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SVI Foresight

SVI Foresight is a monthly electronic journal. It has a multi-disciplinary perspective highlighting contemporary strategic and security studies. The Journal is envisioned to be a collection of policy-oriented articles written by the SVI Research Officers, Visiting Faculty, and professional experts. The objective is to provide the readership with a concise all-around and real-time policy-oriented discourse on contemporary strategic regional and international developments, highlighting their relevance to Pakistan.

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Editor's Note

SVI Foresight for the month of November brings with it another well-timed issue of the SVI electronic journal SVI-Foresight. Covering various contemporary topics of strategic importance, emerging technology, and political discourse happening around the world, it offers opinion-based short commentaries on a number of issues of regional and international importance, and they tend to the global politics and stability.

The issue entails discussion on the arms control and countries that pushes arms race like India, the developments in the Middle East, emerging technologies and their role in the modern warfare, and other latest international developments have all being analyzed from different perspectives by varying scholars.

It is hoped that this issue will help readers in staying updated with the current strategic environment and they will find the analyses useful. The *SVI Foresight* team invites and highly encourages contributions from the security and strategic community in the form of opinion-based short commentaries on contemporary political, security, nuclear, and strategic issues. Any suggestions for further improvements are welcome. Please see [here](#) the copy of the *SVI Foresight* electronic journal. You can find us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) and can also access the SVI [website](#).

Amber Afreen Abid
Editor, SVI Foresight

What does Hamas-Israel War mean for US-China Competition in Middle East?

Hamdan Khan

The vicious cycle of violence between Israel and Palestinians has again resumed. As the clock ticks, it is becoming obvious that the recent eruption of hostilities may not have any precedent concerning the scale of ruthlessness, demolition, and human suffering in more than seven-decade-old conflict. Taking into account the fact that the latest escalation has occurred against the backdrop of the Middle East increasingly becoming an arena for great power competition, the trends spurred by the Hamas-Israel war are likely to have far-reaching implications for the intensifying US-China competition in the region.

The foremost casualty of the Hamas-Israel War is the realization of the broader objectives of the Abraham Accords: 1) normalization of Israel's relationship with some Arab states under the US patronage, which would help preserve the US dominant position in the Middle East against the growing influence of China, Russia, and Iran; 2) the rebranding of US-led economic order in the Middle East to counter China's

deepening economic involvement in the region.

The 2020 Accords paved the way for the normalization of Israel's relationship with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain. Shortly afterward, Morocco and Sudan followed course.

The recent escalation, has prompted fundamental shifts in the regional geopolitical landscape. While the rapprochement with Israel was already a debatable subject for large segments of the Arab population given their emotional attachment to the Palestinian cause, the disturbing images of helpless Palestinians being subjected to horrific carnage and forced displacement by Israel make it extremely hard for some Muslim states to normalize ties with Israel.

Given the imminent ground invasion of Gaza by Israel — which would likely lead to protract urban warfare resulting in terrible suffering for Palestinian civilians and risks dragging other regional actors into the conflict — it will be extremely difficult for any Muslim country normalize ties with Israel.

The Biden administration's attempts to further entrench US-led economic order in the Middle East have also been dealt a jolting blow. By promoting economic interdependence, Washington envisioned stabilizing the relationship between Israel and some Arab states and countering China's expanding economic influence.

A key part of the economic integration plan was the recently announced India-Middle East Europe Economic Corridor (IMEEEEC) — an interconnectivity initiative that aimed to connect India to ports in Europe transiting over-land via the Middle East also linking Israel. The proposed scheme comprised railway links, telecommunication cables, and clean energy corridors linking commercial hubs across the three regions: Asia, Middle East and Europe.

IMEEEEC is considered the US-sponsored rival to China's decade-old Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has been signed by the majority of countries in the Middle East and aims to create a Chinese-centered economic order evoking concerns in Washington. While there were already doubts about the economic viability of IMEEEC, after recent escalation in the Middle East, the fate of IMEEEC lies in the doldrums and there is little probability that

the ambitious project can be realized amid new ground realities of the region.

This is not the only fallout of the recent escalation in the Israel-Palestine conflict for the US-China great power competition. China has been endeavoring to pitch itself as a player in the Israel-Palestine conflict. In June, Xi Jinping hosted the head of the Palestinian Authority (PA) Mahmood Abbas with much pomp and offered to mediate between rival Palestinian factions and facilitate peace talks with Israel.

After the recent escalation, China termed Palestine “at the heart of the Middle East issue” and blamed the “historical injustice” to Palestinians and the denial of their “lawful national rights” as the underlying cause for the recent escalation.

Beijing called for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state for lasting peace in the region and strongly advocated safeguarding the rights of Palestinians. Given that the US position as a mediator in the Israel-Palestine conflict has weakened over time due to its unequivocal support for Israel, China perceives an opportunity to present itself as a backer of Palestinians' rights thereby aiming to expand its geopolitical acceptability in the region at the cost of Washington's regional influence.

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<https://en.wenews.pk/what-does-hamas-israel-war-mean-for-us-china-competition-in-middle-east/>

Hamdan Khan

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The MQ-9B Sea Guardian and the revolution in anti-submarine warfare

Usman Haider

Introduction

Amidst the advancements in artificial intelligence, hypersonic missiles, quantum computing, cyberattacks, and lethal autonomous weapons, there is one aspect that has been overlooked in the current discourse on the revolution in military affairs (RMA) – the new revolution in anti-submarine warfare (ASW). Using uncrewed aerial vehicles (UAVs), such as the MQ-9B Sea Guardian, in anti-submarine roles will significantly alter how ASW is conducted. The shift will be significant, as submarines have been notoriously difficult to find and target.

The recent introduction of General Atomic's MQ-9B Sea Guardian UAV is a clear sign that a revolution in ASW is on the horizon – bringing about what Colin Grey termed 'a radical change in the character or conduct of war' – in this case, the war at sea.¹ The change will make submarines, a platform known for their second-strike capability, far more vulnerable. This will usher in a shift in Strategic Stability that will have an impact on the future conduct and character of war at sea.

General Atomic's MQ-9B Sea Guardian (GA-ASI picture).

The rise of the submarine – from Turtle to Nautilus

Submarines brought their own revolution to maritime warfare when they became part of active naval operations. The first mission was conducted during the American Revolutionary War in 1776 when a US submersible craft named Turtle attempted to sink the Royal Naval Ship HMS Eagle at anchor in New York's port. Since then, submarines have evolved; World War I and World War II made them a force to be reckoned with. However, the Cold War witnessed the true revolution when, in 1954, the USS Nautilus, a nuclear-powered submarine, was launched. Diesel had given way to nuclear. The new technology transformed the submarine from a fast-surface vessel with limited underwater capabilities to a fully submerged vessel capable of prolonged movement and combat without the need to resurface for extended periods.

The propulsion revolution did not stop there. Air-independent propulsion (AIP) technology allowed conventionally powered diesel-electric (SSK) submarines to remain underwater for longer durations than usual. AIP reduced the SSK's need for

frequent access to atmospheric oxygen required by the diesel-electric engines. Masking techniques such as the use of rubber tiles also reduced the noise made by a submarine's propulsion systems; the main factor that makes a submarine vulnerable to enemy sonar detection.

Entry of the Sea Guardian

Now, let's come to the primary question of how the MQ-9B Sea Guardian will bring about a new revolution in ASW. Historically, surface ships, submarines, maritime patrol aircraft, and helicopters have been used to find and neutralise submarines. Fixed wing platforms remain the primary choice; their characteristics of speed, reach and height range allow them to search vast swathes of ocean in a relatively short period of time. However, they have their limitations: limited time on-station due to fuel constraints and human fatigue factors means they cannot provide a persistent surveillance capability. The MQ-9B addresses all these constraints; empowering navies and air forces to conduct their ASW missions effectively and efficiently without any of the limitations of crewed platforms.

The MQ-9B is designed in a specific configuration to target enemy submarines in support of ASW operations. It can carry 80

G or 40 A size sonobuoys on one sortie; a capability previously limited to crewed airborne systems. A sonobuoy is a device used to detect and identify objects moving in the water. Sonobuoys find submarines by either detecting the sounds produced by their propellers and machinery (passive detection) or by bouncing a sonar ping off the surface of the submarine (active detection). In addition to carrying and deploying them, the MQ-9B can simultaneously process incoming data from 32 sonobuoys.

The value of persistence and data links

The MQ-9B also has a longer endurance than crewed aircraft. Depending upon the mission requirements, it can stay airborne for more than thirty hours under any weather conditions. It has a mission radius of 1200 nautical miles and can constantly monitor the ocean for hostile objects. Its onboard tactical data-link¹⁶ allows it to share the required information with other platforms such as the P-8 Poseidon, MH-60 Sea Hawk in real time. These capabilities allow the MQ-9B to loiter and search for submarines over long periods of time and to pass on the information to crewed platforms, surface ships or other UAV's within the network to come and engage the target.

Conclusion

The capabilities of the MQ-9B herald the arrival of a new revolution in anti-submarine warfare. For much of recent naval history, submarines were the only platforms that could remain hidden and avoid detection. However, this is about to change. The MQ-9B will fill existing gaps and deficiencies in current airborne submarine hunters; its persistence in particular will make it far harder for submarines to remain undetected for longer periods.

The MQ-9B will impact future strategic stability by making submarines, once considered a reliable and hard to detect second strike platform, far more vulnerable. This will radically change the strategies and military doctrines of militaries, ultimately affecting the conduct/character of war, thus ushering in a new RMA.

Once fully operational, the MQ-9B will end the submarine's dominance in naval warfare. This is just the beginning, and soon, the MQ-9B will be further upgraded, and the new models will likely be able to simultaneously carry the sonobuoys and depth charges/torpedoes under their wing pylons. The MQ-9B and platforms like it will join the air and naval services of different

nations. The proliferation of this technology will not be restricted to any one country.

A revolution in anti-submarine warfare is on the horizon and requires the immediate attention of military strategists and policymakers. The revolution, led by the MQ-9B, will alter the dynamics of naval warfare for generations to come.

<https://wavellroom.com/2023/11/03/the-mq-9b-sea-guardian-and-the-revolution-in-anti-submarine-warfare/>

Usman Haider

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How the Extended Range BrahMos Changes the India-Pakistan Deterrence Equation

Usman Haider

According to reports from Indian media, in less than a month, the Indian military has tested extended-range (ER) BrahMos missiles from various platforms, including a ground-based launcher, a naval vessel, and a fighter aircraft. The recent tests suggest efforts to enhance the reliability, range, and precision of the BrahMos missile. These are significant developments. Last year an unauthorized missile landed in Pakistan, which raised serious concerns about the missile's functioning and Indian command and control systems.

The tests are being conducted as a preliminary phase before the official induction of improved and upgraded BrahMos missiles into the Indian military. India's efforts to upgrade the cruise missile indicate a strong commitment to enhancing its counter-force capabilities, which has adverse implications for strategic stability in the South Asian region.

The BrahMos is a nuclear-capable supersonic cruise missile designed and built collaboratively between India and Russia. Capable of traveling at speeds of up to Mach

3, it is one of the world's fastest cruise missiles. The BrahMo possesses the capacity to carry a warhead weighing 300 kilograms, encompassing both conventional and nuclear payloads. The missile is the sole system inside the Indian arsenal that possesses the capability to be deployed from several platforms including air, sea, and land.

In addition, the cruise missile exhibits a range of trajectories, such as high, high-low, low, and surface-skim, in contrast to ballistic missiles, which are propelled for only half of their journey and follow a pre-defined parabolic trajectory. A BrahMos missile's trajectory cannot be predicted so easily, which makes it difficult to counter missile defenses.

The recent launches marked the first time that all three ER missiles were tested one after the other in rapid succession. The testing commenced with the firing of an extended-range surface-to-surface land-attack version of the BrahMos from a ground-based launcher on October 10. The range was increased between 450-500 kilometers, from the initial range of 290 kilometers, according to Janes. The new missile was an improved version of the original missile in other ways as well. Besides increasing in range, its accuracy was improved by introducing an active radar seeker.

Indian Army sources revealed to the press that this exercise was part of induction trials. This demonstrates that the new system would be inducted soon and become an operational part of the Indian Army.

Following the ground test, the ER air-launched version of the BrahMos was tested on October 18, from an Indian Air Force Su-30 MKI fighter jet, the only current platform in the IAF arsenal with the capability to launch the BrahMos. The missile tested “was the longer version” of the supersonic BrahMos air-launched system, according to Indian media.

The ER missile has a range between 400-500 kilometers, with the ability to strike targets both at sea and on land. The new capability would allow the IAF to strike targets from standoff ranges and from outside the perimeters of enemy air defenses.

Last came the firing of an ER missile by the Indian Navy from a vessel in the Bay of Bengal on November 1. It was launched from a Rajput-class destroyer, the first in the Indian Navy to integrate with the BrahMos system.

These are several notable takeaways. For the first time in history, the extended-range missiles were tested from across all

platforms. Tests are part of the final trials to make sure that the design, technical parameters, and performance of the different parts of the missile system are properly functioning. Moreover, the multiple tests will help ensure there are no future accidental and unauthorized launches of the missile system. Finally, the timing, synergy, and post-launch statements indicate that the ER missiles are about to enter into service soon.

The enhanced range BrahMos missiles will complicate the India-Pakistan deterrence equation. India already had the temptation to launch a counter-force strike against Pakistan. It is continuously in pursuit of acquiring precision strike systems to effectively execute a counter-force strike. The BrahMos ER is a continuation of this and it will certainly fulfill its existing policy objectives.

Now India will have a strategic capability to strike targets deep inside Pakistan’s territory with a standoff precision-strike weapon that is extremely difficult to intercept because of its maneuverability and high speed. This will adversely affect the current nuclear deterrence dynamics as the new range will bring distant targets within range of the BrahMos, as well as enhance Indian precision strike capabilities.

One might ask: Why does this extended-range BrahMos alter the balance of deterrence between both states, as Pakistan's entire territory is already within range of Indian ballistic missiles? The answer lies in the precision, speed, diversity, and maneuverability of the BrahMos, which makes it different from the rest of the systems currently in service. First, as noted, ballistic missiles follow a pre-defined path, which makes them less useful for targeting mobile ground launchers. Second, they lack precision. The BrahMos' strengths in these areas makes it a perfect counter-force weapon.

Also, it is the only weapon system that can be launched from either a transport erect launcher, naval ship, or fighter jet. Thus, these characteristics make it a first weapon of choice for Indian decision-makers.

The ER BrahMos missile will increase the potential risks of a first strike by India during any future crisis in South Asia, which will undermine the strategic stability in South Asia.

<https://thediplomat.com/2023/11/how-the-extended-range-brahmos-changes-the-india-pakistan-deterrence-equation/>

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Emerging US-China AI arms race undermines their leadership in global standards

Shayan Hassan Jamy

This has truly been the year of artificial intelligence. From the massive leap in generative AI systems such as ChatGPT to the advancements in robotics and military use of AI in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the world has now very much understood that AI is a reality, not a possibility.

It is within this context that the United States is attempting to shape global AI standards. On October 30, US President Joe Biden issued a landmark executive order on “safe, secure and trustworthy AI”. The White House calls the order “the most sweeping actions ever taken to protect Americans from the potential risks of AI systems”.

Under it, AI developers are required to share “safety test results and other critical information” with the US government. This is an interesting development. Direct government oversight of commercial AI systems has been seen in China – which recently introduced its own regulations for generative AI – but was thought to be unlikely in the US.

Other provisions in the executive order include establishing safety standards to be

followed before an AI system can be publicly released, and the labelling of AI-generated content. Exactly how such standards would be implemented by the US, in a country that prides itself on allowing its technology ecosystem the creative freedom to innovate, remains to be seen.

Given the political influence that tech companies in the US possess, it’s likely that these standards would prove merely symbolic. Still, the intent is clear; the US wants to be at the forefront of the global AI debate.

Other major AI initiatives were also announced by US Vice-President Kamala Harris on November 1. Of particular importance was the endorsement of its “Political Declaration on the Responsible Military Use of AI and Autonomy” by 31 countries. The declaration, made in February, aims to “build international consensus around responsible behavior and guide states’ development, deployment, and use of military AI”.

Both Biden’s executive order and Harris’ announcement also emphasised the importance of working with other states to build trustworthy AI. Biden’s order vowed to ensure AI is “interoperable” with its international partners, and to work with its

“allies and partners” to build a “strong international framework to govern the development and use of AI”.

Many of these points were echoed in the first global AI Safety Summit held in Britain from November 1-2. A major development of the summit was the signing of the Bletchley Declaration by over 28 countries, including the US and China. The declaration states that AI should be “designed, developed, deployed, and used in a manner that is safe, in such a way as to be human-centric, trustworthy and responsible”.

China’s endorsement of the declaration is interesting. Speaking on the matter, China’s Vice-Minister of Science and Technology Wu Zhaohui called for “global collaboration to share knowledge and make AI technologies available to the public under open source terms”.

This is not a new stance for China, which recently announced its Global AI Governance Initiative. The initiative calls on states to “enhance information exchange and technological cooperation on the governance of AI”. This is a continuation of China’s strategic thinking on AI, laid out in its 2017 New Generation AI Development Plan. By 2030, China aims to become the global leader

in AI, have a US\$150 billion AI industry, and develop global AI standards.

Biden’s executive order can be seen as a direct response to China’s AI ambitions. Both states recognise the potential for AI to be the most revolutionary technology in human history, and as such, want to lead the global AI debate.

As was the case with nuclear weapons after World War II, states that attained nuclear capability early on were able to set the international standards for their use and proliferation. Likewise, whichever nation is at the forefront of the global AI debate would gain a significant amount of say in any future global order.

Important to note is that, despite the positive developments surrounding global AI standards, both the US and China are focusing on the integration of AI within their respective militaries.

Just last month, the US announced its Replicator initiative, which aims to field autonomous systems “at a scale of multiple thousands” and “in multiple domains, within the next 18 to 24 months”. How the US would ensure safe and trustworthy AI while also aiming to deploy thousands of military AI

systems within the next two years must be questioned.

Ultimately, it seems as if the US and China are in a race to set the global AI standards, and neither is willing to engage directly with the other. The onus of bringing the international community together on AI, then, might rest with other states.

Last week, the first UN resolution on lethal autonomous weapons systems was adopted, with the vote being passed 164-5, with eight abstentions. The resolution stressed the urgent need to address the concerns raised by lethal autonomous weapons systems, including “the risk of an emerging arms race” and “lowering the threshold for conflict and proliferation”.

While this is a positive first step, the resolution needs to be backed up by further action. The unfortunate reality is that, with major states investing heavily in the military applications of AI, it might take a major catastrophe before they properly understand the serious risks associated with AI.

<https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3240690/emerging-us-china-ai-arms-race-undermines-their-leadership-global-standards>

Shayan Hassan Jamy

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Why Israel's Ground Invasion of the Gaza Strip Is Bound to Fail?

Syed Raza Abbas

In his landmark paper “Why big nations lose small wars?” Andrew Mack argued that asymmetry in strategy, technology, and national will create an Achilles heel for great powers. An *asymmetric war* is one where there is considerable disparity between the two contending parties in terms of technology and resources. To meet those shortcomings, the weaker group wages an asymmetric war and protracts the conflict to exhaust the bigger group’s resources and will to fight. The U.S.-Vietnam War (1965-1975) was the perfect example of those conflicts. The North Vietnamese communist guerrillas protracted the conflict and waged tunnel warfare against a much larger and superior adversary, the U.S., and eventually, Americans were forced to withdraw from Vietnam without achieving what they intended at the time of the invasion. A second case study is of the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan (2001-2021), where, initially, Americans were successful in toppling the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

“MULLAH UMAR, THE FOUNDING FATHER OF THE TALIBAN, FAMOUSLY

SAID TO THE AMERICANS, “YOU MAY HAVE WATCHES, BUT WE HAVE THE TIME.”

Taliban fighters retreated into the mountains of Afghanistan. They used the rugged geography of Afghanistan to their favor by waging asymmetric warfare to exhaust the American resources and will to fight. Eventually, Americans withdrew from Afghanistan in August 2021, and the Taliban took back control of Kabul once again. Similarly, Hamas, the Palestinian insurgents who have been fighting against the Israelis since their inception in 1987 during the first Intifada (Palestinian uprising), is using similar tactics of asymmetric warfare. Hamas launched Operation Al-Aqsa Flood on October 7 against Israel and, penetrated deep into the Israeli settlements near the Gaza Strip, and stormed some of the Israeli forward operating bases. Since then, the Israelis have been raining missiles and bombs on the Gaza Strip ruthlessly with airstrikes, mostly killing civilians. Hamas is still very much intact and is prolonging the conflict to exhaust Israelis and make them commit the error of invading Gaza by ground.

Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) have surrounded the Gaza Strip, and there are reports and official statements from the Israeli side that the ground invasion of the

Gaza Strip has begun. The ground invasion of Gaza is easier said than done because, on the surface, the Gaza Strip is only 41 km in longitude and 11-12 km in latitude, but the real problem lies beneath the surface of Gaza. IDF calls those Hamas tunnels as “Metro.” It is estimated that this Hamas Metro is spread over the entire Gaza Strip and is approximately 500 km long zig-zag of tunnels. The depth of those tunnels is 50 meters (150 ft.) at some locations and is made up of concrete. Hamas utilizes those tunnels for different purposes, which include as a shelter during Israeli airstrikes, storage of supplies, manufacturing Qassam and Grad rockets, and smuggling goods from Egypt into Gaza.

“THOSE TUNNELS ARE THE SOLE LIFELINE FOR THE PEOPLE OF GAZA AS THEY ARE LIVING UNDER THE BLOCKADE OF ISRAEL, WHICH CONTROLS LAND, AIR, AND SEA. HAMAS HAS BUILT PAVED ROADS AND TRACKS INSIDE THOSE TUNNELS, WHICH ARE USED FOR TRANSPORTING GOODS, FUEL, SUPPLIES, ROCKETS, AND FIGHTERS FROM ONE LOCATION TO ANOTHER.”

Israelis have reportedly used bunker-buster munitions against Hamas positions in northwestern Gaza in this recent conflict, but

are yet to be confirmed. Bunker Busters are pretty powerful and lethal munitions that can penetrate deep into the ground before detonating and are capable of destroying buried, hardened targets inside the earth. Bunker Busters were first used in World War II by Allied forces against German underground rocket facilities. Israelis have GBU-28 laser-guided bunker-buster munitions in their arsenal. GBU-28 is a 5000-pound powerful bomb carried by a fighter jet, and reportedly, it can penetrate 60 feet into the earth and 10 feet into the hardened concrete structure. The current arsenal of Israeli bunker-busters may not prove as useful against Hamas tunnels because those tunnels are built deeper and more robust than the penetration capacity of Israeli bunker-busters. In 2021, Israel requested the US to procure a newer and more lethal version of GBU-72, but the deal has yet to go through. It is important to note that, according to the Geneva Convention, using bunker-busters in densely populated areas is unlawful. Israelis have been violating the Geneva Convention with their use of bunker-buster munitions in Gaza in 2014, 2019, and 2021 in their conflict with Hamas.

Moreover, Israel is already under pressure from the north by Hezbollah since the start of this conflict. Hezbollah may not have the

capability to launch a ground invasion of Israel because of its shortcomings. Still, they are very much capable of hurting and engaging Israel on the Northern front to deflect its military might from Gaza. To this date, Hezbollah has been successful in diverting the IDF resources from Gaza by continuously attacking Israel from the North. Israel has reportedly called 360000 reservists to duty, and a significant chunk of those reservists are deployed on the Lebanese front to counter the threat of Hezbollah and to deter the likely ground invasion of Israel by Hezbollah. Israel has also evacuated 28 settlements near its border with Lebanon, and those settlements are now housing IDF reservists in a bid to prepare for a possible war with Hezbollah.

“IRAN AND ITS PROXIES OPERATING OUT OF LEBANON, SYRIA, AND IRAQ ARE NOT IN A POSITION TO INVADE ISRAEL BY GROUND DUE TO THE ASYMMETRY IN MILITARY MIGHT UNLESS A REGIONAL ALLIANCE TAKES SHAPE AND A SIGNIFICANT POWER LIKE RUSSIA STEPS IN.”

What they can do and have been doing since the start of this conflict is pressuring the Israelis and Americans. Shia militias are continuously targeting American assets and bases in Syria and Iraq in a bid to refrain

Americans from supporting Israel militarily and make them agree to the ceasefire.

The bottom line is that Hamas may appear to be a rag-tag militia in a small geographical zone, but they have learned the art of fighting below the strength of a bigger adversary. Israelis are facing stiff resistance in the Gaza Strip, and their casualties’ are rising with each passing day. The rise in IDF casualties would increase the public pressure on the Israeli government to put an end to this invasion and call back their troops. The current Israeli regime led by Benjamin Netanyahu is already under pressure from the liberal and opposing political factions of Israel. The stiff resistance of Hamas and war-opposing voices within Israel, coupled with continuous attacks from Iranian-backed resistance groups, would make life difficult for Israelis to make the ground invasion of the Gaza Strip a success story.

<https://stratheaia.com/why-israels-ground-invasion-of-the-gaza-strip-is-bound-to-fail/>

Syed Raza Abbas

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Maldives Presidential Elections: A setback for Indian Regional Aspirations

M. Abu Baker

Dr. Mohamed Muizzu, the mayor of the capital Male, won the Maldivian Presidential election on September 30, 2023 after a second run-off against the incumbent Ibrahim Mohamed Solih. This was a significant development in the background of ongoing Sino-Indian geo-political competition to exert influence in strategically located Maldives. Solih who was first elected president in 2018 was battling accusations by Muizzu that he had allowed India an unrestricted presence in the country. Muizzu promised that if he won the presidency, he would remove Indian troops from the Maldives.

Moreover, he vowed to balance the country's trade relations which he claimed were heavily in India's favor. In an exclusive interview with BBC, the president-elect reiterated that "We don't want any foreign military boots on Maldivian soil ... I promised this to the people of the Maldives and I will live up to my promise from day one." This development was seen as a setback to Indian interests, if its troops are forced to leave. Additionally, his presidential victory was portrayed as win for pro-China camp.

However, he denied this by saying "I am a pro-Maldives person. For me, Maldives comes first, our independence comes first ... I am not pro or against any country." The Progressive alliance (a coalition of the People's National Congress (PNC) and the Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM)) that backed Muizzu favors close ties with China and in the past depicted Mr. Solih's "India-first policy" as a threat to Maldives security and Sovereignty. Muizzu himself has praised Chinese infrastructure projects and investments in the past. These all collectively gave the impression that he is not anti-China.

This electoral outcome is not just a domestic matter but is embedded within the complex geopolitical competition between India & China. The surprise victory of Muizzu, from the Progressive Alliance sent ripples across the South Asia, notably impacting India's self-perceived role as a regional security provider. Besides this, the US indirect support of India's regional ambitions and efforts to restrict China's rising influence also faced a setback with this result. Moreover, if we look at the larger canvas of global power competition, the Maldives owing to its strategic location has emerged as a vital player.

It is a place where major great powers cast their gaze. They are striving to secure greater

influence and trying to undermine their rivals by offering incentives. China, the regional influencer is increasing its footprint in the island nation to counter Indian dominance while also advancing its global military goals. Chinese side exerts its influence through diplomatic engagement and economic aid. Apart from that, China considers the Maldives a key component in its efforts to strengthen its maritime interests in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) while also aiming to maintain regional peace and stability.

Furthermore, it is important to highlight that the pro-China inclination in Maldivian foreign policy initially took place during the presidency of Abdullah Yameen, spanning from 2013 to 2018. During this time period, China had increased its economic assistance, established direct flights, signed Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in 2017, and signed certain military assistance agreements. In addition to that, both states collaborated in most significant areas like Climate change and tourism. Both of these domains were integral in shaping Maldivian foreign policy and diplomatic relations. The above mentioned developments shows the significance of the Maldives within China's Maritime Silk Road (MSR) initiative, an exemplary model of interaction between large and small states,

and China's multi-faceted strategy to strengthen its interests within the nation.

Many analysts alleged that historically, the Maldives adhered to an "India-first" policy. This signified seeking the approval of India, before making certain decisions. However, the warm relations that India and the Maldives had maintained and nurtured over the decades suffered a setback during Yameen's presidency. The 2018 elections proved to be a turning point; Solih a pro-India candidate came to power and vowed to rebuild strong relations with India. Both India and Maldives have worked to align their respective policies, with India's "Neighborhood First" approach under Modi government and Maldives "India First" approach uniting under the broader framework of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region). However, it appears that president-elect Muizzu is not in favor of "India First" foreign policy. His campaign prominently featured the slogan "India Out".

The presence of Indian military personnel in the Maldives is the main issue and the opposition side used it to criticize the government. This issue also highlight that Maldivians are cautious about external involvement. New-Delhi as part of its effort to strengthen defense cooperation had provided two Dhruv helicopters and a

Dornier aircraft to Maldives to help with sea surveillance and medical evacuations. Moreover, it had given a fast patrol vessel along with a landing craft assault ship to the Maldivian National Defense Forces (MNDF). In addition to that, there were around 75 Indian military personnel in Maldives to assist the MNDF in maintaining and operating these aircraft. This in fact led to the opposition parties coming out with the “India Out” campaign.

While 75 troops might seem small, it holds significance as the small nation prefers not to host any foreign troops. Recently, Muizzu told Reuters in an online interview that “The focus is not on the actual number of military personnel here, it is on not having any at all in the Maldives. We will discuss with the Indian government and find out a way forward for this”. The statement from the President-elect strongly indicates that the days for Indian troops stationed in the Maldives are limited. On the other hand, if Muizzu succeeds in this attempt, it will be a victory for the “India Out” campaign. Moreover, the Chinese side will likely try to

lure the Maldives by offering economic incentives and developmental opportunities to bring the South Asian nation into its sphere of influence.

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