



Global Intelligence Summary

REPORTING PERIOD: 16 FEB – 23 FEB



Global Intelligence Summary

Week 7: 16 February – 23 February

Executive Summary

- **Israel** will almost **certainly continue** its pre-ground offensive activity in Rafah, whilst also seeking to engage in the latest round of peace talks in Paris. International condemnation of Tel Aviv is also **likely** to grow stronger as the ICJ continues to hear about Israeli actions in the West Bank.
- The **EU's** deployment of a naval task force to the **Red Sea** will **almost certainly** help to protect merchant shipping, but there is a **realistic possibility** **Iran** will use the Houthis to attack EU vessels to place further pressure on Israel.
- A deteriorating economic situation in **Nigeria** is **likely** to trigger civil unrest.
- In **Nepal**, rare sectarian violence between Hindus and Muslims is **likely** an indication of a future trend as Hindu nationalism increases.



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

AMER

- 1 Mexico:** 700,000 protests proposed electoral reforms
- 2 Haiti:** Senior officials indicted for assassination of former president
- 3 Uruguay:** Surge in narco-related violence

EMEA

- 4 Israel:** Post-war proposals unveiled, second ICJ case opens, and US vetoes Gaza ceasefire
- 5 Red Sea:** EU task force deploys to region
- 6 Nigeria:** Country faces worst economic crisis of recent times
- 7 DRC:** M23 advance on Sake amid fierce fighting

APAC

- 8 Nepal:** Curfew imposed in response to religious violence
- 9 China:** Volunteer armies re-established
- 10 Myanmar:** Junta on the verge of losing control of all bases in Rakhine State
- 11 Australia:** Government announces plans to double the size of the navy



Americas (AMER)

Haiti:

Senior officials indicted for involvement in the assassination of former president.

This reporting period has seen the judge investigating the assassination of former President Jovenel Moïse indict his widow, Martine Moïse, ex-Prime Minister Claude Joseph and the former chief of Haiti's National Police, Léon Charles, on charges related to the assassination. Others who have been charged with involvement include, Dimitri Hérard, the presidential security chief; John Joël Joseph, a former Haitian senator; and Windelle Coq, a Haitian judge whom the authorities say is a fugitive. Each individual has been charged with several crimes and across all those indicted these include murder; attempted murder; possession and the illegal carrying of weapons; conspiracy against the internal security of the state; and criminal association. Alongside this, it is stated in the charges that Ms Moïse conspired to have her husband killed so she could replace him as president. Those who have been charged have stated that they are innocent of the charges brought against them and claim that the incumbent Prime Minister, Ariel Henry, is weaponising the justice system to try and remove his opponents and "benefit" from the former president's death.

Comment: The announcement of the indictments is almost certain to lead to further destabilisation in the already fragile nation beset by gang violence and protests against the government of Prime Minister Ariel Henry. Since Henry took office, gangs have taken control of the majority of the capital, Port au Prince, and he has indefinitely postponed elections, leading to accusations of authoritarianism. In addition to the newly unveiled indictments, several of the alleged conspirators are already on trial in the US state of Florida for participating in a plot to use Colombian mercenaries to kidnap President Moïse. In response to the allegations that he was using the assassination as a way to remove possible opponents, Henry has stated that the country's judiciary was independent, and as such judges were free to issue their orders in accordance with the law and their conscience. It should be noted however that Henry has also previously been implicated in the assassination plot. A New York Times investigation found that Henry had close links with Joseph-Félix Badio, an alleged mastermind of the assassination and that the two stayed in close contact even after the assassination, whilst multiple Haitian officials have also alleged the involvement of Mr Henry. With conflicting narratives and Haiti's fragile state, the full extent of those involved in the assassination may not emerge for a considerable time, if ever.

Mexico:

Several hundred thousand march to protest proposed electoral reforms.

On 18 February, Mexico saw around 700,000 people take to the streets in major cities across the country to demonstrate support for the country's election authority amid accusations that incumbent President, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO) is seeking to undermine it ahead of the country's presidential elections in June. The accusations come after AMLO placed before Congress, a wholesale series of proposed constitutional changes, including changes to the National Electoral Institute (NEI). Reforms proposed for the NEI would see it replaced by a National Institute of Elections and Consultations, reduce the number of counsellors on the body, and subject counsellors to a popular vote. These proposals come on top of reforms that AMLO has already made to the NEI, which dramatically reduced its funding and severely curtailed its oversight of electoral campaign spending, reforms which at the time observers stated could "poison democracy".

Comment: AMLO has long claimed that the NEI and the judiciary are part of a “right-wing conspiracy” seeking to undermine his administration. He has also alleged that the NEI “engineered” his election defeats in 2006 and 2012. In recent months, AMLO has also attacked journalists in extremely long press briefings and tied them into the same narrative. It is almost certain the proposed reforms are designed to try and influence the country’s forthcoming June Presidential election. Whilst it is unlikely that they will pass before the elections, they will be designed to try and further cement the partisan divide between those who support AMLO and his governing MORENA party and those who are opposed to it. Whilst AMLO is not able to stand again, his successor, Claudia Sheinbaum is likely to win if opinion polls are accurate. Under Sheinbaum, it is almost certain that the policy platforms of AMLO will be continued. However, it looks increasingly likely that Sheinbaum will also face several fiscal challenges and her response to these may in the future lead to further civil unrest which could fuse with the wider disconnect amongst those voters who feel that Mexico under AMLO and MORENA has seen its democracy steadily eroded.

Uruguay:

Narco crime spurring increased violence across Uruguay.

Recent publications have reported that there were 382 murders recorded across Uruguay in 2023, the majority of which were narco-related. Gang violence has continued to grow across Uruguay, a country that was previously spared the problems faced by many of its South American counterparts. The United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has identified Uruguay as a transit country for drugs primarily bound for Europe, often through sea-borne containers from the port of Montevideo. Recent seizures of over EUR one billion worth of cocaine in Germany have raised flags as to the true extent of Uruguay’s drug smuggling networks. Uruguayan government and police officials have publicly admitted the growing drug problem and have appealed to the American Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agency for assistance. However, in 2019 the DEA closed its office in Montevideo following strained relations with local law enforcement and the previous administration under President Vazquez. Despite most drug-laden shipments being destined for Europe, Spain is the only European country with a permanent police attaché in Uruguay.

Forecast: Whilst international law enforcement remains relatively non-existent in Uruguay, it is almost certain that drug distribution and violence will continue to rise across the country. Given that the majority of the drug shipments seem destined for Europe, the DEA and other US agencies will likely remain reticent to lend assistance to Uruguay’s increasing narco problem. In addition, the US has been plagued by a fentanyl epidemic which has demoted the significance of cocaine and shifted the DEA’s efforts, likely another contributing factor to the agency’s withdrawal from Uruguay. This will likely force the Uruguayan government into appealing to its European counterparts in an attempt to help bolster its efforts, with Montevideo likely arguing that demand for narcotics in Europe is contributing to increasing crime and gang warfare on the streets of Uruguay. From 2005-10 and 2015-20, Uruguay’s presidency was held by Tabaré Vázquez and in 2010-15 by Jose Mujica. Both presidents were left-wing and held a very liberal stance on drugs, a situation that was potentially exploited by the narcos. Narcos also likely saw Uruguay as a logistics hub that bypasses US counter-narcotic patrols. As the port is so far south, exports from Montevideo transit straight into the South Atlantic and circumvent traditional US counter-narcotic patrol areas such as the Caribbean Sea, Eastern Pacific or Western Atlantic. Uruguay’s 2020 election resulted in a more conservative, centre-right, and US-aligned president who has prioritised law enforcement, and international cooperation and introduced legislative measures to curb drug-related crime. However, the small South American nation of just 3.5 million people, will likely struggle to combat the cartels alone, as evidenced by its calls for international assistance.

AMER Summary and Forecast.

Politics, Economics and Civil Unrest.

In the United States, Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin is expected to testify to Congress on the subject of health secrecy on 29 February. This comes in the wake of his recent cancer diagnosis. The hearing is almost certainly to be politically contentious, with some Republicans arguing that Austin should be stripped of his role over his secrecy. Whilst this is unlikely, if he appears to flounder under questioning, or if it illuminates further lapses of protocols from the Defence Secretary then this appearance could lead some Democrats to reconsider their support for Austin.

Security, Armed Conflict and Terror.

This reporting period has seen Colombia's ELN rebel group suspend ongoing peace talks with the government. Resultingly, in the sixth round of peace talks being frozen. According to the ELN, the Colombian government have begun breaking promises made by President Petro around the number of peace talks. This is as certain Colombian regions have initiated "regional" peace talks, whilst Petro promised all talks would be national. The latest freezing of the peace talks highlights how elusive Petro's goal of "total peace" remains. ELN remains concentrated along the country's Western Pacific coast and the Venezuelan border. There is a realistic possibility that some units may once again seek to launch attacks in the wake of the peace talk freeze, and such attacks are almost certain to be concentrated in these regions where the ELN is strongest.

Environment, Health and Miscellaneous.

This reporting period has seen US authorities charge the leader of a Japanese crime syndicate, Takeshi Ebisawa, with conspiring to traffic nuclear materials from Myanmar for expected use by Iran in nuclear weapons. The new charges were contained in a superseding indictment after he was already charged with international narcotics trafficking in 2022. The nuclear material in question was verified by the US as being "weapons-grade". This case shines a light on how international criminal networks, arms dealers, rouge states and rebel groups all interact. As such there is a realistic possibility that in the coming months, more arrests of those involved in such trades will be announced. In Venezuela, the death toll from the gold mine collapse in La Paragua is almost certain to increase over the next reporting period. Already at least 16 are confirmed dead, and there are a wide range of estimates for how many remain trapped inside the mine. Venezuela's poorly regulated mining industry has grown in recent years as the country's economy and oil output both collapsed, with both the government and local residents turning to mining to try and supplant their incomes. It is almost certain that in the region where the disaster has taken place, there will be an increase in localised civil unrest and anti-government demonstrations as those with links to the mine protest the perceived lacklustre response from the authorities.



Europe, Middle East & Africa (EMEA)

Israel and the Gaza Strip:

Post-war proposals unveiled, second ICJ case opens, and US vetoes Gaza ceasefire.

This reporting period has seen several notable updates in relation to the ongoing war in Gaza. On 20 February, the US vetoed, for the third time, a UN security resolution demanding an immediate ceasefire in the conflict. Thirteen members of the UN Security Council supported this resolution, whilst the UK decided to abstain. It has also been stated by a member of the Israeli war cabinet that unless all the remaining hostages were freed by 10 March, which marks the start of Ramadan, then the Israel Defence Force's (IDF) ground offensive on Rafah will commence. In the wake of events at the UN and the announcement that the Rafah offensive would commence on 10 March, it was then also announced that further ceasefire talks would take place in Paris, with the US, Qatar and Egypt playing key roles. Then, on 23 February, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu unveiled Israel's plans for Gaza after hostilities ended. This draft proposal directly contradicts the ideas of Washington. It makes no mention of a role for the Palestinian Authority, rejects all steps towards the recognition of a Palestinian State and sees Israel seize a substantial amount of land from the enclave to form a security buffer. Meanwhile, the International Criminal Court (ICC) has begun to hear arguments surrounding the lawfulness of Israeli actions in the West Bank Palestinian territories.

Comment: The US vetoing the UN Security Council resolution is unsurprising, as is the resulting criticism of the US. The US has tried to mitigate the bad press by pointing out that it did attempt to circulate and get passed a rival draft resolution which called for another temporary pause in the fighting. The news of further ceasefire talks will be seen as promising, however, talks collapsed less than two weeks after Netanyahu rejected "delusional" proposals put forward by Hamas. In the context of the peace talks, there is a realistic probability that the recently unveiled plans from Netanyahu are a negotiating tactic. However, given the political constitution of much of the Israeli government, it also remains possible that these plans are those that the Israeli government wishes to see imposed after the conflict. The news that the IDF ground invasion of Rafah will commence on 10 March if the hostages are not released comes as international condemnation of such a plan continues to grow. There are now over 1.5 million displaced people in Rafah, and throughout this reporting period, and ahead of the expected ground offensive, this reporting period has seen an intensification of IDF airstrikes on Rafah and its surrounding area as they seek to shape conditions ahead of the ground offensive. Finally, the ICC court case on Israeli actions in the West Bank is set to last until the next reporting period, and the ruling on whether Israeli actions in the occupied West Bank is expected in the summer. Whilst this ICC hearing is separate from others in the court regarding Gaza, it is likely that in the eyes of protesters and activists, the two will be conflated. In the Western world, this case will likely further fuel pro-Palestinian unrest, whilst the case and its hearing will almost certainly precipitate protests in the West Bank.

The Red Sea:

European Union launches naval mission to preserve Red Sea shipping.

On 19 February, European Union (EU) Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, announced an EU Naval Task Force has been launched to protect Red Sea shipping lanes. The mission, titled Operation Aspides, will see contributions from the navies of France, Belgium, Italy, and Germany in preserving EU interests from recent Houthi attacks. On the same day of the announcement, a British-registered vessel, the Rubymar, sustained two direct missile hits while transiting through

the Bab al-Mandab Strait. The Houthi-attack initially was thought to have sunk the vessel, with the 24 crew members successfully abandoning the ship for nearby Djibouti. However, reports from 21-22 February indicate the vessel is listing as it is slowly towed towards Djiboutian ports. The attack results in the Rubymar being one of over 40 vessels attacked by the Houthis since the crisis' outbreak on 19 November 2023.

Assessment: The deployment of the EU task force appears to be a direct response to the escalating threat posed by Houthi attacks targeting vessels in the Red Sea. The recent strike on the Rubymar represents one of the closest instances where the Houthis have come to successfully sinking a Western cargo vessel. Following this attack, the United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO) issued a 72-hour warning for Red Sea mariners due to increased sightings of unmanned attack drones. The crisis in the Red Sea has prompted major shipping corporations, such as Maersk and Hapag-Lloyd, to opt out of transiting the route altogether. The near-sinking of the Rubymar is likely to discourage further companies from using these shipping lanes, as the Houthi rebels have demonstrated their capability to disable or significantly disrupt major cargo vessels and have continued to target vessels with no obvious attribution to Israel, the US or the UK. This escalation poses a significant challenge to the EU, as it undermines the bloc's dependence on Red Sea shipping routes. The EU naval task force will almost certainly increase air defence coverage in the waters adjacent to Yemen and will likely decrease the effectiveness of Houthi attacks. However, Brussels has indicated that the task force will operate solely in a defensive capacity and will not be authorised to target launch sites within Yemeni territory, and therefore will not be in a position to degrade Houthi attack capability. Furthermore, the EU may have miscalculated if it believes the Houthis won't attack the task force unless it strikes the Houthis. There is a realistic possibility that Iran may seek to have the Houthis attack the EU task force as a means to influence the West into pressuring Israel for a ceasefire.

Nigeria:

Rising inflation and decreasing currency value.

During the previous reporting period, the Nigerian Naira has fallen to an all-time low in value. On 22 February, the Naira was valued at 1606 to 1 US Dollar. This is around a 230 percent loss in value over the previous twelve months. Analysts have cited several factors leading to the drop in the Naira value including the lack of foreign exchange liquidity, accelerated inflation increases and the government ending of fuel subsidies in May 2023. In January, inflation was reported at nearly 30 percent reaching heights it had not witnessed since 1996. Protests relating to the ongoing rise in the cost of living as well as general economic hardship erupted across much of the country. Alongside soaring inflation and a plunging currency, Nigeria is also battling record levels of government debt, high unemployment, power shortages and declining oil production, which is its main export. Nigeria is currently sub-Saharan's largest economy by size but has shrunk by around USD 100 billion from its heights in 2014.

Assessment: It is unlikely that the Nigerian Naira will stabilise in value anytime soon as President Bola Tinubu continues to float the currency. Under President Tinubu, Nigeria has enacted a wide range of economic reforms aimed at attracting foreign investment. Nigeria boasts a large, young, educated and English-speaking workforce that would make it a desirable location for foreign investment. By floating the Naira, the Tinubu administration has purposefully devalued the currency to make Nigeria even more attractive for foreign investment and to increase Nigeria's export competitiveness. However, the floating of the Naira has likely made the purchasing of imported goods far more expensive, leading to inflation, which has been compounded by the removal of the fuel subsidy. Food prices have been disproportionately affected, which have increased by over 35 percent, driving fears over food insecurity. Following the removal of fuel subsidies in 2023 the price of fuel increased by over 200 percent on the black market causing nationwide protests and strikes that lasted for weeks across Nigeria. Similar levels of protests are likely to occur if the Tinubu administration fails to curb current inflation levels. Moreover, the government has stated that it has saved over one trillion Naira by removing the subsidies, which

it has said it will redirect into infrastructure investment. It is likely that many Nigerians are sceptical of this and have seen little evidence of the investment, providing an additional driver for unrest. If the economic downturn continues, it could affect the security and stability of Nigeria, dissuading foreign investment and worsening the country's current brain drain.

Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC):

M23 advance on Sake amid fierce fighting.

Fighting between Congolese government forces and the M23 rebel group has intensified this reporting period. The fighting has centred around the town of Sake, approximately 18 kilometres from North Kivu's provincial capital of Goma. Armed clashes have also reportedly taken place on the border of neighbouring Walikale administrative area, which until recently had been unaffected by the years-long conflict. The government of the DRC, which has often accused neighbouring Rwanda of supporting M23, has also accused it of carrying out a drone attack on Goma International Airport. The increase in violence and worsening security situation in the country's east has triggered large-scale protests in Kinshasa in recent weeks, marked by the use of tear gas and the burning of flags of Western nations. The UN's Security Council on 21 February announced that they were sanctioning a further group of leaders involved in the fighting. The sanctions include an arms embargo, travel ban, and asset freeze. They target two leaders of the Allied Defence Forces (ADF), one leader each from the Twirwaneho armed group, the National Coalition of the People for the Sovereignty of Congo (CNPSC), and Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), and the military spokesperson for the M23 rebel group.

Assessment: The eastern provinces of the DRC have long been unstable and home to a long-running armed conflict perpetrated by a wide constellation of actors. However, the advance on Sake by M23 is a major development. This is because Sake lies on N2, which is the only road running west out of Goma towards the rest of the DRC. As such, if M23 consolidate control of Sake, then they will have effectively cut Goma off from the rest of the country, given the only other road out of Goma into the DRC, the N2 runs north into the Ituri province, also home to a long-standing conflict. The natural next move for M23 after cutting Goma off, would be to try and capture the city, which if they were successful would be their biggest military gain in more than a decade, M23 previously briefly controlled Goma in 2012. The attack on Goma International Airport will have been conducted because the airport is currently used by both the Air Force of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and The United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) peacekeeping forces in their military operations against M23. Rwanda has long supported the M23 rebel group, and a recent UN report stated that there was evidence that the Rwandan army is using sophisticated weapons, such as surface-to-air missiles, to support M23. As such, the Rwandan army was likely behind the attack. Indeed, the alternative is that M23 were behind the attack single-handedly, which would indicate that the rebels are capable of more advanced attacks than the DRC's government may have realised. As the DRC army and international peacekeepers continue to relocate to the new areas of conflict around Sake, it is almost certain to open up a security vacuum in other parts of the DRC's eastern regions which armed actors will seek to exploit. Meanwhile, if Sake does fall then it is highly likely that M23 will attempt to move along the N2 towards Goma. Such a scenario would likely precipitate fierce fighting and almost certainly result in a worsening of the region's humanitarian situation as many of Goma's 2 million residents would likely seek to flee, many of whom are already displaced from other towns and villages in the region.

EMEA Summary and Forecast.

Politics, Economics and Civil Unrest.

In Germany, the Union Verdi called for a 24-hour strike of Lufthansa ground staff starting from 20 February. As a result, 900 out of 1,000 flights were cancelled, affecting over 100,000 passengers. Major disruptions were seen at Frankfurt, Munich, Hamburg, and Berlin airports. This strike came amidst an ongoing and protracted dispute between unions and Lufthansa over pay and bonuses.

Lufthansa's recent offer of a 10 percent increase was rejected by 96 percent of its employees, indicating a likelihood of more strikes in the future due to the low acceptance of the offer. Polish farmers are set to block most border traffic in protest against constraints imposed on them by the EU and rising costs, citing unfair competition from Ukraine. The planned blockades will encompass all border crossings, including ports and motorways while allowing aid to pass through. In response, Ukrainian farmers are planning a counter-demonstration at the borders, marking an escalation from previous protests that did not fully block all border crossings. On 25 February, early voting will begin in the Russian presidential election. Results are not due until March, but early voting will likely give an indication as to how much Putin will be able to consolidate his power. Elections will also be held in neighbouring Belarus where President Lukashenko is expected to retain power. Protests cannot be ruled out but are unlikely to be as large as 2020 after the authorities introduced a raft of draconian measures and policies aimed at curbing civil unrest. Thousands have gathered in Tel Aviv to demand early elections, reflecting a sharp decline in Prime Minister Netanyahu's popularity in opinion polls since 7 October. Netanyahu has dismissed the idea of early elections, despite renewed calls from demonstrators. Anti-government protests that characterised much of 2023 have subsided during the war, but protesters in Tel Aviv are once again calling for new elections, which are not scheduled until 2026. Iran is scheduled to hold elections on 1 March, with indications suggesting that two-thirds of the population may boycott, potentially leading to civil unrest. The election boycott is likely driven by widespread discontent over the country's economy and fears that Iranian policies in the region will only continue to isolate Iran. It is predicted that the religious right will perform well, as liberal factions show increasing apathy towards the electoral process. The junta in Guinea has temporarily dissolved the government and plans to appoint a new one, without providing a specific reason for the dissolution. This move comes amid pressure from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) for Guinea to transition to civilian rule through elections, which is unlikely to happen in the near future.

Security, Armed Conflict and Terror.

Lithuania is set to close two additional border checkpoints with Belarus, leaving only two out of the original six checkpoints open. This decision, mirroring similar moves by Finland, is aimed at addressing issues of national security, smuggling, and violations of international sanctions. The potential closure of all borders will almost certainly raise concerns, as overland transport in Lithuania is vital for linking the Kaliningrad Oblast to Russia's mainland. Turkey's first domestically produced combat aircraft, the KAAAN fighter jet, conducted its maiden flight. The jet, produced by Turkish Aerospace Industries (TAI), demonstrates the growth of the Turkish defence industry which has been championed for its drone production due to their effectiveness in the war in Ukraine and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The continued proliferation of Turkish arms could help change geopolitics as countries seek to procure weapons from non-Western entities and Turkey will likely seek to extend its influence through the development of arms agreements. Egypt has been observed constructing walls and clearing land along its border with Gaza in preparation for the anticipated exodus of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians. Despite Egypt denying claims of blocking Palestinians from entering the country, it is evident they are reluctant to welcome them. The situation raises concerns as the refugees left in the Sinai desert will have limited resources and sanitation, creating a potential breeding ground for disease, death, and potentially radicalisation. In Sudan, government forces have claimed that they have regained parts of Omdurman, a major city which lies on the other side of Khartoum on the banks of the Nile. This will mark the first time the Sudanese Army has advanced on the city since April 2023, when its war with the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces began. The capture of Omdurman will hold strategic significance, as it is a vital transportation hub which enables access to other parts of the country. Reports from the Russian government indicate that it is trying to dislodge Western mining companies from West Africa in favour of Russian ones. The strategy, which has already started to be implemented in Mali, suggests that elements of the rebranded Wagner Group, now referred to as the Africa Corps, will provide regime survival packages in exchange for Russian security assistance. The group will likely seek opportunities to expand operations in Niger and

Burkina Faso and will likely employ extreme violence against militant or rebel groups which threaten the respective regimes.

Environment, Health and Miscellaneous.

Julian Assange's UK High Court Appeal hearing is fighting extradition to the USA, where he faces potential charges for publishing thousands of classified diplomatic and military documents. If Assange loses the appeal, he could be extradited within days and potentially face a life imprisonment tariff. This has sparked protests in the UK and EU against his extradition.





Asia Pacific (APAC)

Nepal:

Curfew imposed after rare sectarian violence.

On 19 February, local authorities in the southern Nepali city of Birgunj imposed an indefinite curfew following clashes between Hindu and Muslim locals. A group of Hindus that were conducting an immersion procession of an idol of the Hindu goddess Saraswati were reportedly denied access to a lake where the ceremony was due to take place by a group of Muslims. Local Hindus then allege they were pelted with stones, leading to violent clashes and the imposition of a curfew. Enhanced security measures have been introduced to curb the violence, including the deployment of an extra 1,000 police officers. Reports indicate that at least eleven police officers have been injured and dozens of protestors.

Assessment: Violence between religious groups in Nepal is generally uncommon, though this marks the second instance in the past six months that a curfew has been issued due to significant violence between Muslims and Hindus. Curfews have almost certainly been employed to reduce heightened tensions but have done very little to address the underlying issues. There are approximately 1.5 million Muslims in Nepal, which constitutes around five percent of the total population, with Hinduism representing over 80 percent, followed by Buddhism at around eight percent. The Muslim population has also steadily grown, partly due to natural population growth but also due to the immigration of Indian Muslims into Nepal. Indian Muslims have likely sought sanctuary in Nepal from an increasingly Hindu nationalist Modi administration marked by widespread persecution and due to the fact Nepal became an officially secular country in 2006. However, large segments of Nepalese society have not accepted this and there has been a steady growth in Hindu nationalism in Nepal, best evidenced by the rise of the Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP), which demands a return to a Hindu state. This idea has also been championed by representatives of other parties which officially endorse secularism. In 2018, almost half of the country's Nepali Congress party launched a signature campaign favouring a return to a Hindu state. India has also likely influenced its near abroad. India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has unambiguously stated its preference for Nepal to return to a Hindu state and there are allegations that the BJP has funded and supported Hindu nationalist movements in Nepal. Whilst the clashes in Birgunj could be seen as an isolated incident, it is more than likely indicative of a developing trend of sectarian violence in the country, which is likely unofficially endorsed by Hindu nationalists for the schisms it creates, which they can almost certainly exploit. As the Hindu festivals of Maha Shivaratri and Holi approach in late February and March, as well as the Islamic holiday of Ramadan in mid-March, it is highly likely that religious fervour and tensions will remain high, potentially leading to further intercommunal violence.

China:

China re-establishing volunteer armies.

Reports from CNN indicate that Chinese companies have revived the practice of establishing volunteer armies, a practice rarely observed since the 1970s. During the last year alone, at least 16 major firms have created private volunteer armies known as People's Armed Forces Departments, which consist of civilian employees who maintain their regular jobs but are available for military support roles such as disaster response, maintaining social order, and wartime assistance. Most of the companies that have created militias have been state-owned enterprises (SOE), which are directly owned by central or regional governments. However, Yili Group, the world's fifth largest dairy producer, has become the first privately owned company to set up a People's Armed Forces Department unit, although the local government does have an 8.5 percent stake in the company. The units will act as a reserve and auxiliary force for China's military, the

world's largest, and will be tasked to conduct missions ranging from responding to natural disasters and helping maintain "social order" to providing support during wartime. The units will reportedly fall under the command of the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

Comment: The re-establishment of People's Armed Forces Departments has provoked concerns that China is preparing for an armed conflict with the West or an impending invasion of Taiwan, with the units expected to serve as a force multiplier that will liberate conventional military units from other tasks, particularly on the domestic front. However, the primary catalyst for their creation has likely been China's myriad of economic problems and poor forecasts for the future. Their likely main role will be to restore social order and deter internal unrest, with the Communist Party of China (CCP) likely assessing that economic issues will be the trigger for protests and dissent in the future. During the COVID-19 pandemic, China experienced unprecedented nationwide civil unrest and dissent, an unfamiliar concept in China, which also directly challenged the CCP. Whilst the pandemic may now be over, China is now grappling with a range of economic problems that could stoke dissent. China's GDP growth has stalled, its property market faces collapse, youth unemployment has skyrocketed, and it faces deflationary pressure. In addition, the legacy of the one-child policy is manifesting itself in the form of an ageing population, and by 2030 approximately 30 percent of the population will be over 60, likely placing a huge pressure on any future workforce. Furthermore, the Chinese economy is primarily couched within the manufacturing sector and rapid advances in technology will likely displace human workers, increase socio-economic inequality and be a major source of future civil unrest.

Myanmar:

Junta forces at risk of losing most its military bases within Rakhine State.

During the last reporting period, officials of the Three Brotherhood Alliance (TBA) announced that the Myanmar Junta is set to lose all military sites within the state of Rakhine. The reports follow successive recorded losses by the Junta against the Arakan Army, an ethno-paramilitary group seeking greater autonomy for Rakhine, one of the three members of the TBA. In response to the advances by the Arakan Army, Junta forces have allegedly destroyed several bridges and key infrastructure to delay the TBA offensives. The Junta government is also struggling to delay multiple offensives across several parts of the country, with rebel victories reported in Kachin and Mon states, as well as in the Sagaing and Bago regions. In the week prior to the announcement, the Junta government enforced mandatory conscription for all men aged 18-35, and women aged 18-27.

Assessment: The potential loss of all major military bases within Rakhine will almost certainly undermine the Junta government and motivate other ethnic rebel groups to continue with their offensives. The Arakan Army's consecutive gains in Rakhine have already compelled the Junta to resort to desperate measures amounting to a scorched earth policy. Success from other rebel groups will likely force the Junta into emulating these tactics across the country. The humanitarian situation in Myanmar has deteriorated as a result of the war and it is currently estimated that almost 20 million people, or a third of the population require humanitarian assistance, with the conflict driving up the prices of food, fuel and other basic necessities. Destroying infrastructure, especially roads and bridges, will likely further isolate struggling communities, disrupt the local economy and delay the facilitation of goods and aid. The effects of the war will also likely continue to affect Myanmar's neighbours, especially Bangladesh which borders the Rakhine State and the increasingly unstable Chin State. The crisis has precipitated a refugee crisis, leading to an influx of Rohingya refugees into Bangladesh where there were already an estimated one million, putting strain on local resources and infrastructure. Bangladesh has stated that it cannot cope with any more refugees and the success of the offensives has already resulted in calls for Dhaka to directly engage with the rebel groups. Dhaka will likely be reticent to do this as it will undoubtedly strain relations with the Junta. However, if it assesses that the Junta's influence will be completely removed from the area, it may see it as the only mechanism to stem the flow of refugees into Bangladesh.

Australia:

Royal Australian Navy to double its fleet.

On 20 February, the Albanese government announced plans to build Australia's largest navy since World War Two, effectively doubling the size of its current fleet. Under the plans, the Royal Australian Navy will increase its current fleet of major surface combatants to 26, which will include 20 destroyers and frigates with an additional six Large Optionally Crewed Surface Vessels (LOSVs), that can operate with sailors aboard or independently as uncrewed surface vessels (USVs). The expansion will also include 25 new minor surface vessels for use in Australia's adjacent waters. The announcement followed an independent analysis from a retired US Navy Vice-Admiral which found that the current fleet was not appropriate for the current strategic environment. Under the expansion, the Royal Australian Navy will also move away from a bias towards anti-submarine warfare (ASW) bias and will almost double the navy's number of vertical missile launch cells from 432 to 702. The expansion is also being sold as a huge boost for Australia's ship-building industries, with the majority of vessels being built in Western Australia's Henderson precinct which is expected to create around 1,200 new jobs.

Assessment: The doubling of the surface fleet comes as part of a wider effort to enhance Australia's defence capabilities and will increase Australia's defence spending from 2.1 percent of GDP to an estimated 2.4 percent. It is almost certain that the main driver behind the fleet expansion and general increase in defence expenditure is the containment and deterrence of China. In recent years, China has evolved from a "brownwater" navy, largely contained to its neighbouring seas to an expeditionary naval, with global reach and growing influence in the South China Sea, Indian Ocean and Western Pacific. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is now the world's largest naval force, and the China Coast Guard (CCG) is the world's largest coastguard. In addition, China has established a naval paramilitary force which consists largely of fishing vessels known as the People's Maritime Militia (PMM). The CCG and PMM serve as part of China's "grey zone" maritime strategy, which involves using non-military assets to achieve military and strategic objectives such as to enforce China's claims over the heavily disputed South China Sea. With the CCG and PMM acting as force multipliers for the PLAN, China has been able to divest its navy of traditional roles and project naval force further afield. Currently, China only has one foreign naval facility at the Djibouti Logistics Support Base which has enabled it to sustain operations in the Indian Ocean and off the coast of Africa. However, there are plans for China to develop more bases in Cambodia, Pakistan, Equatorial Guinea, Sri Lanka and invariably more that have so far been kept out of the public sphere. Moreover, China has established naval agreements with countries like the Solomon Islands which allows it to dock and replenish ships. China's transition to a "bluewater" navy will be a major shift in the current strategic environment and has been a catalyst for the development of new military alliances and increased operability, as evidenced by the AUKUS agreement and Australia's acquisition of its first nuclear-powered submarines. Although Australia's fleet expansion will not directly challenge the PLAN, when combined with allied nations it will help counter and deter China, promote regional stability, and protect vital sea lanes. It will also likely be seen in the context of a wider Indo-Pacific arms race and doubtlessly be welcomed by regional nations or nations with regional strategic interests such as Japan, South Korea and the US.

Politics, Economics and Civil Unrest.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has deemed the Taliban's conditions for attending a UN-sponsored meeting on Afghanistan in Doha as unacceptable. The two-day meeting in Doha ended without Taliban participation due to unmet demands. The Taliban, which took control of Kabul in 2021, faces international criticism for bans on women's education and employment. Guterres emphasised the need to lift these restrictions and called for clear consultations with the Taliban regarding the appointment of a UN special envoy. The international community, including many governments and aid agencies, has scaled back funding in response to Taliban policies, impacting Afghanistan's economy and likely worsening the humanitarian situation. However, the UN is likely

trying to establish a precedent for other rogue nations and is unlikely to buckle to the Islamist regime. In Pakistan, the army-backed Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), have struck a power-sharing deal sidelining Imran Khan loyalists. Despite Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party winning the most seats in the recent election, candidates were forced to run as independents due to a crackdown. Allegations of vote-rigging have surfaced, prompting a delayed count and increased scrutiny. Fears of democratic backsliding will likely trigger civil unrest and will be quelled by authoritarian measures such as the suspension of the Internet and restrictions imposed on social media platforms such as X. Farmers' protests continue to rage across much of India, leading to widespread disruption, multiple violent clashes with the security services and reports of both police officers and protestors killed. Protests will almost certainly continue to escalate and gradually move towards the capital after a government deal offering to guarantee crop prices for five years has been rejected by the farmers. Protests have continued in Indonesia over the recent general election results that have likely led to the presidency of the country's Defence Minister, Prabowo Subianto, who has ties to the Suharto dictatorship. Protests will likely endure as the election is finalised, with vote counting anticipated to take weeks in the island nation of over 250 million people.

Security, Armed Conflict and Terror.

President Putin has potentially violated a UN resolution after gifting North Korea's Kim Jong-un a Russia-made luxury car. The gift is likely symbolic of their growing military relationship which continues to provoke fears in the region. Reports from Ukraine indicate that Russia has used dozens of North Korean ballistic missiles, prompting speculation over what Moscow will provide Pyongyang in return. A Taiwanese tourist boat was intercepted by China's Coast Guard near the strategically important and disputed islands Kinmen Islands, which lie just 10km from the Chinese mainland. Taiwan's military has stated it does not intend to intervene, likely in a move to not escalate the situation. China has also announced plans to conduct routine patrols and establish law enforcement operations around the Taiwan-controlled Kinmen Islands, following an incident where two Chinese nationals died while fleeing Taiwan's coastguard after entering restricted waters near Kinmen. This action is likely an attempt by China to intimidate Taiwan, particularly in light of the election results favouring the anti-Beijing candidate Lai Ching-te. Beijing has accused the Philippines of deliberately escalating tensions in the South China Sea following joint air patrols conducted by the US and the Philippines in the region. The Philippines, on the other hand, asserts that the patrols were carried out to safeguard their territory and national interests in the South China Sea. This air patrol took place a week after joint maritime exercises between the US and the Philippines.

Environment, Health and Miscellaneous.

In South Korea, trainee doctors have initiated a collective walkout in response to government plans to increase medical student admissions by 2,000 places. Doctors have cited concerns over unnecessary competition among doctors and the overwhelming of medical facilities. Health services in the country are likely to be greatly impacted, with surgeries already cancelled as over 8,000 doctors plan to walk out. The Health Ministry has demanded that doctors return to work and prioritise patient safety. The protest has forced South Korea to raise its public health alert to "severe" for the first time. China and Thailand are set to enact a visa-free entry arrangement for their citizens, permitting stays of up to 30 days. This policy will take effect from 1 March, aiming to bolster the ties between the two nations, showcasing China's influence in Southeast Asia. Moreover, it is anticipated to rejuvenate the tourism sector, which faced a significant downturn in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic. According to Thailand's Geo-Informatics and Space Technology Development Agency (GISTDA), the recent outbreak of wildfires in the country has put an estimated 160,000 hectares in 10 northern provinces at risk, marking a critical environmental and humanitarian crisis. Many of the fires are assessed as being deliberately started by farmers in pre-planting or post-harvest burns. Of most concern is likely the spread of the fires to the country's national parks. A volcanic eruption from Indonesia's Mount Merapi in West Sumatra has killed at least 11 and several remain missing. Another Indonesian volcano,

Mount Semeru in East Java has erupted at least five times in three days, prompting concerns that a major eruption is due, forcing the authorities to raise the alert.

