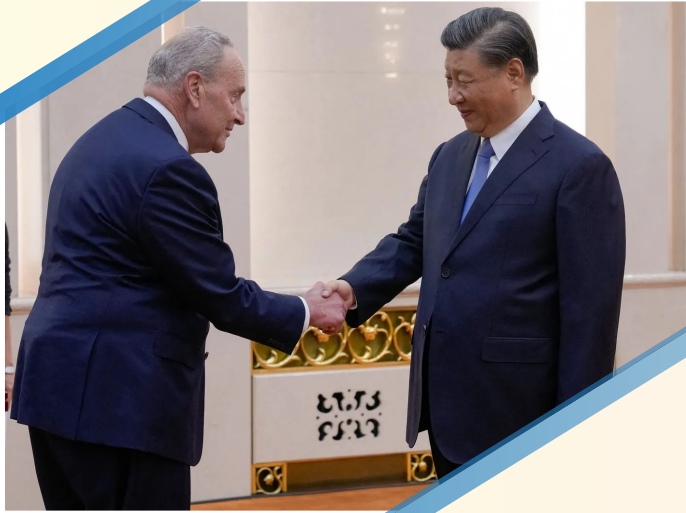


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Indo-Pacific Insights

CGS Centre for Governance Studies



**A Bi-Weekly
Roundup of Key Events**

Will the Hamas-Israel war change the Middle East?

Shamsuddoza Sajen

The recent conflict between Hamas and Israel has reverberated across the Middle East, creating far-reaching implications that extend beyond the immediate crisis. The recent years of progress in forging ties between Israel and Arab nations, notably Saudi Arabia, appear to have been thrown into disarray. This situation is not limited to regional consequences but also carries global significance. To gain a deeper understanding of the stakes involved following the Hamas-Israel conflict, let's closely examine the situation.

October 2

China-funded bullet train unveiled in Indonesia



Indonesia inaugurated Southeast Asia's first bullet train, connecting its two largest cities, following a series of delays. The \$7.3 billion high-speed rail project, part of China's Belt and Road initiative, was predominantly funded by Chinese state-owned companies. The Jakarta-Bandung high-speed train boasting a speed of 350 kilometers per hour.

Indonesia, Southeast Asia's largest economy, is actively seeking investment from its biggest trade partner, China. A meeting in July between Indonesian President Joko Widodo and Chinese President Xi Jinping led to various projects, notably a multi-billion dollar Chinese glass factory on Rempang Island in the Riau Islands Archipelago. However, this initiative faced strong opposition from indigenous islanders concerned about their villages being demolished for the "Eco-City" development.

October 5

Russia hands over uranium for Bangladesh's nuclear power plant

Russian President Vladimir Putin commended the Rooppur nuclear power plant as a testament to the enduring partnership between Russia and Bangladesh. During a virtual ceremony in Ishwardi, where uranium was handed over, Putin emphasized the project's importance for Bangladesh's energy and economic stability. Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina also participated in the event remotely. The Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant, with a 2,400MW capacity, is under construction by Russia's Rosatom, with the first 1,200MW unit set to begin operations next year

October 7

Israel-Hamas war



Palestinian militant groups, led by Hamas, launched an attack into Israel from the Gaza Strip. Israel formally declared war on Hamas the following day. Prior to this, tensions had been escalating in the long-standing Israeli-Palestinian conflict due to clashes at Al-Aqsa mosque and in areas like Gaza and Jenin, resulting in hundreds of casualties.

The conflict saw a rocket barrage of over 3,000 missiles targeting Israel, with Palestinian militants infiltrating Israeli territory. Tragically, at least 260 Israelis were killed at a music festival, and hostages were taken to the Gaza Strip.

Israel responded with airstrikes in Gaza, impacting civilian and military infrastructure. Many Palestinians were internally displaced, worsening an already dire humanitarian situation due to supply blockades.

International reactions to the conflict varied, with Western nations condemning Hamas, while other countries and Hamas themselves attributed the escalation to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. Calls for de-escalation were widespread. Additional clashes occurred between Hezbollah, Palestinian militants in Lebanon, and Israeli forces.

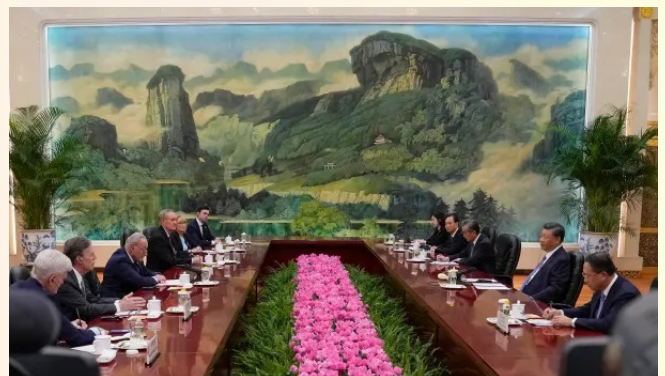
Herat earthquake



A devastating 6.3 magnitude earthquake hit Herat Province in western Afghanistan, resulting in over 2,400 fatalities and extensive destruction. Three days later, on October 10, a 5.1 magnitude aftershock occurred. Subsequently, on October 11, another 6.3 magnitude earthquake struck, compounding the ongoing crisis. The earthquakes have collectively affected thousands of people, causing injuries, fatalities, and significant damage. Humanitarian organizations have been actively involved in providing aid, rescue, and relief efforts to support the affected population during this challenging time.

October 9

U.S. Senators Visit Beijing



U.S. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer expressed gratitude for a stronger statement from China condemning Hamas's killing and kidnapping of Israeli and foreign civilians during a bipartisan congressional visit to Beijing. Schumer led a delegation of six senators, including three Democrats and three Republicans, in an effort to stabilize U.S.-China relations, which have deteriorated in recent years over trade, Taiwan, human rights, and other issues.

The visit marked the first by U.S. lawmakers since 2019. The meetings, including one with President Xi Jinping, appeared amicable and raised the possibility of Xi attending the upcoming Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in San Francisco for a face-to-face meeting with U.S. President Joe Biden.

While Chinese position towards the U.S. has somewhat softened at the top level, anti-American sentiment remains prevalent in officialdom and state media, leaving open questions about China's evolving stance amid ongoing economic challenges.

Pacific Partnership 2023 Arrives in Papua New Guinea

Pacific Partnership, the annual multinational humanitarian and disaster relief preparedness mission, has arrived in Papua New Guinea on October 9, marking the largest mission of its kind in the Indo-Pacific. This year's mission, supported by nations such as Australia, Canada, Chile, Japan, Republic of Korea, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States, aims to enhance disaster response capabilities and strengthen bonds with Papua New Guinea through tailored activities in engineering, disaster response, public health, and outreach events. The mission will feature medical care, repairs at a local school, knowledge exchanges, and community engagements, fostering cooperation for a stable and secure Indo-Pacific region.

October 10

Chinese Coast Guard Chases Philippine Navy Ship

Tensions in the South China Sea escalated as China's coast guard claimed to have chased a Philippine navy ship away from a disputed area near the Scarborough Shoal. China asserted that the Philippine ship had ignored warnings to leave. The Philippines' military is investigating the incident and views it as possibly Chinese propaganda rather than a direct confrontation.

October 11

China frees Australian journalist

Chinese authorities have released Australian journalist Cheng Lei after more than three years in detention. Cheng, a former anchor for Chinese state broadcaster CGTN, was detained in August 2020 and formally arrested in February 2021 on charges of "supplying state secrets overseas." Her closed-door trial strained Australia-China relations. Cheng's release is seen as a positive development, with Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese considering a visit to China later this year. The case had been a point of tension amid strained relations between the two countries due to various issues, including calls for a COVID-19 origin investigation.

Myanmar-Russia Nuclear Power Plant Deal



Russia and Myanmar's junta have signed an agreement to construct a small nuclear power plant as Myanmar faces ongoing energy shortages. The memorandum of understanding (MoU) was signed by Russia's state-run nuclear corporation Rosatom and Myanmar's Ministry of Science and Technology at Russian Energy Week. The junta has sought Moscow's assistance in addressing the country's fuel and electricity crisis. Nuclear cooperation began with junta leader Min Aung Hlaing's visit to Russia in July, and Myanmar opened a nuclear technology center with Russian support in February. Human rights groups have raised concerns about the regime's handling of nuclear technology.

Will the Hamas-Israel war change the Middle East?

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The immediate future



It currently appears that Israel is escalating toward a full-scale war in Gaza. This escalation entails a ground invasion of Gaza, the targeting of Hamas bases, the elimination of Hamas leadership, and unfortunately, significant collateral damage involving civilian casualties and property destruction.

However, the long-term military occupation of the area is a separate matter, as maintaining such an occupation could become prohibitively costly. This is evident from Israel's previous withdrawal from the entire Gaza Strip in 2005 for similar reasons.

Can Netanyahu survive the Hamas's attack?



The recent attack has dealt a significant blow to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has held power for more than 16 years. Criticism has arisen regarding his national security approach and his oversight of the country's intelligence and military,

which may have played a role in the surprise attack. Particularly, his policy of appeasing Hamas to weaken the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah and Palestinian society has faced strong condemnation, raising questions about his leadership and crisis management.

However, this crisis could also offer Netanyahu an opportunity to regain his position, especially in light of the nationwide protests against his efforts to undermine the Israeli judiciary a few months ago. He has already formed a unity government involving several opposition members and placed the country on a war footing. It's evident that a desire for violent retribution is currently uniting Israeli society, albeit tentatively. Netanyahu's future hangs in the balance, with much depending on how he manages the crisis.

A broader regional conflict?

The escalation of the conflict in Gaza has raised concerns about the potential for a broader regional conflict involving Iran and its allies.

While Iran has officially denied issuing a direct order for the attack, it's highly unlikely that Hamas would have acted without Iranian approval. Reports of a meeting between Iranian, Hamas, and Hezbollah leaders prior to the attack suggest a coordinated effort, consistent with Iran's history of supporting groups like Hamas by providing funding, weapons, and training. On October 12, 2023, Iran's Foreign Minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, has expressed concerns that the Israel-Hamas conflict may escalate into a broader regional war. He warned of the potential for new battlefronts to emerge as Israel intensifies its attacks on the Gaza Strip. Amir-Abdollahian conveyed these worries during a visit to Lebanon, where he met with leaders of Hezbollah.

Lebanese armed group Hezbollah, in a show of solidarity with Hamas, launched rockets at the northern Israeli border, raising the troubling prospect of their direct involvement in the conflict. Israel is concerned about opening a new front with Hezbollah, which is armed with a substantial missile arsenal and poses a more formidable threat than Hamas. Recent clashes have resulted in casualties on both sides. It's worth noting that a month-long war between Hezbollah and Israel broke out in 2006, ending in a stalemate and a tense detente between the two sides.

Currently, the US is actively working to prevent the conflict from spilling over into a regional level. According to Reuters, the US is engaging with its partners who have channels to Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran. The primary objectives are to persuade Hamas to cease its attacks, secure the release of hostages, prevent Hezbollah from entering the conflict, and keep Iran from further involvement.

In a defensive measure, the US has deployed an American aircraft carrier to the Eastern Mediterranean to deter any potential threat from Iran.

Notably, the conflict has prompted Saudi Arabia to engage with Iran to prevent a wider surge in violence across the region. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman had his first phone conversation with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, soon after the attack. This willingness to engage, despite differing approaches, is a unique development when compared to other regional conflicts, such as those in Yemen and Syria.

A battle ground for global powers, again?

Experts have described the situation in Israel as a failure of the current U.S. Middle East policy. It's true that there has been a noticeable shift in U.S. focus away from the Middle East since the Obama administration, with its "Asian pivot." The Biden administration has, more than ever, concentrated on containing China and implementing the Indo-Pacific strategy, which clearly reflects this shift. The U.S. has also seen a loss of control over its traditional allies in the region, especially Saudi Arabia. For many, the recent Hamas attack could serve as a wake-up call for U.S. policymakers and create pressure for increased U.S. involvement in the region.

In recent years, China has expanded its influence in the Middle East, mediating reconciliation between traditional rivals Iran and Saudi Arabia and welcoming them, along with the UAE, into the BRICS group. China has also cultivated a deeper relationship with Israel.

However, the Hamas-Israel conflict presents a dilemma for China. While full-throated condemnation of Hamas is expected by Israel, taking a strong stance risks alienating its Arab and Iranian partners. Finding the right balance in this complex situation presents a significant diplomatic challenge for China. It appears that, at least for the time being, Beijing's Middle East policy is paralyzed by the ongoing war.

China's primary ally, Russia, stands to benefit from the new Middle East crisis as it diverts Western attention and resources away from Ukraine. Meanwhile, the calculated statements from Putin and his team indicate Moscow's efforts to foster relations with both Israel and the Palestinians. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov emphasized the need for a "balanced approach" and dialogue with both parties, positioning Russia as a potential mediator. With its close ties to Iran and active role in the Syrian war, Russia is likely to leverage the Hamas-Israel conflict to its advantage.

Israel-Saudi rapprochement, a distant possibility!

Under the Biden administration, the United States witnessed strained relations with its traditional allies, Saudi Arabia and Israel. President Biden condemned the killing of Jamal Khashoggi and expressed concerns about the Israeli government's actions, particularly its increasing authoritarianism.

However, in recent times, there appeared to be efforts to improve relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia, with the United States mediating and pushing for a potential rapprochement between the two nations. Progress in that direction seemed promising, and it appeared that a resolution was within reach.

The recent conflict between Hamas and Israel has thrown a wrench into these plans. Saudi Arabia has decided to put the U.S.-backed plans for normalizing ties with Israel on hold. This move signals a swift reevaluation of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy priorities, as the war escalates between Israel and Hamas. Ultimately, the ongoing war has exposed the futility of attempting to bring peace to the Middle East while sidelining the Palestinian issue.

The halted peace deal between Saudi Arabia and Israel held the potential to establish a pivotal transport hub connecting India, the Middle East, and Europe. Such a hub might have paved the way for deeper macroeconomic integration across Eurasia, a development contrary to the interests of Moscow and Beijing.

The future of Palestine issue

While restraining Israel from seeking military revenge may be challenging, it is evident that a military solution won't provide a lasting resolution to the Israel-Palestine conflict. Israel's approach of confining Palestinians to Gaza and the West Bank, combined with periodic military operations to combat terrorism, has only fueled resentment and further violence. This is exacerbated by the presence of a relatively far-right Israeli government openly supporting West Bank settlements and undermining potential peace efforts.

The global community has been calling for an end to the 75 years of injustice faced by Palestinians, with the two-state solution widely seen as the most viable option. Even China and Russia support a two-state solution. However, many Israeli leaders view the two-state solution politically precarious. They find it more expedient to annex smaller territories, foster alliances with Arab nations, and sidestep the underlying issue. Conversely, a one-state approach risks potentially diminishing the Jewish population to a minority in their own nation.

On the flip side of death and destruction, the recent attack also offers an opportunity to rekindle efforts to find a solution, one that the world should not let slip away.

Contributors

Shamsuddoza Sajen

Journalist and Researcher
sajen1986@gmail.com

Mohammad Nihad Nowsher

Research Assistant at Centre for Governance Studies (CGS)
nihad@cgs-bd.com

Bahauddin Ahmed

Digital Coordinator at Centre for Governance Studies (CGS)
bahauddin@cgs-bd.com



45/1, New Eskaton, 2nd Floor, Dhaka 1000, Bangladesh
Email: ed@cgs-bd.com, Web: www.cgs-bd.com