



Global Intelligence Summary

REPORTING PERIOD: 13 OCT - 20 OCT 2023



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Week 44: 13 October – 20 October 2023

Executive Summary

- It is **almost certain** that the Israel-Hamas conflict will continue to result in civilian casualties in both **Gaza** and **Israel**, with an Israeli ground offensive into Gaza looking increasingly **likely**.
- In **Western Europe** there remains a **realistic possibility** that further terror related incidents occur in response to the ongoing conflict in the Middle East.
- As the Republican party continually fails to nominate a Speaker of the House in the **United States**, political volatility and polarisation is **likely** to increase, potentially leading to a government shutdown.
- It is **highly likely** that **Argentina** experiences an extremely tight election on 22 October, with right-wing libertarian Javier Milei **highly likely** the only candidate with any chance of victory in the first round.



Figure 1: Significant activity identified during the current reporting period

AMER

- 1 US:** House of Representatives remains without a speaker
- 2 Venezuela:** Government and opposition strike election deal
- 3 Ecuador:** Daniel Noboa wins snap presidential election

EMEA

- 4 Western Europe:** Israel-Hamas linked attacks decrease security situation
- 5 Poland:** Anti-PiS coalition looks to unseat ruling party and realign with EU
- 6 Israel and Palestinian Territories:** IDF ground offensive looming and chances of wider conflict unresolved
- 7 Iraq:** US military bases targeted in drone strikes
- 8 Uganda:** Several attacks conducted by IS linked group

APAC

- 9 Afghanistan:** Taliban seek entry into China's Belt and Road Initiative
- 10 India:** Supreme court refuses to rule in favour of same-sex marriages
- 11 China:** Putin praises Belt and Road Initiative and pitches Arctic route



Americas (AMER)

United States:

Republican infighting continues to leave the House of Representatives without a Speaker.

Infighting within the Republican party has again led to another week passing without an elected Speaker of the United States' House of Representatives. In the first vote on 17 October, Representative Jim Jordan, the eventual Republican nomination, received 200 votes, 17 short of the number needed for a majority. The following day, Jordan tried again but instead lost a vote, receiving 199 in total. This led Republicans to contemplate other options, with it widely reported that they were considering giving increased power to Representative Patrick McHenry, who has been temporarily filling the Speaker's chair. Jordan listened to and deliberated this option on 19 October, before ruling it out and pressing on with a third vote on 20 October, which he is widely expected to lose again.

Assessment: Republicans control the House by a narrow 221-212 margin, with a candidate for speaker needing to receive 217 votes to be elected, which Jordan has failed to secure. Jordan, a co-founder of the far-right House Freedom Caucus and a staunch ally of former President Donald Trump, faces a lack of support from a substantial portion of moderate Republicans. These individuals often collaborate with Democrats on legislation, emphasising the need for compromise, and are likely hesitant to back his campaign. The 200 votes Jordan received in the first round was the lowest tally former Speaker Kevin McCarthy ever received when trying to get elected in January 2023 and this contextualises the challenge Jordan faces to be elected Speaker of the House, making the outcome increasingly unlikely at this time. Meanwhile, the Democrats have suggested they are willing to negotiate with Republican's to find a candidate that would enjoy the backing of both parties. Whilst this is realistically possible, it is more likely that this is a publicity stunt as they know it is highly unlikely that the Republicans would accept such an offer. If Jordan continues to fail in these votes, the most likely next step is a new Republican candidate emerges and attempts to be nominated. The House now entering its 17th day without a Speaker will almost certainly expedite the process too. The current situation has left Congress incredibly distracted as the United States likely desires to effectively respond to pressing issues such as the current Israel-Hamas war and military aid requests from Ukraine. Failure to nominate a speaker is increasing the chances of a government shutdown which could send Congress into legislative paralysis.

Venezuela:

The government and opposition strike election deal paving the way for sanctions relief.

On 17 October, Venezuela's government and its political opposition announced that they had agreed to electoral guarantees for 2024 presidential elections, though the deal did not lift bans on opposition candidates barred from public office. The following day, in response to the deal, the United States government eased sanctions on Venezuela's oil sector, issuing a new general license that allowed the South American country to produce and export oil to its chosen markets for the next six months without limitation. The United States Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, welcomed the deal but has given Venezuelan president, Nicolas Maduro, until the end of November to begin making tangible concessions. If such progress is not made by that time, the relief measures will start to be withdrawn.

Assessment: Venezuela has been in a political and economic crisis since Maduro won the 2018 election which was widely considered a sham. Subsequently, Washington imposed multiple sanctions on the country, including banning Petroleum of Venezuela (PDVSA), the state-owned oil company, from exporting oil to its chosen markets. The situation had been in stalemate until

the meeting between the government and opposition this last reporting period, the first between the two sides in 11 months. The sanctions relief offered by the United States is an extensive rollback, and is more expansive than many were expecting, highly likely indicating Washington's commitment to reaching a deal. Indeed, under Biden's premiership, instead of isolating Venezuela, Washington has been engaging with Caracas on issues such as energy, immigration and political reform, with the United States likely fearing isolation would push Venezuela into China's and Russia's sphere of influence. Venezuela is estimated to have the largest oil reserves in the world, and oil makes up 95 per cent of its exports. The easing of sanctions will enable Venezuela to export oil to more countries and will likely result in an increased demand for Venezuelan oil. This will begin to remove some of the economic difficulties the country faces as the state budget will increase allowing for greater government spending, which will likely focus on socio-economic issues. There is a realistic possibility that the United States is looking to boost global flows of oil to alleviate high prices caused by sanctions on Russia. Whilst it is unlikely Venezuela's exports could immediately offset the loss of Russian production, the potential exists with long-term investment and sustained sanctions relief. Politically, the agreement states that the presidential election will take place as scheduled in the second half of next year and international observers will oversee the vote. These steps towards democratic elections were critical for the United States to offer sanctions relief, but Washington has stated that all relief is reversible if Maduro fails to meet his election commitments, including undoing the disbarring of potential presidential opponents. The economic improvements that are highly likely to be witnessed as a result of the sanctions relief will likely make Maduro comply with Washington's request, meaning that there is a realistic possibility that Venezuela witnesses relatively democratic elections in 2024 amid the backdrop of an improving economy.

Ecuador:

Centre-right businessman Daniel Noboa wins snap presidential election.

Businessman Daniel Noboa won Ecuador's presidential election on 15 October, meaning that the 35-year-old will become the South American country's youngest ever president when he assumes office in November 2023. Centre-right Noboa received 51.84 percent of the vote, with his opponent, leftist Luisa Gonzalez, receiving 48.16 percent; Gonzalez accepted defeat on election night, reiterating her commitment to democracy. Ecuador's next election was not scheduled until 2025, but the vote was called early by outgoing President Guillermo Lasso so that he could avoid potential impeachment, on charges he disregarded warnings of embezzlement at a state company. Noboa will now govern for 17 months until the scheduled 2025 elections, where he will be able to stand for a second term.

Assessment: Until the next scheduled presidential election in May 2025, President-elect Noboa's political agenda is almost certain to be dominated by the economy and internal security. Ecuador's economy has struggled since the COVID-19 pandemic, motivating many thousands of Ecuadorians to migrate. Noboa campaigned on rebuilding the country's economy and meeting the needs of the population, whilst at the same time promising to balance Ecuador's foreign debt obligations, and markets have initially responded positively to his victory. However, it is unlikely in his truncated 17-month premiership that Noboa will be able to secure any tangible reduction in deficits or accumulation of debt. Unless Noboa agrees a debt restructuring with lenders, the current economic climate is likely to sustain. The internal security situation in Ecuador will also almost certainly take much of Noboa's bandwidth. Fuelled by drug-related crime, the country's homicide rate quadrupled between 2018 and 2022, with 2023 on course to increase further. Then in August 2023 during the presidential campaign, anti-corruption presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio was fatally shot. Security quickly became voters' number one issue and Noboa's hardline promise to tackle sharply rising crime with a new intelligence unit, tactical weapons for security forces, prison ships to house the country's most dangerous convicts, and a beefed-up presence at ports and airports, highly likely contributed to his eventual victory. Noboa is likely to have greater chance of impacting the security situation than the economy at this time, and it is therefore likely that he will prioritise this issue as he almost certainly looks to get re-elected in

2025. Noboa will however face issues in establishing his agenda as his National Democratic Action party holds only 13 seats out of 137 in the National Assembly; Gonzalez's Revolution Ciudadana party is the largest bloc, with 48 seats. There is a realistic possibility therefore that the country's political volatility continues due to political paralysis at the legislative level. Ultimately, Noboa has little time to advance any large policy goals before the next election, and with a hostile assembly and economic uncertainty, any big investment projects would be difficult to implement. Therefore, it is highly likely that Noboa will pursue quick wins regarding Ecuador's internal security and crime to appease social and political pressures.

AMER Forecast. Argentina will hold presidential elections on 22 October, with three candidates currently in a tight race. It is likely that the first round will prove inconclusive, and a second-round runoff will be required, however it is looking increasingly likely that right-wing libertarian Javier Milei could ultimately become president. This will present further difficulties in the long term with Milei highly likely to bring unorthodox policies. On the same day, opposition primaries will take place in Venezuela following the government and opposition signing an agreement towards democratic elections. The opposition are highly likely to consolidate around one candidate, presenting a genuine challenge to President Nicolas Maduro. In Brazil, the release of a draft congressional report that recommends former President Jair Bolsonaro is charged with attempting to stage a coup; whilst not surprising, this will almost certainly lead to political volatility as a prosecution commences, with large demonstrations possible. Disruption should also be expected in the next reporting period in Santiago, Chile as the city hosts the Pan American Games, the America's largest multi-sport event. It is estimated that 1.1 million spectators will visit the various venues, including around 90,000 tourists, bringing with it pressure on public services, most notably transport.

Violent incidents in response to the Israel-Hamas war are highly likely to occur across the region, with the greatest threat in North America. The continued risk of terror attacks and aggravated assaults remains in place for both Jewish and Islamic communities. In Haiti, the security situation remains severe. The emboldening of gangs has been witnessed this last reporting period with the Secretary-General of Haiti's High Transition Council (HCT), Anthony Virginie Saint-Pierre, being kidnapped. Expect the situation to remain desperate until at least an international taskforce enters.

Hurricane Norma, currently located off Mexico's Pacific coast, is transiting toward the Baja California peninsula. Norma is currently a Category 4 hurricane, and whilst it will likely weaken in strength throughout 20 October, it will highly likely bring significant disruption to coastal areas over the weekend.





Europe, Middle East & Africa (EMEA)

Western Europe:

Heightened security in Western Europe in response to Israel-Hamas linked terror attacks.

Throughout the reporting period France has adopted a number of security measures in order to counter terrorism in the country. On 13 October, a teacher was killed, and three others were injured, in an Islamist-inspired attack at a school in Arras in northern France. France has deployed up to 7,000 soldiers to the streets of major cities, conducted heightened security patrols, and evacuated the Louvre Museum, Palace of Versailles, and Gare de Lyon train station in response to a series of bomb alerts. The French government cited a “jihadist atmosphere” linked to events in the Middle East as the reason for increased security measures and noted a marked increase in antisemitic incidents. France has also banned pro-Palestinian protests and has arrested many for defying the ban. In neighbouring Belgium, two Swedish football fans were killed in Brussels on 16 October after being shot by a Tunisian immigrant who swore allegiance to the Islamic State (IS). In Berlin, where large pro-Palestinian protests that have descended into violent clashes between the police and demonstrators, a synagogue was attacked with Molotov cocktails in an arson attempt, resulting in the German authorities increasing security at Jewish-linked sites. In the United Kingdom, the head of Mi5, Ken McCallum, stated that there is a high chance that events in the Middle East could spill onto the streets of the United Kingdom, warning of an increased risk of antisemitism, Islamophobia, and Islamic extremism.

Assessment: While the attack in Belgium was likely an isolated incident and targeted Swedish football fans specifically, in response to the recent burning of Korans in Stockholm, it is almost certain that the security situation in much of Western Europe has deteriorated in response to the conflict between Israel and Hamas. It is highly likely that events in the Gaza Strip will inspire further retaliatory attacks across the continent. Extremists will invariably attempt to target Jewish-linked establishments in cities with a large Jewish diaspora, such as Paris and London. However, as many European governments, including the United Kingdom, France and Germany, have pledged their support for Israel, and will likely help sustain Israeli Defence Force (IDF) operations with the supply of materiel, it is highly likely that non-Jewish civilians and government sites will also be targeted by extremists. In order to mitigate these threats, it is highly likely that European countries will deploy more police or military to the streets, conduct more security patrols and potentially reintroduce border checks within the European Union to disrupt the cross-border movement of extremists or weapons. Despite being banned in some countries, it is almost certain that pro-Palestinian protests will continue to erupt across Western Europe, resulting in numerous clashes with the police and widespread travel disruption.

Poland:

Coalition unseats ruling PiS party and looks to set new course for Poland.

Poland's opposition parties have secured enough seats in the general election to potentially end the Law and Justice (PiS) party's rule since 2015, according to the National Electoral Commission's final vote count on 17 October. Despite PiS remaining the largest party with 35.4 per cent of the vote, analysts are stating that they lack the ability to form a winning coalition in the lower house of parliament. The centrist Civic Coalition (30.7 per cent), centre-right Third Way (14.4 per cent), and the Left (8.6 per cent) have pledged to form a coalition government to unseat PiS, collectively holding 248 seats out of the Sejm's 460. The opposition also gained control of the Senate with 66 seats to PiS's 34. President Andrzej Duda will now have to nominate a candidate for prime minister. In addition, the PiS party had engineered referendums on four controversial questions ranging from the acceptance of migrants to an increase in the retirement

age. However, opposition parties called for supporters to boycott the referendums, and as less than 50 per cent of the electorate answered them, they were invalidated.

Assessment: The Polish parliamentary election on 15 October almost certainly marks a change in direction for the country, which was appearing increasingly autocratic, illiberal and had been moving away from the European Union's direction. If PiS had remained in power, it is likely that Poland would have continued on this course and potentially helped to create a powerful Eastern European bloc that would present a serious challenge to Brussels. It is highly likely that former President of the European Council and head of the Civic Coalition, Donald Tusk, will become the next prime minister. Tusk will undoubtedly attempt to steer Poland back onto the European Union's course and will likely secure an unblocking of funds from Brussels. It is highly likely that he will convince the European Union to do this by promising to reverse many of PiS' controversial policies, depoliticise the judiciary, restore media freedom and decrease state-sponsored homophobia. However, it is likely that Tusk's ability to do this will be hindered by the fact that despite losing their majority, PiS are still the most popular party in the Sejm, President Duda is often aligned with PiS and can veto legislation, and the coalition has been formed with the principal aim of unseating PiS and is unlikely to agree on many individual policies.

Israel and the Gaza Strip:

IDF sustains strikes on Gaza with ground offensive in preparation.

Throughout the reporting period the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) have sustained their airstrikes on Hamas-linked targets throughout the Gaza Strip, whilst Gaza based militants have continued to fire rockets towards major population centres in Israel. On 17 October, a large explosion at the al-Ahli hospital in Gaza City is reported to have killed up to 500 people, many of whom were sheltering in the hospital's grounds. Hamas and many Palestinians have attributed this to an Israeli airstrike, whereas the IDF have reported that this was a misfired rocket from the Palestinian Islamic Jihad group (PIJ). The explosion at the hospital has provoked huge international condemnation and has resulted in major protests against Israel's military operations in Gaza. There have also been huge protests within the West Bank which have led to numerous clashes between the IDF and Palestinians, resulting in multiple fatalities. The IDF have conducted raids into the West Bank to engage and detain members of Hamas leading to arrest of a senior Hamas spokesman. The Palestinian Authority's (PA) response to the conflict has resulted in protests in the West Bank demanding that the president of the PA, Mahmoud Abbas, step down.

President Joe Biden and Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, have both visited Israel and pledged support to the country, with military aid expected to be delivered. Iran has sustained its threats to the West and has stated that if the United States intervenes on Israel's side it will use its proxy forces throughout the region to attack the American military; a United States warship intercepted three land-attack cruise missiles on 19 October reportedly fired at Israel by the Yemen based and Iranian backed Houthis. The United States has responded by reaffirming its stance that it will intervene on the side of Israel should Iran's proxy forces intervene and has amassed a substantial naval force in the Mediterranean with more assets en route. However, Biden has also urged Israel to exercise caution and take all necessary measures to avoid the killing of civilians. The IDF have yet to commit to a ground offensive on Gaza the Israeli Defence Minister, Yoav Gallant, has told IDF troops that they will soon see Gaza from the inside.

Reports indicate that Gaza is quickly running out of vital supplies such as water, food and medicine. The United States has also pledged USD 100 million in aid for Gaza and has persuaded Egypt to open the Rafah crossing to allow for the facilitation of aid into Gaza. However, the United States did also veto a United Nations Security Council Resolution that would have called for a humanitarian pause in fighting to allow for the aid to enter the Gaza Strip. The United Kingdom and Russia abstained from voting on the resolution.

Assessment: The IDF, Hamas and multiple media outlets and online commentators have produced circumstantial evidence attributing blame to either an IDF airstrike or a misfired rocket from PIJ in the explosion at al-Ahli hospital. The evidence so far presented is largely inconclusive and it is almost certain that actors and audiences will subscribe to whichever story best suits their narrative. What is almost certain is that the explosion will provoke much anti-Israeli sentiment worldwide and may lead the West to temper its support for Israel, especially if similar scenes unfold. It is highly likely that the IDF are still preparing for a ground offensive into Gaza after mobilising an effective number of troops in southern Israel and improving its defensive posture in the north, where it faces attacks from Lebanese Hezbollah, and in the West Bank where protests and violent clashes are certain to endure.

Biden's visit and commitment to Israel will likely provoke further protest throughout the world but will also likely be interpreted as crossing a red line by many Palestinian aligned factions, likely inspiring Hezbollah and other Iranian-backed groups to conduct attacks against US forces, as evidenced already by attacks in Iraq. It is likely that Iranian-backed militias have already crossed the United States red lines by attempting to attack their military assets. However, as there have been no American casualties the United States is demonstrating restraint, and it is unlikely that United States forces will strike Iranian-backed groups unless they kill American service personnel or conduct a full-scale attack on Israel rather than limit attacks to cross border firings. Washington has ordered multiple naval assets to deploy to the Mediterranean and is likely delaying direct military action until all these resources are positioned, aiming to gather a substantial firepower advantage before engaging. However, the United States warship's interception of Houthi fired missiles likely heading towards Israel will likely be seen as American involvement by directly defending Israeli territory- a move that may influence Tehran to become more bellicose in both its rhetoric and actions.

There is a high chance that an IDF ground invasion into Gaza will provoke an attack from Hezbollah forces in southern Lebanon and other militant groups from the West Bank, with many Western nations stating that citizens should avoid all travel to Lebanon. Should Hezbollah be planning an attack in Israel, it is likely they are waiting for an offensive to begin so that IDF forces are fixed in the south and a potential third front opens up in the West Bank. If the IDF are forced to fight on three fronts there is a realistic possibility that their forces are so stretched that they will require United States support. It is highly unlikely that Washington does not want to intervene in a conflict, and this has been the main driver for deploying so many military assets to the eastern Mediterranean to dissuade Iranian-backed groups. However, it is likely that Western visits and declarations of support to Israel will be interpreted as an endorsement of any Israeli action. A ground offensive will almost certainly entail IDF fighting with Hamas and other militant group fighters street to street, with many civilians doubtlessly getting trapped, especially if Hamas refuses to let them leave. A ground offensive supported by extensive artillery and airstrikes will undoubtedly result in a significant number of civilian casualties, and Western assistance may be perceived as complicity, likely triggering widespread condemnation and protests. To mitigate this, it is almost certain that Western nations will try to persuade both Israel and Egypt to allow for civilians to leave Gaza and to open a corridor for aid. Whilst Egypt has stated it will open the Rafah crossing for aid, it is looking highly unlikely that it will allow refugees to enter Egypt, leaving millions trapped in Gaza.

Iraq:

American military bases targeted across the region in numerous drone strikes.

On 18 October, two separate drone attacks targeted American military forces stationed in Iraq. The first of the attacks was aimed at the al-Asad military base in western Iraq and saw two drones trained on the location. Both drones were intercepted but one of the projectiles still managed to explode, causing minor injuries, and damaging some equipment. The second drone attack targeted the al-Harir air base, which houses United States forces in the northern Iraqi city of Erbil. A largely unknown terrorist organisation called Tashkil al-Waritheen subsequently claimed

responsibility for the attack on al-Harir. On 19 October, two different American military bases in Iraq were attacked with drones and rockets, and elsewhere in the region, two United States military bases in Syria were also attacked, one of which took place near the border with Iraq and Jordan.

Assessment: Regional tensions have soared since the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war. The general feeling in Iraq regarding the conflict almost immediately developed into a strong anti-Israeli, anti-American sentiment, with the nation's top Shi'ite Muslim cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, condemning Israel and calling on the world to stand up to the "terrible brutality" in besieged Gaza. However, the attacks on the United States military bases were unlikely to be carried out by an Iraqi militia. The United States has been on a heightened alert for activity from Iraqi-based, Iran-backed groups after they had previously threatened to target United States interests in the region with missiles and drones, if Washington intervened to support Israel against Hamas in Gaza. Whilst not directly intervening, the United States has supplied Israel with air defences and munitions. It is therefore highly likely that Tashkil al-Waritheen were responsible for at least the attack they claimed, as they are reportedly directed by Iran's Quds Force, and likely responding to United States interference. It is also likely that whilst not claimed, the other attacks in the region were carried out by groups aligned with Tehran. As the Israel-Hamas war continues, it is highly likely that similar incidents will occur, and these will intensify the more the United States gets involved.

Uganda:

Uganda confronted with a spike in attacks from Islamic State linked group.

The security situation in Uganda has deteriorated during the last reporting period, evidenced by several attacks and the foiling of planned attacks throughout the country. On 13 October, the Ugandan Army reported that the Congo-based and Islamic State (IS) affiliate, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), had conducted a cross-border attack into western Uganda, ambushing a civilian lorry. On 17 October, a newlywed couple from the United Kingdom and their tour guide were attacked and killed in the Queen Elizabeth national park in western Uganda. The Ugandan authorities have also attributed this attack to the ADF. Separately, the Ugandan police were alerted to the potential bombing of churches in the central Butambala district, where bombs disguised as gifts were sent to pastors. This potential attack was again attributed to the ADF and resulted in the Uganda Air Force conducting air strikes on ADF positions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). In response to these security challenges, the United Kingdom's Foreign Office updated its travel advice, warning against non-essential travel to Queen Elizabeth national park and parts of western Uganda.

Assessment: The Allied Democratic Forces started as a Ugandan insurgency but has operated from the jungles of eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) for almost three decades after being forced to withdraw by the Ugandan Army. In 2016 the ADF pledged allegiance to IS, which has since claimed responsibility for a number of the group's bombings and massacres, the most infamous of which was highly likely the June 2023 attack at a boarding school where at least 40 students were killed. It is likely that the group is exploiting the remote, forested, and relatively ungoverned areas of the eastern DRC as a staging base for its operations, where it can conduct cross-border attacks in Uganda and then retreat to its safe haven in the DRC. It is likely that the ADF is motivated by what it sees as a historical persecution of Muslims in Uganda and has subscribed to IS' brutal ideology, perhaps to gain publicity and even funding from external audiences. There is also a realistic possibility that the ADF is increasing its operations in response to the ongoing situation between Israel and Hamas. Should this be the case, then more attacks in the near future are more likely as the Israeli Defence Forces continue to conduct operations in Gaza. The killing of Westerners in one of Uganda's major tourist destinations has almost certainly given the group more publicity and served to undermine Uganda's security services. In response, it is almost certain that the Ugandan military will increase its strikes on the ADF, which will likely lead to retaliatory operations.

EMEA Forecast. It is almost certain that civil unrest will continue to erupt across much of Europe, the Middle East and North Africa in response to the Israel-Hamas war. Large protests have already taken place, with major demonstrations in London, Paris, Berlin, Madrid, Rome, Athens, Amman, Rabat, Cairo and many other cities and towns across the region. The vast majority of demonstrations have been in favour of Palestine and will highly likely increase in scale and intensity if Israeli conducts a ground offensive into Gaza.

The Swiss are set to vote on 22 October in the country's first federal election in four years. Switzerland's right-wing populist Swiss People's Party (SVP) is looking likely to achieve power, running on a platform opposed to mass immigration and the European Union. Success could yield demonstrations in the country from the left who view the SVP as xenophobic and populist. In Liberia, as the presidential election is now almost certain to require a run-off election, opposition candidate, Joseph Boakai, is seeking support from smaller parties as he prepares to take on the incumbent, George Weah. Provisional results suggest an extremely tight race, which could potentially trigger political instability. Elsewhere in Africa, Burkina Faso's military leaders have signed a deal with Russia to build a nuclear power plant to increase electricity supplies. It is likely that maligned coup governments in the Sahel will lean towards Russia for investment and trade, increasing the Kremlin's influence in the region. The security situation remains dire in the Sahel and there is a realistic possibility that the junta's will seek the assistance of Russian private military companies in their fight against militants – a move that will further increase Russian influence and potentially result in war crimes.

Ahead of the upcoming general election in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, President Felix Tshisekedi has eased some restrictions in conflict-ridden eastern provinces, including lifting the curfew and allowing peaceful demonstrations. It is likely that extremist groups will exploit the relaxation to conduct operations and undermine the government. There is also an elevated risk of groups conducting cross-border raids into Uganda as the military gives them more breathing space.

Environmentally, in the United Kingdom, Storm Babet will almost certainly continue to bring heavy rain and high winds to much of Scotland, with the storm having already caused extensive flooding and led to the cancellation of many flights and road closures. In Ghana, the Akosombo Dam has overflowed and at least 8,000 people have required rescuing in the Volta region. Local authorities say the dam discharge is ongoing, meaning downstream communities will continue to be impacted by flooding until water levels in the reservoir return to normal. Moreover, the health ministry in Burkina Faso has declared a dengue fever epidemic amid the deadliest outbreak in years, with more than 200 people dead and new cases rising sharply. The capital, Ouagadougou has witnessed the worst of the epidemic, and it is likely the epidemic will further undermine the military government that is failing to contain extremist threats across the country.



Asia Pacific (APAC)

Afghanistan:

Taliban expresses desire to become part of Belt and Road Initiative.

On 19 October, the Taliban's acting commerce minister, whilst visiting Beijing, announced that Afghanistan is actively pursuing membership in the Belt and Road Initiative and wants to become part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor refers to a flagship section of the Belt and Road Initiative, with the Taliban administration planning on sending a technical delegation to China for further discussions. The commerce minister expressed that Afghanistan is ready for investment and made allusions to Afghanistan's untapped resources. He also stated it is now possible to travel to provinces where there is industry and agriculture that previously could not be visited on account of the security situation.

Assessment: It is likely that China, which shares a 92km border with Afghanistan, will be one of the first countries to formally recognise the Taliban government of Afghanistan, and made a major step towards this in September 2023 by appointing its first ambassador to Kabul. It is likely that Beijing views Afghanistan as a potential gateway to accessing markets in the Middle East and South Asia. At the same time, the country would be a conduit to Pakistan where it is investing heavily in port facilities on the Arabian Sea, which it could then use to export Chinese manufactured goods further afield. Afghanistan is also believed to have largely untapped mineral reserves. These include copper, iron ore, gold and most importantly, substantial lithium reserves, which are becoming increasingly in demand for use in batteries for electric cars and devices. However, it is likely China perceives Afghanistan as too unstable to conduct major operations there now. Afghanistan is home to a number of violent extremist organisations (VEOs), most notably, the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). Afghanistan's economy under the Taliban has hugely deteriorated, largely in response to isolationism. VEOs have exploited this to challenge the Taliban's authority and have conducted numerous attacks throughout the country. It is likely that China perceives this as a major threat to its own stability as it shares a land border with Afghanistan, with its western province of Xinjiang also having an Islamic insurgency. It is likely that Beijing views economic prosperity as a way to improve the security situation in Afghanistan and contain any threats that could pose a risk to China.

India:

Supreme court refuses to legally recognised same-sex marriages.

On 17 October, India's Supreme Court refused to grant legal recognition to same-sex marriages, asserting that the matter should be resolved by parliament. The five-judge bench which ruled on the matter was split two to three in favour of not granting legal recognition. However, the court did express that LGBT relationships should not face discrimination by the state. Prior to the hearing, the ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata party (BJP) government opposed the case, stating that LGBT marriages were not consistent with the Indian family unit concept of husband, wife, and children. However, the court did instruct the government to form a high-level committee to examine the concerns, rights, and welfare entitlements of same-sex couples in the future.

Assessment: Despite the Supreme Court's ruling, it is likely that views on LGBT relationships in the largely socially conservative country are softening, evidenced by the 2018 overturning of a colonial-era law that banned homosexuality. The fact that the judges were split also provides hope for future hearings on the matter. However, most politicians in India were not in favour of the ruling, with the BJP dismissing arguments in favour of the ruling as "urban elitist views". Therefore, the LGBT community will almost certainly still face widespread discrimination and

harassment from multiple elements of society. The ruling will doubtlessly be interpreted as a setback for the LGBT community in India, but as too will be the court's decision to pass on the responsibility to parliament. It is likely that parties that constitute the Indian parliament will reflect the majority of their electorate and refuse to recognise same-sex marriages for years to come. The refusal to recognise same-sex marriages will also deny same-sex couples a myriad of privileges afforded to heterosexual couples. Without legal recognition they will be denied joint bank accounts, inheritance rights and cannot be deemed the legal next of kin. However, the court's decision to instruct the government to establish a committee may present LGBT couples an avenue for future progress and if established will likely play a crucial role in shaping legislation regarding LGBT rights in India.

China:

Putin praises China at Belt and Road Initiative forum and pitches Arctic trade route.

In this last reporting period, Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed admiration for Chinese President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) during a visit to Beijing. Putin lauded the BRI for promoting global connectivity and shared interests among nations. He also sought global investments in the Northern Sea Route (NSR), emphasising its potential to enhance trade between eastern and western regions. This visit marks Putin's second known trip outside the former Soviet Union since the Ukraine conflict began. Putin referred to Xi as his "dear friend" and highlighted Russia's commitment to cooperate with China and other nations for mutual and sustainable economic progress. Putin alluded to Russia's development of transport infrastructure, mainly the NSR, which extends from Murmansk near Russia's border with Norway, to the Bering Strait near Alaska in the High North. Putin invited interested states to participate in the route's development and pledged support for year-round navigation for ice-class cargo ships, starting next year. European delegates, including former French Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin, reportedly walked out of the meeting during Putin's speech. The Russian delegation included key officials like Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak.

Assessment: Putin's visit underscores Moscow's interests in deepening cooperation with China and strengthening its role in global connectivity and trade. It is almost certain that one of China's and Russia's strategic priorities is to establish a multi-polar world and undermine American hegemony, an aim that could be facilitated by deepening Sino-Russian ties. Putin was also likely sending a message to other countries that are maligned by the West, stressing that global connectivity and trade will be prioritised by Moscow over a country's political stances or internal affairs. Putin's remarks concerning the NSR are likely an attempt to draw investment from China and have it incorporated as part of the BRI. The NSR offers a significantly shorter and more efficient maritime passage between Europe and Asia, allowing for quicker and more cost-effective shipping of goods, and enables Russia to profit vicariously from Asian and European trade despite of sanctions. Additionally, there are no major chokepoints like the Suez Canal, which is controlled by a sovereign state, and the piracy risk in the High North is negligible. It is highly likely that the NSR will result in decreased insurance premiums, decreased chances of blockages or delays, decreased security measures, and decreased fuel costs. The NSR's previous viability has been impeded by the extent and duration of sea ice in the Arctic. However, as climate change leads to reduced ice cover and Russia invests heavily in ice-breaking technology, the route is becoming increasingly navigable and will likely be able to accommodate year-round transits. Chinese adoption of the NSR would likely foster better relations between Beijing and Moscow but more importantly, China would use Russian fuel extensively, a commodity sanctioned by the West which has been imported by China in record amounts after the war in Ukraine. However, retreating sea ice also leaves Russia's northern flank incredibly vulnerable and it is almost certain to prompt a Russian militarisation of the Arctic to protect Russian territory, the NSR and the vast amounts of untapped hydrocarbons that lie under the Arctic Sea. In the short-term, Russia will undoubtedly benefit from Chinese use of the NSR and investment in its Arctic ports and infrastructure. However, in the long-term there is a realistic possibility that the High North will become a point of friction between the two countries, given the area's untapped resources, China's military expansionism and existing territorial disputes such as the Amur Province.

APAC Forecast. Protest and civil unrest is almost certainly going to continue throughout the reporting period in response to the Israel-Hamas war. There have been protests in favour of Palestine in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and other Muslim majority nations. In India, there have been demonstrations in favour of Israel, but also sizeable protests from the Muslim population in favour of Palestine. As the war continues, inter-religious clashes cannot be discounted.

Indonesia's Constitutional Court has opened the door for individuals with prior regional electoral experience to run for the presidency, potentially facilitating President Joko Widodo's son's inclusion in a prominent candidate's lineup for the upcoming election. This move is seen as Widodo's effort to maintain influence after his tenure ends next year, with this possibility sparking pre-election demonstrations. Ahead of the Pakistani elections, Nawaz Sharif, the leader of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) party and a former Prime Minister, is set to return after more than four years of self-imposed exile. His return comes ahead of a contentious election season, and it remains uncertain whether he will face any charges related to prior convictions. Sharif was ousted three times as Prime Minister and remains a deeply divisive figure in Pakistan and any action against him would likely trigger civil unrest. New Zealand's election in the last reporting period saw a substantial surge in support for the centre-right National Party and its preferred coalition partner, ACT, potentially signalling a new era in the country's politics. The new government's agenda will likely focus on defence, security, and rising living costs.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's visit to Pyongyang continues to lay the groundwork for a potential visit by President Vladimir Putin, who has been increasing collaboration with the diplomatically isolated North Korea, likely in a bid to secure arms for his operations in Ukraine. It is likely that the developing relationship will be of major concern to South Korea, Japan and other regional actors, potentially provoking an arms build-up in the region. In China, the founding family of Country Garden, China's foremost private property developer, initiated the sale of their personal assets to inject a substantial USD 300 million into the struggling company, averting a potential collapse. This financial struggle faced by Country Garden, a prominent player in a growing list of Chinese companies experiencing challenges, raises concerns as a potential barometer for the broader Chinese economy.

South Korea, the United States, and Japan are reportedly set to conduct their first joint aerial exercise near the Korean peninsula in the next reporting period. The exercise is almost certainly a demonstration of their strengthening ties amidst growing tensions with North Korea and China's influence in the region. Additionally, the three nations have established a three-way communications hotline as part of their trilateral security cooperation efforts. Taiwan's air defence and exclusive economic zone continued to be penetrated by Chinese aircraft throughout the last reporting period, with the most significant penetration being the simultaneous entry of 13 Chinese aircraft and multiple naval assets. It is likely China will continue these drills to undermine Taiwan whilst the United States is dedicating attention to the Middle East. Looking more long term, Fiji is poised to enhance its defence and security collaboration with Australia, focusing on security intelligence, cyber security, defence, and police cooperation. Notably, while China has recently secured policing agreements with Pacific Island nations like Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, a longstanding policing agreement between China and Fiji, dating back a decade, has been temporarily suspended. This signals heightened competition in the Pacific region, with the potential for further diplomatic manoeuvring and agreements in the near future.

In Afghanistan, the west of the country was subject to another earthquake on 15 October which registered a 6.3 magnitude. It has also experienced several smaller earthquakes and aftershocks, with further shocks likely. It is highly likely that the Taliban government lacks the resources and capabilities to effectively deal with many of the hard hit and remote areas in Herat province and that international aid will be in limited supply. In China, a blue alert has been issued for Typhoon Sanba, which is expected to inundate southern China with heavy rainfall. This is the 16th typhoon to hit China in 2023 and is likely indicative of climate change.