



Global Intelligence Summary

REPORTING PERIOD: 15 DEC – 22 DEC 2023



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Week 52: 15 December – 22 December 2023

Executive Summary

- **Colorado's** decision to ban Donald Trump from the Republican primary ballot will **almost certainly** galvanise his base and provoke further political volatility in the **United States**.
- In the **Czech Republic**, at least 14 have been killed and dozens injured by a gunman who has **almost certainly** exploited the country's liberal gun laws.
- In the **Red Sea**, the **Yemen**-based Houthi Movement continues to attack merchant shipping which will **almost certainly** force major shipping companies to alter their courses, with increased costs **likely** being absorbed by the consumer.
- The RSF have captured **Sudan's** second city and major humanitarian hub, Wad Madani. Its capture will **almost certainly** compound the existing humanitarian situation and increase food insecurity.



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

AMER

- 1 USA:** Colorado bars Trump
- 2 Venezuela:** US prisoner exchange secures continued sanctions relief
- 3 Chile:** Voters reject new constitution

EMEA

- 4 Iceland:** Volcanic eruption evokes memories of 2010
- 5 Czech Republic:** Mass shooting at Prague University
- 6 Israel and Gaza:** Israel rejects permanent ceasefire and vows to eliminate Hamas
- 7 Sudan:** RSF capture Sudan's second city and major humanitarian hub
- 8 Yemen:** Houthi attacks force shipping companies to suspend operations in the Red Sea
- 9 DRC:** General election marred by delays and controversy

APAC

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- 11 China:** Magnitude 6.2 earthquake kills at least 131 in rural China
- 12 Australia and New Zealand:** Canberra and Wellington pursue greater defence ties



Americas (AMER)

United States:

Colorado Supreme Court blocks Donald Trump from ballot.

A court challenge in Colorado has resulted in the state's Supreme Court ruling to disqualify former President Donald Trump from the Republican Party's upcoming primary ballot for his involvement in the 6 January 2021 riots, marking an unprecedented moment in US politics. The decision was justified on the grounds of the US Constitution's insurrection clause and marks the first time the clause has been invoked in US history. The decision has been condemned by the majority of Republicans and presidential rival candidate, Vivek Ramaswamy, pledged to drop out of the Republican primary in Colorado and called on Trump's other rivals to follow suit, suggesting failure to do so would be an endorsement of the decision.

Assessment: The decision to disqualify Trump from the Colorado ballot is a further manoeuvre that blurs the lines between the US' political and judicial systems and will almost certainly set up a contentious battle between the election campaign and the courts. Moreover, the legal challenge is highly unlikely to harm Trump's bid for the presidency and his campaign team will invariably leverage this to his political advantage. Trump's campaign team will undoubtedly appeal the decision and more importantly will likely manipulate the decision to bolster their narrative. Trump's campaign team will suggest he is a victim of the ruling elite who are exploiting every mechanism to block his route to the White House and will simply add this to the list of 91 other criminal charges and civil trials that are being used to undermine him. Many Democrats are likely cognisant of this and disapprove of such tactics as they will almost certainly help to galvanise Trump's base. Furthermore, the conservatives currently hold a six to three majority in the US Supreme Court, suggesting that Trump's appeal is likely to succeed. In fact, the most significant effect of this decision is likely to secure Trump's nomination, with all his Republican rivals rallying around him and lambasting the Colorado decision on a united front. With Trump's opponents using every legal or criminal means necessary to block the former president and the Republican's endeavouring to impeach Biden, the 2024 presidential campaign is set to be one of the most politically volatile episodes in modern US history.

Venezuela:

Prisoner exchange with US secures continued sanctions relief.

On 20 December, following months of negotiations, ten Americans detained in Venezuela were returned to the US, and at least 20 people linked to Venezuela's political opposition were released, after US President Joe Biden granted clemency to Alex Saab, an ally of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro. Saab had been accused of siphoning around USD 350 million out of Venezuela through the US as part of a bribery scheme linked to Venezuela's state-controlled exchange rate. Saab was greeted at the airport by Maduro himself.

Assessment: At the time of his arrest in 2020, Venezuela claimed to have designated Saab a diplomat who was negotiating shipments of fuel and humanitarian aid from Iran. His links to Tehran are highly likely what brought him to the attention of US authorities. Nevertheless, his release suggests that the improving relations between Caracas and Washington remain on the same trajectory. The White House said it would need to see progress on prisoner releases in order to continue with energy sanctions relief for Caracas. It is highly likely that Maduro desires to maintain this sanction relief as the government has already begun to benefit from the fiscal easing. The government has predicted it will get 27 percent more income from the state-run oil company, PDVSA, in 2024, likely allowing it to increase social spending ahead of next year's



election. Maduro will also likely try and use Saab's return to bolster his political strength internally ahead of elections, using the incident to highlight that he will fight for members of his party, whatever the resource required. For the opposition in Venezuela, some well-known opposition figures were among those released but it still remains unclear about Maduro's compliance with other parts of the US election deal. Ultimately Maduro will likely participate in the agreement until the benefits to him are outweighed by negative aspects.

Chile:

Voters reject the latest draft proposals for a new constitution.

On 17 December, Chilean voters once again voted to reject a draft new constitution. This is the second draft constitution in two years that the Chilean voters have rejected. The last constitution was rejected as voters perceived it as being too radically left-wing. This latest draft was rejected for being too right-wing. As a result, the country's 1980 constitution, which was drafted during the dictatorship of General Pinochet will remain in place, despite voters overwhelmingly having voted some years ago for a new or reformed constitution. President Boric has stated that in response to the two proposed constitutions being rejected, that there will be no further attempts to amend the country's constitution until at least 2026 when his term in office ends.

Assessment: As stated, this is the second proposed new constitution in two years that Chile has voted against adopting. Both were perceived as too radical and too extreme by the majority of the voters. Indeed, elements of this second draft constitution were perceived to be more socially and economically conservative than the existing era Pinochet document. Despite the double rejection, many Chileans still wish for constitutional change. This is because they feel that the current Pinochet constitution still hands too much power to the free market and has led to the country's rising inequality. These issues in turn sparked major political and civil unrest in 2019, ultimately leading to the efforts to draft a new constitution. As a result of the pledge by President Boric that he would not seek further constitutional change for the rest of his term, it is almost certain this will be the last major constitutional vote until at least 2025 or 2026. In the long-term, Chile will highly likely adopt a new constitution, as the current one has now been amended over 60 times since its adoption in the 1980s. In the short-term however, the Boric government is likely to seek to use what powers it currently has to focus on the country's long-term development and seek to try and minimise inequality within the constraints of the current constitution. The defeat of two successive constitutions for being too left and too right respectively, highlights the divisions present in Chilean politics, which have often been the catalyst for civil unrest within the country.

AMER Forecast. Anti-austerity protests have erupted in Buenos Aires, with thousands rallying against President Milei's economic policies. The president recently announced a 54% devaluation of the peso currency and cuts to subsidies. The new security minister introduced a protocol allowing federal forces to prevent road-blocking protests, and the government warned that those participating in such actions could lose state benefits. Given the economic crisis and opposition to government policies, ongoing protests are anticipated. Security forces may increasingly deploy crowd control measures, including tear gas and water cannons, to assert control if the protests persist.

Venezuela and Guyana have agreed not to resort to force to settle their territorial dispute over the oil-rich Essequibo region after a meeting between the two leaders. While Guyana's President Irfaan Ali and Venezuela's President Nicolás Maduro committed to refraining from escalating to a conflict, they were unable to make progress in resolving the long-standing dispute, deferring the matter to a joint commission for further consideration within three months. Essequibo, making up over two-thirds of Guyana's territory, has been a source of tension, exacerbated by Venezuela's recent referendum on establishing a state in the area.

At least five people have been killed across four northeastern US states due to severe storms.

Over 400,000 are currently without power in Maine due to storm and flooding has affected much of the New England area. A state of emergency has also been declared in the Essex and Franklin counties of New York State. The extent of the damage is expected to cause sustained disruption in the area. On 23 December, severe weather in the Western US and southern California is expected to disrupt travel during the holiday period, with heavy rain, snow, flooding or landslides expected across the region. In the remote region of Arequipa in Peru, a magnitude 6.0 earthquake struck near Chuquibamba on 20 December, with tremors felt as far away as the capital Lima and in parts of northern Chile. There have been reports of landslides but to date no reports of casualties. Given the extent of seismic activity in the Andes which makes up the “Pacific Ring of Fire”, there is a realistic possibility of aftershocks. In neighbouring Chile, wildfires continue to spread across the country, with several now forming in close proximity to the Santiago metropolitan area where approximately one-third of the country reside. Local authorities have warned residents in parts of the capital to stay inside and close windows due to the associated air pollution. A state of emergency has been declared across the Buenos Aires province due to a severe electric storm that has resulted in at least 14 deaths, with 13 reported in Bahia Blanca. The casualty toll could potentially increase in the coming days. The declaration of a state of emergency reflects the severity of the situation and is likely to involve heightened emergency response efforts to address the impact of the storm and provide assistance to affected areas and residents.



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Europe, Middle East & Africa (EMEA)

Iceland:

Volcanic eruption impacts south-west Iceland following weeks of tremors.

On the evening of 18 December, a volcanic eruption took place in south-western Iceland on the Reykjanes Peninsula. The eruption took place around 3 kilometres north of Grindavik, a small fishing settlement around 40 kilometres south-west of Iceland's capital Reykjavik. The eruption has posed no significant risk to life as Grindavik was evacuated on 11 November, following the impacts of hundreds of seismic tremors in the areas surrounding the settlement. However, reports indicate that toxic smoke could reach the capital, Reykjavik.

Assessment: The four-kilometre-wide fissure volcano is unlikely to cause any significant disruptions to travel across Iceland. Unlike the more disruptive eruptions of Eyjafjallajökull in 2010, which released around 250,000 million metric tonnes of ash, volcanologists indicate that the fissure volcano is physically unable to release ash at the sheer quantity required to cause notable travel disruptions. In the immediate hours succeeding the volcanic activity, officials at Reykjavik's Keflavik International Airport only recorded minor delays to services. Despite this, the longevity of the lava flows around the fissure is unclear. The fissure has the possibility to expand and cause more disruptive lava flows that have the ability to impact road networks surrounding Grindavik, and properties within the settlement itself. However, at this current time, the fissure shows no signs of expanding. Beyond ash-induced air pollution, the volcano is unlikely to pose any major threat to both lives and travel.

Czech Republic:

Worst mass shooting in Czech's modern history kills at least 14 at university.

On 21 December, a mass shooting at Charles University in central Prague, Czech Republic, left at least 14 dead and 25 injured, with at least 10 seriously injured. The shooter has been identified as 24-year-old student named David Kozak, who had no prior criminal record but legally possessed a "huge arsenal of weapons and ammunition." The motive is still under investigation, and the gunman is also suspected in the killing of his father and a separate incident involving a young man and his two-month-old daughter. The suspect reportedly killed himself before he could be detained by the police. Czech President Petr Pavel called for unity, and Saturday 23 December has been declared a National Day of Mourning.

Assessment: This event is the worst mass shooting in Czech modern history but is not too surprising given the country's permissive gun ownership laws. The Czech Republic recognises the "right to acquire, keep and bear firearms," and a constitutional amendment enacted in 2021 legally guarantees "the right to defend one's own life or the life of another person with a weapon." This amendment came in response to a European Commission proposal to restrict firearm possession across the EU which met stiff resistance in the Czech Republic. Gun laws in the country were relaxed after the fall of communism and gun ownership saw a resurgence. By 2020, there were over 307,000 legal gun owners in a country of about 10.6 million people. It is likely that the country's tradition of armament manufacture and the widespread ownership of firearms have contributed to the prevalence of mass shootings. Since 2000, there have been at least nine mass shootings where four or more people have been killed, which is disproportionately high for a relatively small population in a European country.



Sudan:

RSF capture Sudan's second city and major humanitarian hub.

The conflict in Sudan which erupted in April 2023 between the Sudanese government and the rebel group, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), is leading to a humanitarian catastrophe according to multiple NGOs operating in the war-torn country. During the reporting period, the RSF captured the country's second largest city, Wad Madani, in the Al Jazirah state in east-central Sudan. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) says at least 250,000 to 300,000 people have fled the state since the RSF advanced on the state capital on 15 December. Local sources report that the Sudanese police and army fled their positions in response to the RSF advance, leading to calls for the commander in chief of the Sudan Armed Forces, Abdelfattah Burhan, to be replaced.

Assessment: The capture of Wad Madani and the reportedly fleeing of government forces will almost certainly embolden the RSF who have been accused by both the UN and US of committing war crimes and genocide across the country. Furthermore, the city is less than 200km away from the capital Khartoum and its seizure will help facilitate future RSF operations directed towards the capital. Wad Madani was declared a safe zone and was being used as a humanitarian hub due to its previously assessed safety and proximity to major supply routes. Its capture will almost certainly decrease humanitarian access to many parts of the country and much of the aid will likely be seized by the RSF. It is assessed that up to 18 million people in Sudan are acutely food insecure and the advances of the RSF are likely to cause this figure to increase. Aid agencies and humanitarian groups are likely growing frustrated with the lack of international attention Sudan is receiving, especially when compared to Ukraine or the Gaza Strip. There is also growing concern over the alleged support from the UAE to the RSF, with the UAE accused of supplying the paramilitary group with arms and supplies. If true, then it is likely that the RSF will be able to sustain and even expand their operations. If the RSF sustain a similar operational tempo, it is likely that they will capture the grain producing regions in Al Jazirah, and the areas along the Blue Nile and White Nile rivers. In such a scenario, it is highly likely that greater internal displacement will occur, and harvests will be hugely disrupted, further compounding the humanitarian situation in the country.

Israel and the Gaza Strip:

Israel rejects ceasefire until Hamas are eliminated.

Throughout the reporting period, the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) have extended their clearing operations to target Hamas' Central Gaza Strip Brigade and transitioned into holding operations in parts of the northern Gaza Strip. The IDF have stated that they are trying to target the top three commanders in Hamas' Northern Gaza Strip Brigade. Hamas alongside other Palestinian militias are resisting IDF advances to the east and north of Khan Younis where they are conducting a deliberate defence, with Israel ordering new evacuations in southern Gaza and increasing the rate of its air strikes. Hamas have stated that they and other Palestinian groups have unanimously rejected the prospect of further prisoner exchanges until Israel ends the war. Militant groups continue to fire indirect weapon systems into Israel, but the frequency of these attacks has decreased, although Tel Aviv was subject to a mass rocket salvo launched by Hamas' al Qassem Brigades. In the West Bank, IDF operations continue to target Palestinian fighters in sensitive areas such as Nablus and Jenin. Hamas have called for widespread demonstrations in the West Bank for 22 December in support of a ceasefire. Lebanese Hezbollah have maintained their cross-border attacks and have launched rocket salvos into northern Israel but have yet to commit to a ground offensive, despite retaliatory strikes from the IDF. Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, is refusing to agree to a permanent ceasefire until Hamas surrender or are eliminated.

Assessment: With the IDF now committed to multiple parts of the Gaza Strip, there is a realistic possibility that they will become fixed and overstretched within the enclave, especially as other Palestinian militias are now involved in the fighting. There is a realistic possibility that Hamas' original plan was to limit its engagements with the IDF until the IDF were committed to several

parts of the Gaza Strip. Israel is likely reticent to grant a temporary ceasefire as Hamas are highly likely planning on using it as means to regroup, plan, and construct prepared defences against future IDF operations. Hamas' calls for demonstrations are likely aimed at further destabilising the West Bank, which will further serve to overstretch the IDF. Furthermore, widespread demonstrations will almost certainly escalate to violent confrontations between Palestinian fighters or civilians and the IDF, with incidents of Palestinian deaths being used to further undermine Israel on the international stage and attract support for the Palestinian cause. Without a cessation in the fighting, it is almost certain that the humanitarian situation in Gaza will reach critical levels. Pressure is mounting on the US to agree to a UN Security Council Resolution that will bring humanitarian assistance to those in need. After changes to the wording of a previous draft resolution that now refrains from using language that alludes to a ceasefire, it is looking increasingly likely that the US will either vote for or abstain from voting. Both outcomes will likely result in the new resolution being passed. However, if the US was to veto the resolution, it is likely that Hamas and other elements hostile to the US will call for more attacks on the US and its interests throughout the region.

Yemen and the Red Sea:

Houthi attacks force shipping companies to suspend operations in the Red Sea.

Throughout the reporting period, the Yemen-based and Iranian-backed militant group, the Houthi Movement, have maintained their attacks of merchant shipping within the Red Sea. There have been at least six attacks on merchant shipping since 13 December involving anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs), one way attack drones and attempted hijackings from fast boats. Several attacks have been interdicted by US, French and UK naval assets in the region. The scale and intensity of the attacks has forced several major shipping and oil and gas companies into suspending any operations within the Red Sea, including Maersk, MSC, Hapag-Lloyd and BP. The effect the Houthi attacks are having on international shipping has led to the deployment of a US-led naval taskforce deploying to the Red Sea known as "Operation Prosperity Guardian". The taskforce will include military assets from several countries, including the US, UK, France, Australia, Canada, Italy, Bahrain and several other nations, with more expected to join. The Houthis have responded by stating that they will continue to attack merchant shipping in the region as long as Israel conducts military operations against Hamas.

Assessment: Recent attacks in the Red Sea indicate that the Houthi Movement are no longer limiting their attacks to Israeli-linked shipping. The Houthis are now almost certainly attacking shipping linked to countries that are politically or military supporting Israel, a move that is highly likely endorsed by both Hamas and Iran. Shipping insurance premiums for the Red Sea have nearly doubled, and the threat has forced companies to consider longer routes around Africa's Cape of Good Hope, impacting global supply chains. The situation may worsen as insurers reevaluate policies, potentially demanding additional coverage, and Houthi attacks could lead to delays, higher operating costs, and increased fuel consumption- all of which are likely to be absorbed by the consumer. The disruptions add strain to a global economy still recovering from COVID-19 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and will likely affect energy-importing countries disproportionately, and likely contribute to headline inflation across much of the world. Whilst Operation Prosperity Guardian aims to protect shipping in the Red Sea, it is likely that it will face a number of difficulties and could even escalate the situation. Questions remain as to whether the air defence coverage will be sufficient enough to protect the entire Red Sea, especially when the Houthis are using cheap, Iranian-derived drones and missiles which could be layered and fired near simultaneously to overwhelm air defence systems. Should the Houthis be successful in closing of the Red Sea for a protracted period, there is a realistic possibility that the economic damage incurred to countries within the Saudi-led coalition could lead to a resumption of hostilities with the Houthis. In such a scenario, it is likely that the militant group will restart their missile and drone attacks on both Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC):

Elections take place across the DRC.

On 20 December polling took place across the Democratic Republic of the Congo as the state faces its fourth general election since their restoration of democracy in 2006. The election comes at a volatile time for the country, which in recent months has seen a resurgence of violence in the east. In mid-October 2023, the March 23 Movement (M23), a rebel paramilitary group, launched an offensive in the North Kivu Region, capturing multiple settlements. The offensive has marked the election with controversy with President Felix Tshisekedi announcing that regions impacted by rebel violence will not be eligible to vote. The voting continued into 21 December 2023 after several polling stations saw delays prompted by protests and violence. In Bunia, Congolese police deployed live ammunition and tear gas to disperse a recently ransacked polling station. Results for the election are scheduled to be announced around 31 December.

Assessment: The results of the election are likely to cause long-term civil unrest and violence across the volatile state. Following the election of Felix Tshisekedi in 2018, ensuing violence in response to his succession saw 34 people killed, 59 wounded, and around 240 arrested. Opposition parties have indicated that they are likely to dispute the result of the election by any means. Martin Fayulu, runner-up in the 2018 election, has stated his supporters will not accept the result if the voter turnout is insufficient. Voter turnout has gradually declined in the DRC since the reestablishment of elections in 2006. Tshisekedi's disputed victory in 2018 saw only 48% of the Congo's eligible population turn to the ballot box. The highly likely threat of opposition disputes is almost certain to plunge the fragile state into even greater turmoil. The M23's progression in the North Kivu has seen fighting within 20 kilometres of the province's capital, Goma. Attempts to curtail the M23 offensive and other militant groups like the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) are likely to be hindered by nationwide civil unrest, which is likely a condition the groups will exploit. Security force crackdowns in the DRC are typically violent, with live ammunition often deployed to disperse large crowds. Subsequently, it is likely that if Tshisekedi preserves his presidency, the Congo is expected to plunge into nationwide violent unrest, reflective of the country's turbulent history in the early 2000s.

EMEA Forecast. Junior doctors in England have initiated a 72-hour strike in their ongoing dispute with the government over pay levels, resulting in significant disruption to the National Health Service. Seeking a 35 percent pay rise, junior doctors, who constitute half of the medical workforce, are engaging in their longest-ever walkout over six days. The government is offering an average increase of 8.8 percent, with no additional concessions anticipated from Prime Minister Rishi Sunak. The strikes have so far impacted over 1 million appointments and procedures, costing around GBP 2 billion. In France, Eurotunnel's French site staff unions launched an unexpected strike after rejecting a pay increase, which led to the cancellation of all trains to London via the Channel Tunnel. The strike only lasted a matter of hours after Eurotunnel reached an agreement with the unions. With an agreement reached, further strikes are unlikely during the Christmas period. Germany's constitutional court has ordered a partial repeat of the 2021 federal election in 455 electoral districts in Berlin due to irregularities. This ruling is not expected to significantly impact the ruling coalition's majority led by Chancellor Olaf Scholz. The far-left Linke party, which holds two crucial Berlin direct mandates, is unlikely to be heavily affected. The 2021 elections in Berlin faced challenges such as a shortage of ballots and long queues at polling stations. Also in the German capital, hundreds of farmers and their tractors gathered to protest the government's plans to cut diesel subsidies and tax breaks for agricultural vehicles as part of Berlin's 2024 austerity measures. The planned cuts, aimed at reducing greenhouse emissions, have sparked opposition from farmers who argue it threatens their livelihood and the competitiveness of Germany's agricultural sector. The management of Polish public television, radio, and news agency PAP has been dismissed, leading to the halt of a news channel's broadcasting. Critics argue that the media outlets had become politicised under the previous government and served as a propaganda tool during Law and Justice's (PiS) eight years in office. This move is seen as a swift and decisive action by Donald Tusk's new coalition but was

met by a sit-in from members of the ousted government. Such an episode could serve as a harbinger of future political unrest in the country as Tusk's coalition attempts to wrest power from the PiS. Egypt's President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi secured a third term in a vote lacking serious challengers after an alleged campaign of arrests and intimidation, winning 89.6 percent of the vote. The election, held amid Egypt's economic crisis and the Israel-Gaza conflict, faced criticism for lacking genuine competition, with state apparatus allegedly preventing serious contenders. Despite the controversy of the result, civil unrest is unlikely given the government's traditional brutal suppression of it. Talks over Ethiopia's controversial Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Blue Nile River have concluded without a successful agreement, with Ethiopia accusing Egypt of possessing a "colonial mindset". Construction of the dam, initiated in 2011, has been a source of contention, with multiple negotiations failing to yield a binding resolution. The dam, nearing completion, began generating electricity last year but is not yet fully operational. Concerns persist that if Egypt and Sudan are adversely affected, tensions in the region could escalate. Angola has decided to leave the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) after joining relatively recently in 2007. The country's oil minister stated that OPEC does not serve Angola's interests and joins other mid-sized producers Ecuador and Qatar, which have left OPEC in the last decade. Oil accounts for 90 percent of Angola's exports and it is likely that the government feels it can accumulate more revenue outside of the Saudi-dominated group.

Cyprus has reportedly disrupted an alleged Iranian plot targeting Israeli businessmen, leading to the arrest of two Iranian asylum-seekers. The suspects, linked to Revolutionary Guard, were detained by Cypriot security services in a joint operation with Israel's Mossad. The authorities believe the plot involved planned killings of primarily Israeli businessmen, with the detained Iranians facing deportation. This marks the third alleged Iranian plot targeting Israelis in Cyprus in over a year and has almost certainly been motivated by the war in Gaza. In Niger, French forces are expected to have fully withdrawn from the country after the current military junta requested them to do so after assuming power. It is almost certain that jihadist groups will exploit the retrograde of Western forces and increase their attacks within the region. However, Niger is likely to turn to Russia's Wagner Group or other private military companies, who will doubtlessly be far more malevolent in their counterterrorism operations. In Somalia, the US has conducted its first airstrike on al-Shabaab militants in over four months as Somali forces are conducting clearance operations in parts of the country's south. The target was reportedly a senior ranking al-Shabaab commander, and his death is likely to provoke a violent response from the militant group. Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) militants who have ties to the Islamic State group, have killed at least 10 people in an attack in Uganda's Kamwenge district. The ADF, established in the 1990s, continues to carry out deadly attacks despite military efforts to counter them, including airstrikes and joint operations between Uganda and the DRC. The militants crossed into Uganda from the DRC and are likely exploiting the relative safe havens of the border areas and the current political instability in the DRC to launch cross border raids into Uganda. As Christmas approaches, further ADF attacks on Christian communities are likely.

In northern Europe, Storm Pia has hit parts of Scotland with 185kmph winds, bringing down power lines and trees, resulting in property damage, power outages and disrupted travel services. Whilst the weather has settled over the UK, the storm is expected to bring adverse weather over the North Sea and could bring strong winds and heavy rain to northern continental Europe. An explosion at an oil terminal in Conakry, Guinea, resulted in at least 13 deaths and 178 injuries. The incident led to the closure of schools and petrol stations, with authorities advising the public to stay at home. The cleanup process is expected to take a considerable amount of time. As the only refinery in Guinea, the explosion is likely to disrupt oil product supplies, potentially causing shortages, price increases, and possible protests. In South Africa, a wildfire on the slopes of a mountain near Cape Town has threatened the local area, resulting in at least one neighbourhood being evacuated and has injured at least five firefighters. South African firefighters have deployed helicopters to contain the blaze. Like much of the southern hemisphere, Africa will likely suffer from the multifarious effects of El Nino as the summer season begins.



Asia Pacific (APAC)

Thailand:

Parliament to debate allowing LGBTQ marriages.

On 20 December, the Thai cabinet endorsed a bill which would allow members of the country's LGBTQ+ community to get married. Part of the changes will see the Civil and Commercial Code changing the words men and women, husband and wife to individual and marriage partners. The draft plan would grant LGBTQ+ couples the same equal and legal rights as their heterosexual counterparts.

Assessment: Thailand is globally seen as having a reputation for acceptance and inclusivity for its LGBTQ+ individuals. However, the LGBTQ+ community lack many legal protections and rights, whilst away from major urban areas discrimination continues to occur frequently. The Thai Parliament has previously tried to pass legislation which would allow marriage and legal protections for LGBTQ+ couples. Yet, none of those previous bills have passed through parliament, a sign of the power of conservative opposition in the country. This time, activists and politicians are more convinced this bill will pass through parliament. This is because not only has it been endorsed by the country's cabinet, but in the country's May 2023 general election, all major parties spoke of bringing marriage equality to the country. Once the bill has passed parliament, it would remain for King Maha Vajiralongkorn to endorse the bill before it becomes law. In a sign of how confident the government are that this bill will pass, they have already begun discussions on amending the country's pension laws, to make sure that same-sex couples have equal pension rights. If the bill passes, Thailand will be the first country in Southeast Asia to allow same-sex marriages and will be only the third in Asia, after Taiwan and Nepal. There is a realistic possibility that Thailand's decision could inspire other countries in the region to follow suit or at least repeal some of their more regressive laws concerning LGBTQ+ relationships.

China:

Magnitude 6.2 earthquake kills at least 131 people in Jishishan county, Gansu province.

Just before midnight on 18 December, a magnitude 6.2 earthquake struck Jishishan county, Gansu province, near the border with Qinghai province. More than 155,000 buildings were damaged or destroyed and at least 131 people were killed and over 1000 more were injured, with dozens still missing. About 2,200 search and rescue personnel, including those from the fire department and forest brigade, as well as professional emergency rescue workers, were dispatched to the disaster zone; hundreds from the military and police were also deployed.

Assessment: The 72 hours after an earthquake are the most likely time to rescue survivors, but it is almost certain that the extreme winter conditions around the quake epicentre in Gansu hindered search and rescue efforts; temperatures fell to about minus 15 degrees Celsius in the hours following. With dozens still missing, it is highly likely that the death toll will rise. Gansu is one China's poorest regions and thus the economic loss will be comparatively lower than if a populous centre was targeted. Crucially a major hydropower dam 50 kilometres from the epicentre was unaffected by the tremors, with the dam on the upper Yellow River operating normally. However, following the aftermath of any natural disaster, the government response is closely monitored. Water, electricity, transportation, communications and other infrastructure has been damaged and while the local government has received 20 million yuan (USD 2.8 million) for the emergency response, as well as 2,600 tents, 10,400 beds, 10,400 quilts, 10,400 mattresses, and 1,000 stoves, many have been forced into extremes such as gathering in fields, burning wheat straw for warmth, and taking refuge in cars. If the already poor region does not receive necessary



support, civil unrest is a realistic possibility. Due to the rural nature of the region affected however, any protests are highly likely to be isolated.

Australia and New Zealand:

Australia and New Zealand pursue greater defence ties.

On 20 December, New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon, visited his Australian counterpart, Anthony Albanese in the recently elected premier's first state visit. During the visit the two leaders announced their intentions to pursue greater defensive ties between the two states. The historic allies have agreed to meetings between their respective defence and foreign ministers in early 2024 to ensure a coordinated approach to regional defence.

Assessment: The decision to pursue greater ties between the neighbouring states forms part of a greater response by the West against growing Chinese influences in the Pacific region. China's territorial claims over the South China Sea have seen growing confrontation with many of its neighbours. On the same day of the Luxon-Albanese announcement, Chinese foreign minister, Wang Yi, warned his Filipino counterpart of the potential of growing force over frequent confrontations between Chinese and Filipino vessels. The territorial ambitions of the Chinese have in turn witnessed a growing pursuit of ties between Pacific States and the West. The AUKUS Agreement, signed between Australia, the UK and the US in 2021 aims to preserve peace and stability across the Indo-Pacific. 'Pillar one' of the agreement has recently facilitated the purchasing of UK-US nuclear-powered submarines by the Australians. The first pillar proves divisive for New Zealand which has barred docking rights for nuclear submarines since 1984. Despite Luxon's view that this position is non-negotiable, the New Zealand leader is keen to contribute to AUKUS Pillar II. The second pillar calls for greater information-sharing around the development of military technologies to bolster Western defensive capabilities. Luxon's determination to pursue greater ties with Australia in turn suggests a willingness to defend Western interests in the Pacific, but also modernise the New Zealand Armed Forces. The willingness to strengthen such ties indicates a growing determination by the West to counter increasing Chinese influence in the Pacific and is likely to further escalate Sino-American tensions in the long-term.

APAC Forecast. In Islamabad, Baluchis demonstrating against Pakistan's alleged mass arrests, mistreatment and extra-judicial killings of Baluchi men have marched 1600km to the nation's capital. The police deployed tear gas and water cannons to disperse the crowds and arrested hundreds. After making the long journey from Baluchistan, protestors are likely to remain in the capital for several days and provoke more heavy-handed responses from the police. Also in Pakistan, the authorities continue to identify, detain and deport undocumented Afghans en masse, raising concerns of terrorism and a worsening of the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. There have been mass protests throughout Bangladesh involving members of Bangladesh's ruling Awami League and supporters of the political opposition. With an election scheduled in January, further instances of civil unrest are almost certain.

In India, the ethnic conflict in Manipur state has resulted in the introduction of curfews and internet outages in order to contain the violence. The measures were introduced a day before the mass burial of almost 90 victims and security measures remain enhanced throughout the state. In Myanmar, Amnesty International has accused the military junta of committing indiscriminate attacks on civilians and employing banned cluster munitions in its conflict with ethnic minority insurgents. The military is facing coordinated rebel assaults in Shan state and western Rakhine state, and it appears that the momentum is with the rebel groups. Over 300,000 people have fled the fighting since October, exacerbating a crisis that emerged following the 2021 coup. Beijing has increased its efforts to broker a ceasefire, however an immediate cessation in the fighting looks unlikely. On the 18 December, North Korea fired its most advanced inter-continental ballistic missile which travelled approximately 1000km before landing in the sea outside of Japan's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). This launch is likely in response to the recent announcement of

South Korea and the USA to step up their deterrence plans over the North Korean nuclear threat and will begin sharing missile information in real time. In addition, international troops stationed on the South Korean side of the truce village of Panmunjom on the border with North Korea, who had previously been unarmed, can now resume carrying guns, according to the United Nations Command (UNC). This decision is in response to North Korean soldiers resuming "an armed security posture" in the area. These events will undoubtedly raise concerns about regional security and the ongoing tensions on the Korean Peninsula and the potential start of a new Cold War in the Asia-Pacific region.

Heavy rain has paralysed several parts of India's southern state of Tamil Nadu, inundating roads, affecting train services, and leaving authorities scrambling to rescue those stranded. The deluge follows the damage caused by Cyclone Michaung, with Tamil Nadu receiving almost 50mm of rainfall, compared to the normal 2.5mm for this time of year. The state government declared a state of emergency, citing "record rain," and rescue efforts are currently underway, with neighbourhoods submerged and stranded passengers awaiting assistance. Wildfires in Western Australia have threatened the major city of Perth, with several still active in close proximity to the state capital. On 16-17 December, an early summer heatwave swept over large parts of Australia, helping to fuel dozens of bushfires across the country. In north Queensland, the authorities urged thousands of people to move to higher ground because of the danger of flooding from torrential rains caused ex-Tropical Cyclone Jasper, including in some of the major suburbs of Cairns. Extreme heat, drought, cyclones, and subsequent flooding are all expected to plague parts of Australia, which is suffering from the El Nino effects, with major disruptions anticipated during the festive season.

