



Global Intelligence Summary

REPORTING PERIOD: 20 OCT - 27 OCT 2023



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Week 45: 20 October – 27 October 2023

Executive Summary

- A shooting in Maine in the **United States**, represents the worst mass casualty event in the US in 2023 and will likely provoke gun law debates and panic, with the suspect still at large.
- Joint Azeri-Turkish military exercises in **Azerbaijan** are likely aimed at forcing concessions from **Armenia**, with regional Caucasus talks held in **Iran** without any Western involvement.
- **Israel** have conducted targeted raids into the **Gaza Strip** which are highly likely shaping activity for a future full-scale offensive.
- **Sri Lanka** allows a Chinese research ship to dock in Colombo, likely provoking Indian and US fears of civil-military research that will enable future Chinese submarine operations in the Indian Ocean.



Figure 1: Significant activity identified during the current reporting period.

AMER

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Americas (AMER)

United States:

Mass Shooting in Lewiston, Maine with suspect still at large.

On 25 October, a gunman killed at least 18 people and wounded 13 others in the city of Lewiston, Maine. Reports of a gunman first emerged at a bowling alley where a children's event was taking place. Later reports then placed the gunmen at a nearby bar and grill. The gunman was identified as Robert Card. At the time of writing, Mr Card is still at large, and a state-wide manhunt is underway. Law enforcement across the state is asking residents to stay inside and keep doors and windows locked. Mr Card's vehicle was found abandoned around eight miles outside Lewiston along State Highway 196. Police have announced that eight of the victims have so far been identified whilst they are working to establish the identities of the other ten. Mr Card is a member of the Army Reserve and had recently been making threats he would carry out a shooting at the National Guard facility in Saco, Maine. As a result of these threats, and his "erratic" behaviour whilst training over the summer, military commanders issued concerns and he was sent for evaluation at the Keller Army Community Hospital at West Point.

Assessment: This attack is the deadliest mass shooting in the country since the 2019 shooting at the El Paso Walmart which left 23 dead. Data on mass shootings from this year would indicate that the US is forecasted to see over 679 mass shootings in 2023, this is a rise from the 647 that the country saw in 2022. Lewiston is the second largest city in Maine and is located approximately halfway between the state capital, Augusta, and Portland. Maine is one of the 20 states across America in which permits are not required to carry a gun. Maine is one of the more politically independent states in America, and consequently, this incident may well lead the state to tighten its gun regulations in the coming months. Federal measures around gun regulations to stymie the number of mass shootings in the state remain gridlocked by partisan sentiment.

United States:

Republican Mike Johnson elected speaker after three weeks of infighting.

On 25 October, following a three-week period without an elected leader, the United States House of Representatives elected Republican Mike Johnson as Speaker of the House, following a 220 to 209 party-line vote. Johnson's first act was to put forward legislation that signalled the House's support for Israel, a resolution that passed by 412-10, with six "present" votes. Jordan also prioritised the issues of border security, preventing a potential government shutdown on 17 November, and establishing a bipartisan commission to examine the United States' USD 33 trillion national debt. President Joe Biden commented on Jordan's victory by stating "even though we have real disagreements about important issues, there should be mutual effort to find common ground wherever we can."

Assessment: The accession of Johnson to the role of Speaker ends a chaotic three weeks that left the House of Representative's undirected and unable to carry out any of its basic duties. Congress is now almost certain to start working through pressing issues such as the current Israel-Hamas war, military aid requests from Ukraine, border security, and the impending November government shutdown. While House Republicans broadly support funding for Israel, the United States border, and avoiding a shutdown, meaning that they are highly likely to pass legislation on this in the coming weeks, they are divided over further support for Ukraine. Republicans narrowly control the House by a 221-212 margin, leaving them with little room for error on controversial votes. Johnson's ability to work on bipartisan deal will also likely be difficult given his inexperience and conservative views. Since his election as Speaker, Democrats have blasted Johnson's conservative stances on social issues like abortion and gay marriage, as well

as his efforts to overturn the 2020 election; Johnson was the author of an unsuccessful appeal by 126 House Republicans to get the Supreme Court to overturn election results in states that Donald Trump had lost in the 2020 presidential election. The reality of a Democratic majority in the Senate and Biden occupying the Oval Office makes it highly unlikely laws will be passed in Washington without bipartisan support. Therefore, whilst the election of Johnson to Speaker is almost certainly a step forward, there is a realistic possibility that on issues such as aid for Ukraine and the impending government shutdown, differences between the two parties elongate the issues, meaning political volatility will continue in the coming weeks.

Panama:

Government signs significant new copper mining deal despite environmental protests.

In the last reporting period, President Laurentino Cortizo gave final approval to a deal with Canadian mining company First Quantum, allowing its local subsidiary, Minera Panama, to continue operating a huge open-pit copper mine in central Panama for at least 20 more years. Demonstrations against this decision began almost immediately, leading to the Department of Education and the University of Panama cancelling classes. Protests on 23 October intensified in Panama City, with police using tear gas against protesters, before nearly 50 protesters were arrested, and five police officers were injured on 24 October.

Assessment: Cortizo and First Quantum first reached an agreement regarding the project in March but have had to scale back the deal to get it through Congress. It is highly likely though that Cortizo will have been happy to compromise, prioritising getting the deal approved as soon as possible. The Cobre Panama project is already worth three percent of Panama's GDP, is roughly 80 percent of the country's total exports, and the new contract's terms guarantee a minimum annual income of USD 375 million to Panama's government for the duration of the deal. It is therefore almost certain that Panama's economy will have seriously deteriorated without it, and there is a realistic possibility that the contract's final approval will provide another economic boost by sending a positive message to future investors. Critics say that the continued development of Cobre Panama threatens forested land and crucial groundwater just 120km west of Panama City, in the state of Colon. It is highly likely that mining has had a negative impact on biodiversity in the region, and environmental protesters are highly likely to continue demonstrating in the short term. However, it is almost certain that Cortizo and the Panamanian government will press on with the project due to the positive economic impact on the nation's economy.

Venezuela:

Criminal investigation launched into opposition primary threatening sanctions relief.

On 25 October it was reported that Venezuela's Attorney General, Tarek Saab, was launching a criminal investigation into the opposition's presidential primary which was held on 22 October. The government is claiming that the vote, which was organised without state help and attracted more than 2.3 million votes, was marred by fraud. Maria Corina Machado, a long-standing opposition leader won the primary with more than 93 percent of the vote. Various parts of the country, including regions closely allied with the incumbent, reported high levels of turnout with long queues, and polling stations having to remain open late to allow everyone to cast their votes.

Assessment: The announcement of this investigation into the opposition seriously risks destabilising the US relaxation of sanctions on Caracas and throws further proposed sanctions relief into doubt. The initial sanctions relief was only granted last week. This came in the wake of the announcement that the opposition and Maduro government had reached an electoral deal in Barbados. This deal saw both sides agreeing to international observers for the 2024 vote and an agreement that each side could choose its candidate according to internal rules. Consequently, the Biden administration granted sanctions relief for Venezuela's energy sector for six months, paving the way for additional exports of the crude oil the country produces and accounts for 90 percent of all Venezuelan exports. Further relief after November is conditional on Caracas abiding

by the signed agreement, releasing political prisoners, and reinstating all candidates for the 2024 election who have previously been banned from holding office due to their links to the opposition. At the time of writing, Ms Machado is one of those banned from holding office which will undoubtedly further complicate the proposed elections.

AMER Forecast.

Following the first round of Argentina's presidential election last weekend, Peronist Economy Minister Sergio Massa and far-right libertarian radical Javier Milei will face off in a second-round run-off. Massa performed much better than expected, finishing six points ahead of the polls suggested favourite, Milei. It is highly likely that this will be a polarising campaign, and where the support of the third candidate, conservative Patricia Bullrich, goes will likely determine the victor. In Guatemala, the court order that was blocking the suspension of President-elect Bernardo Arevalo's party, Semilla, is due to end on 31 October. The country's electoral commission initially suspended Semilla before the Supreme Court overturned this decision. The election period has turned violent in recent weeks and Arevalo's accession has been disputed, and if the suspension of Semilla comes back into force, the future of the transition is even more likely to descend into chaos. In the United States, the United Auto Workers have reputedly reached a settlement with Ford to end their strike. This deal will likely be used as a template for deals with other automakers, with companies hoping it will see a reduction in civil unrest. This is unlikely across the economy however, with news that Walgreens pharmacy staff are expected to stage a walkout beginning on 30 October. The increasing number of strikes likely reflects the growing discontent in the United States and thus will likely become a major issue in the 2024 presidential election.

A Kenyan court has extended a temporary order preventing the government from deploying hundreds of Kenyan police officers to Haiti for a U.N. approved mission. Endemic gang violence in Haiti is expected to continue largely unchallenged until foreign intervention arrives. The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) reported a significant increase in antisemitic and Islamophobic incidents, with 774 complaints in the 16 days following the Israel-Hamas conflict on 7 October, an almost tripling of the number of incidents from 2022. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) also indicated a 388% rise in antisemitic incidents in the US from 7 October to 23 October compared to the prior year. It is almost certain that hate related crimes will continue to increase as Israel sustains its military operations on Gaza.

Hurricane Otis has caused severe damage to several parts of western Mexico, including the popular holiday destination of Acapulco where dozens of people have been killed. The hurricane was registered as a category five storm, and it is expected to bring severe weather to much of western Mexico in the coming days. Cyclone Tammy has been downgraded to a post-tropical storm and remains off the east coast of Bermuda. However, there are fears that it may regain tropical characteristics as it transits over the western Atlantic, possibly bringing severe weather to parts of the eastern US. An Arctic cold front is set to intensify over the northern U.S. and Canada, spreading southward and bringing winter weather and snow to central North America before the end of October.



Europe, Middle East & Africa (EMEA)

Albania:

Former prime minister charged with corruption and money laundering.

Former Prime Minister Sali Berisha, and his son-in-law Jamarber Malltezi, have been charged with corruption and money laundering relating to a land deal in Tirana. It is alleged that Malltezi exploited Berisha's position in government to change laws and privatise land that had been used for a sporting complex owned by the Ministry of Defence, so that it could then be sold for below market price for a lucrative redevelopment. The charges come three years after Interior Minister Taulant Balla initially sent allegations against Malltezi and Berisha to the prosecutor's office. Berisha has denied the allegations and has suggested that they are politically motivated and designed to damage his political career and his Democratic Party, and that the prosecutors involved are under the control of Socialist Prime Minister, Edi Rama.

Assessment: Berisha, who served as prime minister from 2005-2013 and as president from 1992-1997, was re-elected as a Democratic Party lawmaker in April 2021. Berisha has previously been banned from entering the United States and the United Kingdom due to alleged corruption and ties to Albanian organised crime. However, it is likely that Berisha still maintains a large following throughout Albania, with his Democratic Party being the only credible opposition to the incumbent Socialist Party of Albania. It is almost certain that many of his supporters will perceive this as a move to destroy the centre-right opposition. If found guilty, Berisha could be sentenced to up to 12 years in prison, a sentence that could rally his base and lead to civil unrest. Moreover, if a significant proportion of the public believe that the charges are fallacious, it is almost certain that the move will further deepen political divisions in the country, which is fairly evenly split between the centre-right and the socialists. The Socialist Party has aspirations to join both NATO and the European Union, however Albania's accession to either is likely being hindered by endemic corruption, with the country routinely being ranked as one of the most corrupt countries in Europe. Whether the charges are legitimate or not, it is almost certain that the incumbent party will attempt to see them through in a bid to suggest that Albania is coming down on corruption to improve its chances of joining either organisation.

Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkey:

Joint military exercises and talks demand concessions from Armenia.

Throughout the reporting period Azerbaijan and Turkey conducted a joint military exercise which included areas of the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region which was recently annexed by Armenia. The drills named Mustafa Kemal Ataturk 2023, included up to 3,000 military personnel and hundreds of armoured vehicles. Exercises also took place inside the Azeri exclave of Nakhchivan which shares a narrow border with Turkey to the west, as well as borders with Armenia in the north and east and Iran to the south and west. The exercise coincided with a regional summit held in Tehran aimed at promoting peace and cooperation in the Caucasus, which involved envoys from Turkey, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Russia. The meeting marks the first time all regional actors, with the exception of Georgia, have met together since Azerbaijan's offensive which drew condemnation from Tehran, Moscow and many Western nations.

Assessment: The joint military exercises by Turkey and Azerbaijan were almost certainly strategic messaging aimed at Armenia to accept the annexation of Nagorno-Karabakh and to influence Armenia to accept several of Turkey's demands as the region heads towards peace. It is highly likely that one of the priorities for Turkey during the meeting was to promote peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan so that it can secure the revival of the Zangezour corridor, also known as the Syunik Corridor, which would connect the Azeri exclave of Nakhichevan to the Azeri

mainland through Armenian territory. Such a corridor would improve Turkey's access to the Caspian Sea and enable Turkey to sustain cheap gas imports from its long-term Turkic ally, Azerbaijan. The Zangezour corridor has effectively been closed since the early 1990s as a result of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the contested Nagorno-Karabakh territory. Its closure has caused deleterious effects for Armenia's economy and isolated it from much international trade, a factor that has been greatly compounded by the fact Armenia's border with Turkey has also been closed since the early 1990s. Now that Nagorno-Karabakh has been effectively ceded by Armenia, it is likely that Yerevan will push for the resumption of the Zangezour corridor and open its border with Turkey, as this would provide it with greater trade access and Armenia would likely receive fees from gas transported through its territory. Moreover, it is highly likely that Armenia is in a weakened position since its relations with Russia have deteriorated after Moscow refused to support Yerevan over Nagorno-Karabakh and accused Armenia of drifting closer to the West. Armenian Prime Minister, Nikol Pashinyan, has even gone on to suggest that a peace deal could be reached with Azerbaijan within the next few months, potentially bringing stability to the region. However, after Azerbaijan's offensive it is likely that such a move will prove unpopular with many Armenians. Iran, who maintains diplomatic relations with both Armenia and Azerbaijan, is likely attempting to improve its influence within the mineral rich region and decided to host the meeting in Tehran to reduce the influence of external actors, particularly the West.

Israel and the Gaza Strip:

IDF conduct ground targeted raids as humanitarian situation deteriorates.

Throughout the reporting period the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) have launched at least two incursions into the Gaza Strip using main battle tanks, infantry and armoured engineering units. An IDF spokesperson stated that the latest raid on 26 October eliminated terrorists, neutralised threats and dismantled explosives. The IDF have also claimed that the deputy head of Hamas' intelligence directorate, Shadi Barud, was killed in a targeted airstrike on 26 October. Barud was reportedly instrumental in the planning of Hamas' attacks in southern Israel on 7 October as well as multiple smaller attacks against Israel. The IDF has maintained its air strikes on Gaza and the Hamas run Gaza Health Ministry has claimed that the civilian death toll now exceeds 7,000, leading Turkish President Erdogan to exclaim that Israel's response to the Hamas terror attack has now long passed the point of self-defence. Protest movements demonstrating against Israel's response have been sustained throughout the world and have been largely targeted towards US and Israeli Embassies. The Rafah border crossing between Egypt and Gaza has opened and at least 70 trucks have delivered aid to Gaza. However, aid workers have indicated that this is only a "drop in the ocean" of what is needed, and that the humanitarian situation continues to deteriorate, leading the United Nations stating that many more will die as a result of Israel's siege. The UN has also stated that it is now running low on fuel for aid operations, with Israel claiming that Hamas is stockpiling fuel. European Union leaders have convened and requested a ceasefire in order to allow for the facilitation of humanitarian aid into Gaza. It is assessed that over 200 hostages are still held by Hamas within the Gaza Strip with Qatar now acting as a mediator. Hamas has stated that it will only release hostages once a ceasefire is declared and there have been reports Hamas is demanding the release of thousands of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad fighters in return. The United States says that it has struck Iranian and pro-Iranian sites within Syria, suggesting that this action was "separate and distinct" from the Israel-Hamas war.

Assessment: The small-scale tactical operations into Gaza by the IDF were almost certainly targeted raids to eliminate Hamas positions, destroy defensive positions and conduct reconnaissance by fire to identify new enemy locations. The incursions are highly likely shaping activity that will better prepare the IDF for a widely expected large-scale incursion into the Gaza Strip and that the on the ground intelligence was deemed necessary after the IDF totally withdrew from Gaza in 2005. However, the longer the IDF delay an incursion, the more time is afforded to Hamas to rebuild damaged defensive positions and prepare for a full-scale attack. One of the IDF's major concerns will be Hamas' extensive tunnel network which will enable Hamas to conduct

ambushes against IDF forces and it is highly unlikely that IDF airstrikes will be able to fully destroy the tunnel network. Consequently, it is highly likely that the IDF will conduct further incursions into Gaza with heavy engineering equipment to degrade the tunnel network and that IDF raids will be conducted at night to exploit their thermal imaging advantages. To counter the IDF's armoured advantage, it is highly likely that Hamas will rely on improvised explosive devices that use an explosively formed projectile to penetrate heavy armour and these will be deployed across any suspected IDF ingress routes. Israel's delaying of a full-scale incursion is likely due to the number of hostages being held by Hamas, many of whom are from foreign countries. However, it is unlikely that Israel will submit to Hamas' demand to release thousands of detained fighters in return for far less hostages, which will further delay an IDF ground assault and limit their attacks largely to air strikes. Despite the United States' suggestion that its air strikes on Iranian and pro-Iranian positions were not part of the Israel-Hamas war, they will invariably be perceived as being in support of Israel by many observers. US forces in the region have already come under attack from Iranian backed proxy groups and it is likely that this would be the primary catalyst for escalation and a wider conflict. It is almost certain that these strikes were strategic messaging from the US aimed at influencing Iran to rein in its proxy forces. However, if the US manages to persuade Iran from using its proxy forces to attack US bases and interests in the region, it remains highly unlikely that Hezbollah will cease its cross-border attacks from Lebanon in their bid to fix IDF forces in the north of Israel.

While humanitarian aid is entering Gaza through the Rafah crossing, it is almost certain that the aid delivered is nowhere near enough to sustain Gaza's population of over 2 million. Despite calls from external organisations like the EU to pause activity to enable humanitarian corridors, it is unlikely that Israel will cease its strikes as this could be exploited by Hamas, which will doubtlessly cause the humanitarian situation to further deteriorate and serve to energise anti-Israel demonstrations throughout the world.

Tanzania:

Government cedes a third of its largest port to UAE shipping firm despite protests.

On 22 October, a concession deal reportedly worth USD 250 million was signed between the Emirati maritime giant, DP World, and the government of Tanzania. The deal will allow DP World to control over one-third of the Dar es Salaam port for the next 30 years and will be reviewed after that time period has elapsed. The deal was first reported on in July 2023 and has sparked major demonstrations in Tanzania, resulting in dozens of detentions of activists, as well as leading to petitions calling on the government to step away from the deal. The petitions were dismissed by the Tanzanian High Court and the deal was signed in the presence of Tanzania's President Samia Suluhu Hassan, who has been routinely accused of cracking down on critics such as her predecessor, the late John Magufuli.

Assessment: It is likely that the deal was signed to address chronic inefficiency and corruption allegations relating to the port of Dar es Salaam. However, it is almost certain that the ceding of one-third of Tanzania's primary port to the UAE for a period of 30 years was seen as a loss of sovereignty in the developing east African nation, where many also likely believed that Tanzania's long-term control of the port would yield greater future profits. There are also undoubtedly questions as to where the money will go, with many suspecting that much of it will end up in the pockets of the elite and not be effectively reinvested into the Tanzanian economy. One of the UAE's strategic priorities is to diversify the economy away from oil. DP World, which is linked to the UAE's royal family, expects to triple its revenue within a decade and will likely exploit shipping opportunities in developing nations to achieve this. The UAE has already invested nearly USD 60 billion in infrastructure and energy sectors throughout Africa, making it the fourth largest investor in the continent after China, the EU and the USA, and DP World alone has pledged a further USD 1 billion in African investment. Such investments are often seen as exploitative and have strained geopolitical relations and led to domestic tensions but will undoubtedly be a cornerstone of foreign powers' strategies in Africa. The port of Dar es Salaam also serves a number of land-

locked countries such as Zambia, Uganda and Burundi where there are untapped resources to be exploited, many of which are in high demand green energy materials. The Tanzanian government has stressed that there will be no local job losses at the port and that Tanzania will retain 60 percent of the earnings, a condition that will likely help to stifle protests.

EMEA Forecast. In Spain, the Socialist Party and the hard-left Sumar have reached a coalition agreement to form a new government. However, the support of Sumar is still not enough to secure the investiture of Socialist Party leader, Pedro Sanchez as Prime Minister. For this, he will need the backing of Catalan separatists who are demanding an amnesty law to mass pardon people involved in the region's failed independence bid of 2017. If Sanchez fails to reach an agreement, the country looks likely to hold fresh elections. There is a possibility that voters might give the centre-right and far-right coalition the clear majority that it fell short of in the previous July 23 vote. Meanwhile, in Switzerland, the right-wing anti-immigration SVP has emerged victorious in the country's federal elections. The win won't affect the composition of the country's federal council, but it highlights how Swiss voters are increasingly concerned about immigration. In Liberia, the country will head to a Presidential run-off which is scheduled for 14 November. This comes after no candidate secured victory in the first round of the presidential elections. The run-off will see President George Weah and opposition leader Joseph Boakai face off against each other. In Morocco, civil unrest is manifesting across the regions which suffered the most damage in the country's recent earthquakes. Protestors are stating the government's response continues to be too slow and inadequate. Finally, Turkey will be holding a series of events to mark 100 years since its founding, with country-wide disruption widely forecasted as a result.

In Niger, it has been announced that half of the French troops which were based in the country have now withdrawn, with the remaining troops likely to be withdrawn soon. Insurgents and armed groups will almost certainly continue to exploit an emerging security vacuum. Washington, however, has shown a willingness to try and engage constructively with the country's new military Junta, and this may help to improve the security situation. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Allied Democratic Forces attacks are almost certain to continue, and their tempo may increase as they seek to try and cause disruption in the run-up to the country's forthcoming elections. In the wake of Armenian-backed separatists losing control of Nagorno Karabakh, whilst Armenia's ally, Russia, seemingly did not intervene, Yerevan has stated there is no point in Russia having military bases in Armenia. This statement comes after the country recently held military drills with the US and NATO, and after it joined the International Criminal Court, suggesting it is increasingly likely that the country is in the middle of a strategic pivot away from Moscow and towards the West.

Countries across Europe will continue to assess the damage they have received from several storms which have struck the region early in the winter storm season resulting in multiple incidents of flooding. The storms have cleared away the remnants of the heat domes which lingered over much of Europe, and as such the cold weather is likely to continue into the foreseeable future.



Asia Pacific (APAC)

Pakistan:

New charges for Khan, Shariff returns, and civilians to no longer be tried by military tribunals.

This reporting period has seen Imran Khan indicted by the court for leaking state secrets. This is just the latest charge that Mr Khan faces since his removal from office in April 2022, and his deputy, Shah Mahmood Qureshi, has also been indicted in this case. This latest indictment means that he faces a penalty of 14 years in prison, and possibly the death penalty. Also, this week saw the return from self-imposed exile of Mr Khan's political rival and former Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif. Mr Sharif has returned as he attempts to mount a political comeback in the country's postponed 2023 elections. This week has also seen the country's supreme court rule that trying civilians arrested for their roles in the protests following Imran Khan's detention in May 2023 in military tribunals was unconstitutional.

Assessment: This latest indictment is a further sign of just how much legal jeopardy Mr Khan is in. Whilst it is highly unlikely that he will face the death penalty, this latest charge almost certainly means he will be unable to contest the country's forthcoming election. The return of Mr Sharif, who is currently barred from participating in elections, is a sign that he and his party, the Pakistan Muslim League—Nawaz (PML-N), have reached an agreement with the military to drop charges against him, and could be a sign that he will be allowed to participate in the elections. It would be highly unlikely that he would return to the country and face continuing his jail sentence unless there was a high likelihood of his charges being dropped. The unbarring of Mr Sharif, and the likely barring of Mr Khan, still one of Pakistan's most popular politicians, will only raise fears of just how free and fair the country's upcoming elections will be. Finally, the ruling that civilians can not be tried in military tribunals is being seen as a major victory by human rights organisations and will likely lead those already convicted to appeal. Going forward, these cases will now be transferred to civilian tribunals which are traditionally more transparent and fairer. Such a ruling will likely be seen as a win for Mr Khan and his PTI party against the country's military establishment.

Sri Lanka:

Colombo permits Chinese research vessel to dock despite Indian and US concern.

On the 25 October, a Chinese research vessel, the Shi Yan 6, docked in the Sri Lankan port of Colombo despite protestations from India and the United States. A spokesperson for China stressed that the vessel had solely docked for replenishment and that the vessel was on an "expeditionary voyage" in the eastern Indian Ocean after leaving Guangzhou in southern China. The research expedition has been organised by the South China Sea Institute of Oceanology (SCSIO) under the Chinese Academy of Sciences, and the vessel is scheduled to operate for 80 days and take part in over 28 different research projects.

Assessment: Indian and US concerns regarding the vessel's operations in the Indian Ocean are almost certainly linked to the theory that most Chinese research vessels are state owned and are ultimately used for dual purpose operations. These operations will conduct legitimate civilian oceanographic, geological and atmospheric research but will also help answer the intelligence requirements of the Chinese military and intelligence agencies. Sri Lanka sanctioning the use of its ports will enable China to sustain longer operations in the Indian Ocean, a strategically significant trade route rich in undersea resources and an area where the Indian and US military routinely operate. One of the main drivers for Chinese research voyages in the region will be to

explore and ultimately exploit mineral rich seabed resources to support the country's future economic development. China is also seeking to become a global maritime power and the world's most powerful navy, and will require extensive oceanographic, bathymetric and atmospheric data to support this. It is almost certain that Chinese China's civil-military integration is far greater than in Western countries and civilian researchers work intimately with the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). Most significantly, a greater understanding of the underwater battlespace will enable the PLAN to conduct successful submarine operations in the Indian Ocean. A greater understanding of the area's bathymetry will allow submarines to hide from SONAR or use bathymetric maps to stealthily navigate the sea floor. Additionally PLAN submarines can hide behind thermoclines- a distinct layer of water that can act as a natural barrier that helps conceal submarines from sonar detection by refracting or scattering sound waves and disrupting SONAR operations. Successful PLAN submarine operations would not only hold India and US assets in the region at risk but could destabilise the region and lead to rising tensions and greater military activity.

South China Sea:

Chinese and Philippine vessels collide in most serious regional incident of 2023.

On 22 October, two separate collisions took place between Chinese and Filipino vessels in disputed areas of the South China Sea near the Second Thomas shoal. In the first and more significant incident, the Philippines accused a Chinese coastguard vessel of "intentionally" colliding with one of its vessels on a resupply mission. In the following 24 hours, Beijing and Manila traded statements blaming the other and Washington released a statement that China has ignored the facts when reporting the collision. On 25 October however, United States President Joe Biden went further with America's support of the Philippines, reiterating that the United States' defence commitment to the Philippines was "ironclad." The Chinese foreign ministry responded by saying the United States had "no right to get involved" in the situation.

Assessment: There have been multiple incidents between Chinese and Filipino vessels around the disputed Second Thomas shoal in 2023, but the collisions this reporting period are almost certainly the most serious so far. The purposeful colliding of vessels has the potential to cause serious damage, particularly to the smaller vessel, which in incidents like this will invariably be the Filipino one. The uptick in confrontations in the South China is highly likely linked to President Bongbong Marcos of the Philippines seeking closer ties to its historical ally, the United States, than the previous administrations pro-China stance. Biden's referral to the decades-old Defence Agreement and the recently signed new security and defence agreements with Manila, reaffirms his, and Washington's, commitment to supporting the Philippines in this matter. Following this latest incident, it is highly likely that the proposed joint patrols of the South China Sea by the United States and its regional allies such as Japan, Australia, and the Philippines will be expedited. China, who has already militarised many of the islands in the South China Sea, will almost certainly continue to harass rival nation's ships with the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), Chinese Coast Guard and People's Maritime Militia at its disposal. China has a long history of conducting dangerous manoeuvres at sea, ramming vessels, firing water cannons, and blinding sailors with lasers, and consequently there is a realistic possibility of miscalculation and subsequent escalation. Politically, it is almost certain that neither Beijing or Manilla will abandon its claims any time soon, and as Manilla continues its overtures to Washington, it is likely China will intensify its rhetoric and increase its aggression in the South China Sea where it has disputed with several other Southeast Asian nations.

APAC Forecast.

Indonesia's Defence Minister, Prabowo Subianto, has announced his bid for the presidential election with President Joko Widodo's son as his running mate, positioning him as a leading candidate despite his controversial past, including alleged human rights abuses and travel bans to the United States. Such a controversial selection card is likely to be condemned by the opposition and could trigger civil unrest. On 29 October, China will host the 10th Xiangshan

security forum which will be attended by delegations from up to 90 countries, including the United States and Australia. It is likely that this is an attempt to restore dialogue between the rival powers. On 30 October, the Philippines will hold local elections, with Filipinos voting for leaders and councils in over 42,000 barangays, the smallest administrative units. The country faces a history of election-related violence, with at least eight deaths already reported in the run-up to the elections. As a precaution, 242 precincts were placed under Red Alert status, while an additional 1,200 were on Orange Alert, indicating concerns about further violence.

The US and Republic of Korea navies held a sensitive submarine exercise called Silent Shark near Guam on October 22, demonstrating strong support and signalling increased military cooperation in the Philippine Sea to counter Chinese influence. In addition, the USA, Japan, and South Korea issued a joint statement condemning North Korea's arms supplies to Russia, further indicating the development of the tri-lateral alliance. Hong Kong's leader, John Lee, plans to introduce a local national security law in 2024 to guard against external influences, targeting "soft resistance" and meddling. In 2003, a similar attempt faced mass protests and was abandoned, but the current effort may succeed given Beijing's crackdown on dissent. Pakistan has issued a deadline for the 1 November for "illegal immigrants" to leave the country or force deportation. It is almost certain that this move is targeting the Afghan diaspora who Pakistan authorities claim are responsible for 14 out of 24 suicide bombings in the country. The measure could result in the deportation of nearly 2 million Afghans from Pakistan, many of whom will likely be targeted by the Taliban government and the UN has warned of an impending humanitarian crisis. There have been several border skirmishes between Indian and Pakistani forces in Jammu and Kashmir as well as an increase in militant activity in the region. Such border clashes however are fairly common and will likely be contained to the immediate region.

In Queensland, Australia, wildfires continue to force evacuations along the state's eastern regions. The Queensland wildfire season typically ends in October, but state fire services are warning that it could last until February. Cyclone Lola has caused severe damage to parts of Vanuatu during the reporting period but has now been downgraded to a tropical storm. It is expected that Lola will merge with a low-pressure system and bring strong winds and heavy rain to parts of northern New Zealand during the next reporting period.