait and taking it into Iranian waters. Iran claims the ship was linked to Israel.

### **Sudan**

Sudan is a country of 50 million people. Quite unrelated to the Israel-related conflicts, a civil war between rival factions in the Sudanese military government – the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) under General Abdel Fattah al-Burnham and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces under Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo aka 'Hemedti' – has been ongoing for 12 months – since 15 April 2023. Most fighting has been concentrated around the capital, Khartoum, and in the Darfur region in the country's west. By 21 January, some 13,000 – 15,000 people had been killed, 33,000 others injured, 5.8 million internally displaced and 25 million (half the population) were facing starvation. Despite its own problems, Ukraine donated 7,665 tonnes of wheat to Sudan in March.

On 9 March, the UN Security Council called for an immediate ceasefire in Sudan to coincide with the Muslim holy month of Ramadan and to allow aid to get to the 25 million people in desperate need of food – the humanitarian response now being at breaking point. All parties were called on to seek a sustainable resolution of the conflict through dialogue. This call seems to have been ignored by the belligerents. On 10 April, Reuters reported that the SAF, equipped with new, more effective Iranian-made drones, was beginning to get the upper hand in Khartoum and suggested that this may have turned the tide in the conflict.

### **Sudan Update:**

On, 15 April, is the first anniversary of the civil war in Sudan which I have summarised in the monthly update attached. To mark the anniversary, Reuters has published a backgrounder which you may find helpful. It is important that we not overlook Sudan as in human terms, if not geopolitical ones (although several key international players have their fingers in the pie), it is far more impactful than the crises involving Israel – e.g. Sudan has a population of 49 million whereas Gaza one of 2.3 million. As Reuters points out, the civil war has wreaked havoc across swathes of the country, unleashed waves of ethnic violence in Darfur, driven millions into extreme hunger and created the world's largest displacement crisis.

### **China and Russia Update**

As background, you will recall that, publicly at least, China has promoted a narrative that it is neutral in the war between Russia and Ukraine and has put itself forward as a mediator, an offer that Ukraine, if not Russia, accepted when it was last offered a couple of months ago. US intelligence, however, seems to be increasingly confirming that China is supporting Russia with

intelligence and military logistics. As to the latter, China claims these involve normal commercial trading, albeit some items traded may have dual uses.

Reuters now reports senior that senior U.S. officials said on Friday (12 Apr 24) that China is backing Russia's war effort in Ukraine by helping Moscow in its biggest military build-up since the Soviet era, by providing drone and missile technology, satellite imagery and machine tools,

However, the Chinese Embassy in the U.S. said it has not provided weaponry to any party, adding that it is "not a producer of or party involved in the Ukraine crisis."

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