



Global Intelligence Summary

REPORTING PERIOD: 08 DEC – 15 DEC 2023



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Week 51: 08 December – 15 December 2023

Executive Summary

- It is looking increasingly **likely** that the **US** will face a politically volatile election period as the two frontrunners are both experiencing legal difficulties.
- IDF operations in southern **Gaza** and **US** condemnation of **Israel's** tactics is **likely** to trigger civil unrest and raise the chances of indiscriminate attacks.
- A major power outage in **Kenya** is **likely** to force the country into implementing controversial countermeasures such as load shedding, which will **highly likely** provoke civil unrest and political volatility.
- In **India**, the revocation of **Jammu and Kashmir's** special status is **likely** to trigger inter-religious and inter-ethnic tensions.



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

AMER

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- 3 Argentina:** Milei implements drastic measures to improve economy

EMEA

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Americas (AMER)

United States:

Legal developments intensify for Biden and Trump as 2024 presidential election looms.

The last reporting period has seen legal developments progress for both President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump, highly likely the two nominees for the Democratic and Republican parties in next year's election. For Biden, the House of Representatives voted to formalise its ongoing impeachment inquiry into whether the president and his family profited from his actions when he served as President Barack Obama's vice president from 2009 to 2017. The Republican-controlled chamber voted 221-212 along party lines to approve the probe, with the White House dismissing the inquiry as politically motivated and unsubstantiated by facts. For Trump, Special Counsel Jack Smith, the official prosecuting him on federal charges for trying to overturn his 2020 election defeat, has asked the Supreme Court to rule on the appeal Trump lodged following US District Judge Tanya Chutkan's decision to reject his bid to dismiss the case. Trump's lawyers argue that former presidents cannot face criminal charges for conduct related to official responsibilities. The Supreme Court agreed to expedite the review, with Chutkan temporarily placing her original trial on hold but maintained the gag order against Trump regarding the case.

Assessment: The Republicans are focussing their impeachment investigations into Biden around whether his family benefited from Hunter Biden, Biden's son, providing access to the vice president's office within business dealings. No evidence has been found so far that suggests this is the case, however formally beginning the inquiry now provides the Republicans legal authority to force the Biden administration to cooperate. There is also a realistic possibility that formalising the enquiry is a fishing expedition by Republican's to find other misdemeanours; Bill Clinton's impeachment for lying about an affair began with an inquiry into a failed real estate deal and Hillary Clinton's email server saga originated into a probe into a US ambassador's death in Libya. Whether more evidence is discovered or not however, it is almost certain that the process to remove Biden will not succeed. Even if the lower chamber voted to impeach the president, the Senate would then have to vote two-thirds in favour, highly unlikely given the Democrats hold a 51-49 majority. The lack of evidence and more frequent impeachment inquiries however are also causing serious concerns across the political divide that the impeachment process is being diminished, becoming a tit-for-tat between the parties. The prosecution of Trump over accusations that he tried to overturn the 2020 election is the most serious he faces, hence the significance of this decision. Trump appealing the decision very likely had little to do with the legal basis, and much more likely a delaying tactic. Indeed, it is highly likely that Trump will explore every option to delay his trials, freeing him to campaign. He will almost certainly be hoping that this leads to his victory and allows him to pardon himself from all charges. The Supreme Court agreeing to review the appeal pre-Christmas will almost certainly be welcome news to Special Counsel Jack Smith. There is however a likely chance that Trump's original trial date of 4 March will be delayed, and there is a realistic possibility that this delay will allow him to secure the Republican nomination prior to its beginning. Despite issues for both politicians, it is highly likely that both Biden and Trump will be the nominees in the 2024 US presidential elections, but it is likely that the legal clouds surrounding both processes influence the outcome, and it is realistically possible that whoever can avoid the most backlash as a result emerges victorious.

United States:

Iranian cyber-hackers target Israeli device used by US organisations.

During the reporting period the FBI, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), and Israel's National Cyber Directorate said in an advisory

that Iranian hackers, known as the "Cyber Av3ngers," had been responsible for a spate of recent cyber-attacks in the US. The group conducted unsophisticated cyber-attacks which targeted organisations that use programmable logic controllers made by the Israeli company Unitronics. The targeted device is used primarily by water and water treatment utilities companies, with the cyber-attacks affecting several small water companies and even an aquarium.

Assessment: It is almost certain that the attacks were conducted by Iranian sponsored hackers that likely have links to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and conduct cyber-attacks at the behest of Tehran. The motivation for these attacks was almost certainly the US support for Israel in its war with Hamas given that the device targeted was Israeli made. Whilst the effectiveness of these cyber-attacks was minimal, the attacks highlight the persistent and ever evolving range of cyber-attacks companies can face and how vulnerable critical national infrastructure (CNI) is to cyber-attacks. It is almost certain that cyber actors will harness the power of artificial intelligence to improve the efficacy of their attacks and that hostile state actors will be at the vanguard of this trend. Cyber-attacks likely afford state actors a deniable and sub-threshold attack methodology that is challenging to attribute, unlikely to warrant a kinetic response and could potentially cause mass disruption, especially if conducted against CNI. The potential disruption and harm posed by cyber-attacks will likely force countries and companies to re-evaluate their cybersecurity strategies and policies, with the US government already committing to a comprehensive cybersecurity plan to protect American CNI.

Argentina:

Milei implements drastic measures to improve economy.

Javier Milei was inaugurated as President of Argentina on 10 December and in his inauguration speech told the Argentinian people to prepare for "painful measures." Milei stated that a short-term "shock adjustment" was needed to help fix the country's broken economy, and there were no other options due to the country having no money left. On 13 December, his economy minister announced a devaluation in the Argentine Peso (ARS) by 50 percent, to ARS 800 to USD 1, which remains below the black-market rate of ARS 1,045 to USD 1. Alongside this, federal budget transfers to provinces will be cut to minimum viable levels and all new public projects halted. To protect the country's most vulnerable from these changes, the value of the government-provided food card will rise by 50 percent, child benefits will double, whilst the budget for the welfare programme, Potenciar Trabajo, will be frozen at 2023 levels. Milei has also signed a decree to cut the number of federal ministries from 18 to nine, which was a key policy pledge of his.

Assessment: Argentina has long been seen as a symbol of economic dysfunction, having suffered regular debt defaults, bank runs, and periods of hyperinflation. These issues have been both caused and magnified by governments across the political spectrum, including the left, right, and Peronist variety. Milei came to power championing freedom and promising radical measures to restore Argentina's economy to its "glory days" in the early 20th century, when it was one of the largest and wealthiest economies in the world. Since taking office, Milei has moderated some of his more radical policies, which included dollarisation, and the closure of the central bank. Furthermore, some of his governmental picks have been more conventional and technocratic than perhaps anticipated, helping to further boost the confidence of international markets, initially wary of Milei's radical image. This suggests that he is open to collaborating with other parts of the political spectrum, which he almost certainly will need to do if he wishes to try and push through his more radical reforms, as his party lacks a majority in the country's National Congress. These first economic proposals have been welcomed by the IMF, stating that they would help to improve the country's financial stability, whilst they recognise the need to protect the most vulnerable. In the short term, the size of his victory has given him the political space to attempt to implement a radical economic transformation of Argentina, one that his predecessors have hitherto lacked. Yet, it remains to be seen whether Milei can effectively bring about his economic transformations without fomenting widespread national unrest, as in the short term his policies will likely cause higher inflation and further economic pain.

AMER Forecast. On 17 December, Chileans will vote for a second time in recent years to amend the nations constitution. Lawmakers have decided to revise the constitution in order to move away from the original document that was designed under General Augusto Pinochet, a violent dictator that ruled from 1973 to 1990. Recent polls suggest it is unlikely that this version will be approved by voters, primarily due to the inclusion of more conservative political and social reforms on topics such as abortion, immigration and access to health care. Regardless of the result, protests are likely to follow, as widespread unrest over social reform in Santiago has been a constant since 2019. In Guatemala, prosecutors are continuing attempts to remove President-elect Bernardo Arevelo's immunity, which would potentially hinder his ascension to president. The country's High Court, the Organization of American States (OAS), United Nations (UN), European Union (EU), and United Kingdom Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (UK FCDO) see it as the latest attempt to disrupt the political transition. Despite the Guatemalan government denying involvement and attributing actions to the Attorney General (AG), who shares a friendship and political alliance with the incumbent, President Giammattei, concerns persist. The EU has warned of sanctions against those obstructing Arevelo's ascension which would likely be emulated by other external actors. Elsewhere, Donald Trump has secured a substantial and widening lead over his competitors in the latest round of polling for the Republican presidential nomination. Trump leads with 61 percent and his closest rivals, Ron DeSantis and Nikki Haley, trail with only 11 percent apiece. Trump's renewed campaigning to the backdrop of the charges brought against him are likely to deliver much political volatility to the US.

Symptomatic of the complex and polarising situation in the Middle East, activists from a Jewish group demanding a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip blocked traffic on a busy Los Angeles highway on 13 December, snarling traffic for miles. Protests and demonstrations in support of both sides should be expected across the region for the duration of the conflict.

In a significant de-escalation, following a meeting between Guyana and Venezuela's heads of state, the two nations have agreed to avoid any use of force and to not escalate tensions in their long-running dispute over the oil-rich Essequibo. It is likely however that military activity conducted by Venezuela, Guyana and external actors will continue near the region in order to threaten or deter respective sides. The last reporting period also saw the Haitian police chief visit Nairobi to finalise plans to deploy Kenyan police to the Caribbean nation to help fight gang violence. The first contingent of about 300 officers is scheduled for deployment by February 2024, despite ongoing legal challenges in Kenya. Colombia's Central General Command (EMC) rebel group has pledged to halt ransom kidnappings in a move to support ongoing peace talks with President Gustavo Petro. While this will be welcomed by many, it is highly likely that other groups, like the National Liberation Army (ELN), will continue with abductions, with it estimated 91 hostages are still held throughout the country.

In Chile, wildfires continue to rage in areas of the Marga Marga Province, prompting multiple red alerts and evacuation orders particularly near the town of Limache. Following a prolific 2023 wildfire season in the country and the El Nino phenomena currently underway, it is likely that another deadly and above average wildfire season will hit the country. For the US, tornado season is well underway across the southern states, and these should be expected on a weekly basis in the coming weeks.



Europe, Middle East & Africa (EMEA)

Israel and the Gaza Strip:

IDF conduct operations in southern Gaza as Western criticism of tactics increases.

Throughout the reporting period the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) have continued to degrade Hamas forces by targeting military infrastructure and weapons caches throughout the Gaza Strip. The IDF have continued to order Palestinian citizens to evacuate the major population centre of Khan Younis but are encountering resistance from Palestinian militias to the north and east of the city. The US has publicly criticised Israel for some of its tactics, accusing Israel of using seawater to flood Hamas tunnel networks and suggesting that 40-45 percent of IDF munitions dropped on Gaza are “dumb” bombs. President Joe Biden has even accused Israel of committing indiscriminate attacks and demanded Israel to change its tactics. Violent clashes between the IDF and Palestinian groups have continued throughout the West Bank, particularly around Jenin and Nablus. There has also been sustained attacks on Palestinian communities by ultranationalist Israeli settlers, promoting the US to delay the sale of assault rifles to the IDF and forcing the UK to issue travel bans to those who are held responsible for the violence.

Assessment: As IDF forces enter the southern parts of the Gaza Strip it is almost certain that they will prioritise locating and destroying Hamas and other militant organisations indirect fire weapon systems that enable the groups to fire on to targets in Israel. However, as the IDF advance deeper into Gaza, it is likely that they will encounter stronger Hamas resistance who have likely re-grouped and established defensive positions whilst the IDF were conducting clearance operations in northern Gaza. Hamas defences and adoption of guerilla warfare will highly likely stall the IDF advance and could prolong the conflict for months. Whilst groups outside of the Gaza Strip still limit themselves to cross border attacks, the prospect of IDF forces being fixed in the south and the degradation of their Hamas ally as a credible military force are likely conditions that could inspire an escalation, with Iranian-aligned Popular Mobilisation Forces in Iraq conducting regular attacks on US forces in the region. In addition, the extent and intensity of IDF operations and the high levels of civilian casualties is almost certainly serving as a recruitment tool for Hamas and other militant groups throughout the Occupied Palestinian Territories. A recent Palestinian think tank reported survey results showing that Palestinian support for Hamas in the West Bank has tripled since September, a trend which is likely to accelerate with sustained IDF operations in Gaza, consistent raids and clashes in the West Bank, and an increase in Israeli settler-Palestinian violence.

The US criticism of Israeli tactics and accusation that most IDF munitions are dumb bombs as opposed to precision guided, will likely provoke growing anti-Israeli sentiment which will likely manifest itself in the form of protest movements and increase the chances of indiscriminate attacks. There is likely an increased risk of US and UK interests being targeted because of the US veto of a ceasefire and the UK’s abstention, despite both countries introducing measures like travel bans and weapons sales to deter Israeli settler violence.

Niger:

ECOWAS and US try to peacefully influence Niger back to democracy.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has stated that it is willing to engage in negotiations with the military regime in Niger, otherwise known as the National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland (CNSP). ECOWAS has stated that it will work with the CNSP in relation to a short transition roadmap back to democratic rule. The West African bloc have also suggested that CNSP compliance with this proposal will prompt ECOWAS into considering the removal of economic sanctions on Niger. The United States has also announced it plans on resuming security

and development cooperation with Niger, contingent on the country's military leaders taking steps to restore democracy.

Assessment: The decision of both ECOWAS and the US to ease or even remove sanctions on Niger should the military regime commit to restoring democracy is almost certainly born out of humanitarian considerations. International NGOs operating in Niger have demanded that ECOWAS ease its sanctions against Niamey to allow emergency humanitarian aid to enter from neighbouring Benin amid a deteriorating humanitarian crisis. NGOs claim that 4.3 million people currently are at threat from food insecurity, with the number likely increasing as a result of the sanctions. The original coup was justified on the premise of rising extremism and violent extremist organisations (VEOs) in both Niger and the wider region have exploited the withdrawal of Western forces prompted by military coups. Should the humanitarian crisis continue to deteriorate, it is almost certain that the public will decrease its support for the military governments and will also be more susceptible to radicalisation. In addition, it is highly unlikely that either the US or ECOWAS will endorse direct military action against the CNSP. Washington is already likely overstretched with the war in Ukraine and its efforts to deter Iran into provoking a regional conflict in the Middle East, whilst civilians with the constituent ECOWAS nations are likely reticent to support a war in the Sahel given the myriad of likely ramifications. In addition, if external actors are able to influence Niger to peacefully transition back to democracy, similar policies could then be used against the other coup governments in Mali and Burkina Faso.

Yemen:

Continued attacks on shipping.

As of 13 December, two further attacks on international vessels transiting the Yemeni coastline have been reported during the last reporting period. On 11 December it was confirmed that the Norwegian-flagged tanker, Strinda, was hit by a Houthi missile as it passed through the Bab al-Mandeb straight off the Yemeni coast. Alongside this, the French naval frigate FREM Languedoc stated that it had also intercepted and shot down at least one further drone which was threatening the Strinda. As a result of the missile hit, a fire broke out upon the Strinda, and it had to divert to a safe port. Meanwhile, the UK's Maritime Trade Operations reported that on 13 December, a speedboat with armed men aboard approached two vessels transiting off the coast of Hodeidah and that one of the vessels, a Marshall Islands-flagged chemical tanker, had an exchange of gunfire with the speedboat.

Assessment: This marks the second week in a row where multiple vessels transiting the Red Sea area have been targeted by Houthis. These attacks come after a Houthi declaration on 9 December that they would expand their attacks from Israeli-linked ships to ships from any nationality heading towards Israel for as long as food and medicine are not allowed into Gaza. The Houthis stated that they had targeted the Strinda as it was heading for Israel, however, shipping positioning and tracking data indicated that the vessel was bound for Italy, via the Suez Canal. Recently, the Houthis and the Saudis have abided by a fragile ceasefire within the wider Yemeni conflict, and to try and help preserve this state of affairs, the US delisted the Houthis as a terror group and in the wake of last week's attacks the Saudis called for the US to respond with restraint. If these attacks continue, there is a realistic probability that US and international warships in the Red Sea may begin to do more than shoot down missiles and respond to vessels in distress. This could see them intercepting Houthi vessels, or indeed seeking to destroy the Houthi shore-based capabilities which allows them to target international shipping. It may also see the US relisting the Houthis as a terror group. This would increase the chances of a wider conflict in the Middle East however, with Iran's Defence Minister warning that a US-backed multinational task force to protect shipping in the Red Sea would face "extraordinary problems." The Israeli government has also warned if the international community does not start responding with adequacy to these Houthi attacks, then they will. Whilst these attacks are ongoing, however, it will only mean that more vessels divert away from the Red Sea and Suez Canal, and to the longer, but safer, route around the Cape of Good Hope. At least a dozen ships have already

diverted. These diversions, coupled with diversions from the Panama Canal due to its water shortages and long wait times, mean that for the first time in decades, international trade will be seeking to avoid these two crucial routes simultaneously, leading to longer sailing times between markets in the US/Europe and Asia. Given the overcapacity currently in global shipping, longer lead times may present liner operators with a possibility of “soaking up” this excess capacity, and as such it may also lead to high international freight rates if the situation persists into 2024.

United Arab Emirates:

COP28 ends with pledge to shift from fossil fuels.

The 2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP28) has concluded with the pledge of over 200 nations to transition away from fossil fuels. The pledge marks the first international deal signed that overtly calls for the reduced global consumption of fossil fuels. The agreement has called for net-zero emissions to be reached globally by 2050, with around 120 states also pledging to triple their renewable energy capacity by 2030. However, the deal does not force countries to take action, and many critics have suggested that it does not go far enough.

Assessment: The hard struck deal, following two weeks of negotiations, has been criticised by some for falling short of a meaningful contribution to addressing climate change. The focus of criticism has been levied at the removal of the pledge to ‘phase out’ fossil fuels in the agreed deal. The inability to reach consensus over a phasing out of fossil fuel consumptions has indicated to many that global efforts to challenge climate change are not committed. The Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) deemed the semantics of the agreement served as a loophole for states with hydrocarbon-reliant economies. Furthermore, the efficiency of implementing renewable energy sources will require sizeable investment, for which a majority of less developed states are ill-fitted to accommodate. Despite this, the conclusion of COP 28 marks the first time a global agreement has been reached with the specific aim of reducing carbon emissions. The ramifications of such a pledge may indicate a more welcoming stance to renewable energy and incentivise investments by states and corporations. Unlike oil, coal and gas, renewable energy is far less susceptible to shocks in trade, such as with the Russo-Ukraine War. Yet while the agreement serves as a diplomatic success, it is unclear whether it will result in any meaningful impacts to addressing the climate crisis.

Kenya:

Major power outage causes mass disruption which could force Kenya into load shedding.

On 10 December, a power blackout plunged Kenya into darkness at around 20:00 local time, marking the country's third nationwide blackout in the past four months. The outage disrupted various services, including Nairobi's Jomo Kenyatta International Airport (JKIA), where two terminals experienced prolonged power outages. Transport Minister Kipchumba Murkomen, facing criticism for delays in restoring power at JKIA, has requested a police investigation into the possibility of sabotage due to the frequent power disruptions and the fact that a site of national strategic importance was targeted. Many angered Kenyans have demanded answers for the country's systemic power outages and have accused the state-run electricity provider, Kenya Power and Lighting Company (KPLC) of gross incompetence.

Assessment: Transport Minister Murkomen's claim of sabotage could be an attempt to shift attention away from allegations of government incompetence in a move to quell discontent. It is almost certain that many Kenyans are incensed after this recent major power blackout as Minister Murkomen had assured the country that such an incident would never happen again after a major nationwide power outage in August also disrupted flights to and from JKIA and led to the suspension of many key services. In order to mitigate against future power outages, it is highly likely that Kenya will have to introduce controversial measures such as South Africa's load shedding. Load shedding is a deliberate reduction of electric power in a particular area, typically implemented by utility companies to prevent a total blackout during periods of high demand. The

process often prioritises key services over ordinary people and fails to address the underlying factors that have stressed the grid in the first instance. In South Africa, the government's inability to provide sustained power and the country's periodic power outages have been the source of much civil unrest and political volatility. Moreover, the power outages have also exacerbated other issues such as food insecurity, water shortages, crime and have caused many businesses to go bankrupt. If Kenya is unable to address its power supply problems, it could follow the path of South Africa which is contemplating declaring a national disaster in response to the problem and its associated issues.

EMEA Forecast. The region finds itself in a busy electoral period. On 17 December, Serbia will hold snap parliamentary elections, with President Vucic's Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) seeking to retain power. The election was prompted public outrage and large protests following a number of mass shootings, which acted as a catalyst for long term fears over the direction of the country from those who oppose SNS. Despite these grievances, it is likely that SNS will hold onto power, but there is a realistic possibility that they lose the nation's capital, Belgrade, which would strike a significant blow. On 18 December, after a four-year delay, voters in 15 Iraqi governorates, will report to the polls to elect members of the powerful provincial councils. Disruption and violence at elections booths is likely. On 20 December, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) will hold presidential elections, following a campaign that has been marred by insecurity and allegations of irregularities. Incumbent Felix Tshisekedi is highly likely to win due to the fragmented opposition and the single-round electoral system. Given the country's history of contested elections, the result, is unlikely to be universally accepted and civil unrest should be expected. Following Egypt's presidential election between 9-11 December, it is widely reported that incumbent Abdel Fattah El-Sisi has cruised to victory. While official results are not due until 18 December, this result is not unexpected and likely ushers in further repression of freedoms and rights of opposition politicians and journalists. After winning October's election, Donald Tusk's coalition has officially been sworn in as the government following the Law and Justice (PiS) party's attempts to hold on to power. The transfer marks a huge change after eight years of nationalist rule, including raised hopes of smoother relations with the rest of the EU. Finally, ahead of Senegal's presidential elections in February 2024, a court has ordered jailed opposition leader Ousmane Sonko to be reinstated on the electoral register. The move potentially paves the way for Sonko to stand, and his appearance on the ballot highly likely will make the electoral campaign a more charged affair.

Geopolitically, Finland is expected to sign a defence cooperation agreement with the United States on 18 December, a move that grants the US military broad access to a country with a long border with Russia. The move was almost certainly hastened by the war in Ukraine and Finland joining NATO, and Moscow is highly likely concerned by the development. Elsewhere in Europe, the gas pipeline between Serbia and Bulgaria has opened, allowing Belgrade and southeast Europe access to Azeri gas and liquefied natural gas (LNG) from the Greek port of Alexandroupolis, reducing dependence on Russia. Russia and Gazprom were appeased by also signing new deals, deals which likely committed Belgrade to Russia for several years. In the Middle East, Iran has lifted visa requirements for 33 countries, including Gulf states like Saudi Arabia. While the move is focused on increasing tourism, it highlights another sign of thawing relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia after years of tension.

A 72-hour ceasefire in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), supported by both the DRC and Rwanda, was announced in the last reporting period, with the US committing to monitoring the deal using intelligence and diplomatic resources. It was then announced in the subsequent days that the ceasefire had expanded to cover two weeks. The move is likely an attempt to ease tensions between the two African nations, but violence is highly likely to persist as the M23 rebel group, who operate in the area, have said that the deal is unrelated to them and aims to prevent escalation between the two countries. The arrest and charges are widely viewed as retaliation for Sweden's role in detailing and sentencing Iranian official Hamid Nouri to life imprisonment. In Iran, the trial of a Swedish diplomat accused of spying for Israel while on vacation

has commenced after his arrest in April 2022. A verdict is expected on 19 December and there is a high likelihood of a guilty verdict, especially given current heightened tensions with Israel.

Blizzards swept across swathes of Russia early on 15 December, carpeting Moscow in one of the biggest snow falls in decades. The cause was a winter cyclone and disruption is almost certain in coming days. Contrastingly, El Niño related flooding is continuing to wreak havoc on much of East Africa with communities in Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania all affected. In Somalia alone, it is estimated that over two million people have suffered as a result of the flooding. Hundreds have died across the region, mudslides have disrupted transport and the economy, thousands have lost their homes and millions displaced. With heavy rain forecasted across much of the region, it is almost certain that flooding will continue to spread and exacerbate areas already affected, likely provoking an acute humanitarian crisis.

In the Ethiopian region of Tigray, the Global Society of Tigrayan Scholars and Professionals wrote an urgent appeal to the international community pleading for immediate intervention to combat a growing famine caused by the Tigray War which ended in 2022. It is almost certain that the famine is being worsened by the current effects of El Niño. However, The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) is due to restart food aid deliveries across Ethiopia this month after halting the program five months ago over a corruption scheme run by local officials.



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T +1 (345) 949-0004
F +1 (345) 945-6591

info@security.ky
www.security.ky

Cayman Technology Centre
115 Printer Way

PO Box 10055, Grand Cayman
KY1-1001, Cayman Islands



Asia Pacific (APAC)

Pakistan:

Over 20 police officers killed in terror attack on police station in northern Pakistan.

In the early hours of 12 December, Daraban police station, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Dera Ismail Khan, was subject to an assault by armed militants. The attack saw a suicide bomber, employing a vehicular-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED), significantly damage the station, allowing three gunmen to infiltrate and fire at security force personnel. Responsibility for the assault, which resulted in 23 dead and a further 32 injured, has been claimed by Tehreek-e-Jihad (TJP), a group with unofficial ties to the Pakistani Taliban (TTP).

Assessment: The attack marks one of several attacks against Pakistani security forces by the TJP in 2023. On 12 July, the group claimed responsibility for an assault on a military garrison in Zhob, Balochistan, that claimed the lives of nine Pakistani soldiers. Both attacks deployed similar methods, deploying suicide bombers to breach government buildings, allowing armed gunmen to infiltrate and cause mass casualties. This trend of targeting security forces adheres to the group's aims of destabilising and undermining the Pakistani government to establish a conservative Islamic state. Both Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces have seen a marked increase in terrorist activity since November 2022, when the TTP ended its ceasefire with the Pakistani government. The two provinces neighbour Afghanistan, which since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, has provided a relative safe haven for Islamist group operations. This threat has likely worsened with the forcible deportation of undocumented Afghan's from within Pakistan. The extensive exodus carried out by the Kakar government in October and November, has left security forces overstretched and has likely galvanised support for militant groups within the ranks of displaced Afghans. The growing number of attacks against Pakistani forces is in turn likely to continue in the coming months, with security forces at present overstretched, and violent extremist organisations (VEO) are likely able to freely operate from bordering Afghanistan. Pakistani election periods are typically fraught with civil unrest and increased security concerns, and with upcoming parliamentary elections on 8 February 2024, Pakistani security forces will face further distractions and likely be targeted by more militant attacks.

Jammu and Kashmir:

Indian Supreme Court ratifies decision to revoke Jammu and Kashmir's special status.

On 11 December, India's Supreme Court upheld Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 2019 decision to revoke special status for Jammu and Kashmir. The court also stipulated that the region must hold elections before a deadline of 30 September 2024. The decision has been condemned by Pakistan's caretaker government and has resulted in several petitions challenging the revocation from across India.

Assessment: Jammu and Kashmir is India's only Muslim-majority state and the decision to revoke its special status is almost certainly part of Modi's Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) goals to increase the influence of Hinduism within India and will likely prove popular with his base before the general election in May 2024. The region has been a source of contention even before India and Pakistan gained independence from the UK in 1947, and it is highly likely that this decision will stoke inter-religious and ethnic tensions. There have been frequent clashes between the Indian and Pakistani military for decades along the Line of Control (LoC), which serves as the de facto border in Kashmir. This decision could easily provoke further skirmishes in the future, especially near the deadline date of 30 September. However, many of India's estimated 200 million Muslims outside of Kashmir are likely to be aggravated by the decision and many likely

fear the revocation of special status will allow non-Kashmiris to buy land and settle in the region. This could lead to Hindu nationalists resettling in the region to decrease the influence of the Muslim population and ensure that the region remains part of India in the long-term. Such a trend will invariably lead to more inter-religious tension and conflict in Kashmir between Hindus and Muslims frequently sends ripples of tension and repercussions throughout the entirety of India.

Myanmar:

Rebel forces continue multiple offensives as humanitarian situation deteriorates.

Fighting in Myanmar has now spread to over two-thirds of the provinces in the country, with a coalition of ethnic militias and the People's Defence Forces (PDF) conducting multiple offences against overstretched government forces. Coalition forces have now captured several strategic towns, roads and military garrisons, including key areas along the border with China, and have established civil administration in huge swathes of the affected provinces. In response, government forces have increased their use of long-range artillery and air strikes, resulting in hundreds of civilian deaths. The fighting has led to mass blackouts and has displaced over half a million people, according to the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). In a bid to end the fighting, Beijing has demanded a ceasefire and is offering to broker any peace deal in China.

Assessment: It is almost certain that the coalition forces have seized the initiative in the fighting and there is a probable chance that the weakened government military will suffer defeat in much of the country's northern regions. It is likely that the military government will agree to China's brokering of a ceasefire as it likely fears that its forces will soon be overrun, and the country could break apart into several smaller states. China is likely offering to broker peace in order to increase its influence in the country and likely has leverage over the West after the West imposed sanctions on the military government. However, it is unlikely that the ethnic groups will accept peace without any major concessions and will likely demand the creation of autonomous regions at the very least. It is highly likely that aid organisations will become overstretched in the country, as the half a million displaced people is likely an underestimation due to the disruptions caused by the fighting. Moreover, these people join over two million people already displaced by the coup in 2021. In addition, the fighting in the border areas has likely restricted the movement of essential goods from neighbouring India and China, further complicating the humanitarian situation.

South China Sea:

Maritime altercations gradually increasing in severity around disputed shoals.

During the last reporting period, maritime altercations between China and the Philippines further increased tensions in the South China Sea. On 8 December, the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) fired a water cannon at a Philippine fisheries bureau vessel conducting a regular resupply mission to fishing vessels operating near the Scarborough Shoal. The following day, the CCG again targeted four Philippine ships – two navy-operated, two coast guard operated – who were delivering food and other supplies to a military outpost near the Second Thomas Shoal. These incidents were more confrontational, with water cannon blasts, long-range acoustic devices, and vessel ramming, causing injuries and enough damage that required one vessel to be towed back to the western Philippine province of Palawan. Later in the reporting period it was also announced that the Philippine Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, Romeo Brawner, was onboard the vessel that was both sprayed with a water cannon and rammed. The Philippines publicly condemned the incidents, calling the incident a "serious escalation" and summoned the Chinese ambassador. They received strong support from the United States (US), Japan, and the European Union. For their part, China lodged solemn representations and a strong protest with the Philippines, blaming the collision on Philippine vessels.

Assessment: The South China Sea is a vitally important waterway, with more than USD 3 trillion worth of trade transiting the conduit each year. The exclusive economic zones (EEZ) of the

Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei fall within the region, although China claims almost the entire South China Sea, claims rejected by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2016. This has not stopped Beijing however, who have in the last few years furthered these claims, most notably taking over and militarising Mischief Reef. It is highly likely that China's long-term plan is to utilise Scarborough Shoal and Second Thomas Shoal in a similar manner. This is not the first time China has used aggressive tactics against Philippine vessels undertaking resupply missions in the area, in August the Philippines had to delay a resupply mission after its boats were sprayed. However, this is another incremental escalation considering the damage was serious enough to require the damaged vessel to be towed back to the port preventing it from completing its mission. This is further emphasised by Brawner's presence on the attacked vessel, and while he did state that he was unhurt and that he did not believe China knew he was onboard the boat, there is a realistic possibility that Beijing knew and increased the force to present a warning. The latest incident comes weeks after leaders of both nations met and agreed to formulate ways forward in the South China Sea but it is likely that the latest confrontations will be a setback in this process and are highly likely to further strains relations in the short term. President Ferdinand Marcos Jnr of the Philippines has been seeking closer ties with the US and this will highly likely increase this process too. However, the shape of high-level Sino-Philippine relations will highly likely not be impacted too significantly as China remains one of the Philippines top trading partners, with Manilla publicly stating that disputes in the South China Sea were not the sum of the country's relationship with China, with many of the incidents occurring at the ground-level. It would almost certainly take escalatory attacks and interventions from China to significantly change the regions dynamic.

Japan:

Prime Minister Kishida under pressure as financial scandal involving ruling party intensifies.

The scandal involving Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) intensified this week as Prime Minister of Japan, Fumio Kishida, fired four cabinet ministers and several deputy ministers. Prosecutors have been criminally investigating whether dozens of lawmakers received secret funds from fundraising events that saw millions of dollars kept off official party records. A poll released on the day of the cabinet reshuffle had Kishida's approval rating at just 17 percent, with support for the LDP, which has ruled for nearly all of Japan's post-war history, at its lowest since 2012.

Assessment: This was Kishida's third cabinet shake-up in 16 months is highly likely an attempt to limit the fallout from arguably the biggest financial scandal the LDP has faced in decades. Despite heavyweight casualties, including the chief cabinet secretary and industry minister, the reshuffle is however unlikely to resurrect his ailing popularity due to the damage already done. Kishida does not need to call an election until October 2025, so for now the LDP's positions as the ruling party is likely safe; a historically fractured opposition has contributed to the LDP's strong position too. Perhaps of more concern to Kishida however will be that he faces a mandated LDP leadership vote in September 2024. It is almost certain that Kishida's position will be under pressure, and if current issues persist it is realistically possible that the LDP change leader whilst in power. The likelihood of Kishida being removed is not higher because of whom the prosecutors are targeting. Within the LDP there are factions and the largest of these, the Abe faction, are the group being investigated. This makes it unlikely that a viable candidate emerges to replace the incumbent prime minister. The sidelining of heavyweights from the once mighty Abe faction, who traditionally favour big monetary stimulus, is highly likely welcome news to the Bank of Japan (BoJ) too. The BoJ are planning to exit from decades of ultra-low interest rates in the short term, a move that likely would have been inhibited by dominant Abe factions. The BoJ is widely expected to maintain its policy settings next week for the next quarter, but there is a realistic possibility that the banks governor begins to signpost an upcoming change in the accompanying speech.

APAC Forecast. As Bangladesh prepares for a general election on 7 January, it is almost certain that the country will be plagued by further civil unrest. The government has launched a huge crackdown on the opposition which has resulted in periodic clashes between the police and the supporters of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), who have threatened to boycott the election. Protests against the government are expected to place throughout much of December.

South Korea will likely remain on high alert after six Chinese and Russian jets entered its air defence identification zone on 14 December in a rare display of force. It is likely that Russia and China were assessing South Korean reaction times while sending a strategic message to Seoul. Further encroachments are likely as South Korea continues to develop its military relationship with Japan and the US. In November, Taiwan's military thwarted four instances of Chinese forces attempting to approach the island's sensitive contiguous zone, amid an escalated Chinese effort to "intimidate" voters ahead of crucial January elections. Beijing likely aims to influence voters in favour of candidates advocating for stronger ties with Beijing. Consequently, further aggressive Chinese actions are expected to transpire.

Snow, blizzards and plunging temperatures swept across China in one of the nation's most severe cold snaps, spurring authorities in the capital to halt train services, shut schools and tell people to stay home. Disruption is expected to maintain across the country in the coming days, and with the storm moving north to south, the worst of the conditions will likely move with the front. Beijing alone has seen record breaking temperatures (both high and low), extreme weather, and falling air quality and haze in 2023, highly likely a symptom of climate change. In coming years, these incidents are likely to become more frequent and intense. In