



Global Intelligence Summary

REPORTING PERIOD: 15 MAR – 22 MAR



Global Intelligence Summary

Week 11: 15 March – 22 March

Executive Summary

- In **Cuba**, rare civil unrest has almost certainly been triggered by blackouts and the recent removal of government subsidies. With conditions deteriorating, it is **likely** unrest could spread across the island nation.
- Officials in the **Georgian** breakaway territory of South Ossetia have called for joining **Russia**. However, Moscow is **unlikely** to hold a referendum and will exploit territorial disputes to block Georgia's ascension to NATO and the EU.
- Extremists in **Niger** are **likely** to capitalise on the junta's cessation of cooperation with the **US** which will also **likely** play into the hands of strategic rivals like Russia.
- In **Pakistan**, extremist and separatist groups have **almost certainly** exploited the country's current instability to increase the scale and frequency of their attacks.

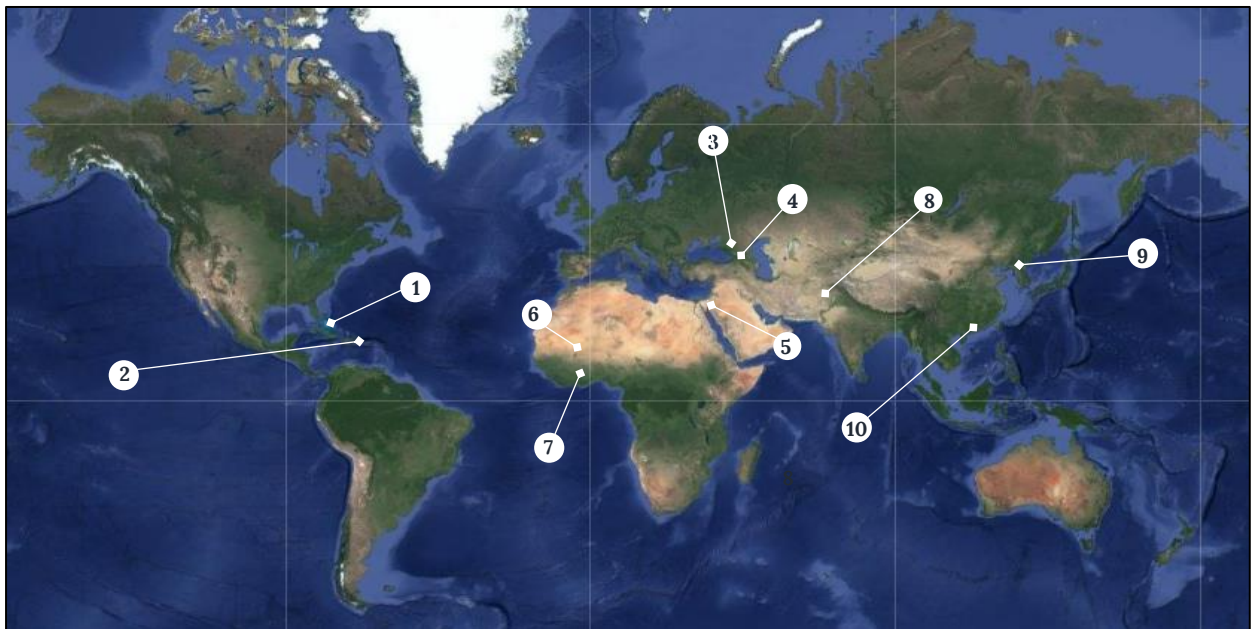


Figure 1: Significant activity identified during the current reporting period.

AMER

- 1 Cuba:** Shortages and austerity prompt demonstrations
- 2 Haiti:** Evacuations continue as no solution in sight

EMEA

- 3 Georgia:** South Ossetia indicates desire to be annexed into Russia
- 4 Armenia:** Risk of war with Azerbaijan if villages aren't returned
- 5 Israel & Gaza:** US calls for ceasefire, clashes at Al-Shifa
- 6 Niger:** Military junta ends cooperation with US
- 7 Nigeria:** Another mass kidnapping raises security concerns

APAC

- 8 Pakistan:** Taliban and separatists increase attacks
- 9 North Korea:** Multiple rocket launches, and hypersonic claims
- 10 Hong Kong:** New security law draws territory closer to Beijing



Americas (AMER)

Cuba:

Shortages and austerity prompt nationwide anti-government demonstrations.

On 17 March, a wave of protests took place across various regions of Cuba, particularly affecting the island's second-largest city, Santiago. The demonstrations were sparked by shortages in essential resources such as electricity and food, with frequent blackouts lasting up to 18 hours a day recorded in some regions. Havana accused the United States of fomenting insurrection within the country, and Cuba's Foreign Minister, Bruno Rodriguez, attributed the crisis to the enduring US embargo on the state.

Assessment: The protests unfolded against the backdrop of a deepening economic crisis plaguing the island nation, characterised by scarcities in food, fuel, and medicine, which continue to cause widespread socioeconomic discontent and prompt a significant exodus of Cubans seeking better opportunities abroad. The ongoing economic downturn is projected to be the most severe one faced by Cuba in nearly four decades and has already contributed to the migration of over 400,000 from the island in the last two years. In a significant turn away from its socialist roots, the Cuban government has increasingly implemented austerity measures, with the recent slashing of gasoline subsidies representing the likely main cause of the unrest. The rise in gasoline prices is particularly felt by the Cuban population, who primarily drive decades-old vehicles that are extremely fuel-inefficient. Further unrest is highly likely in the coming weeks as the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) struggles to address the underlying causes of the economic crisis and continues to prepare other economic reforms. Protests in Cuba are historically rare due to the PCC's suppression of opposition movements and its harsh crackdowns on dissent. Such policy was made evident during a series of protests in July 2021, triggered by cost-of-living increases exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The protests marked the largest scale unrest in Cuba since the 1959 Revolution, and saw draconian crackdowns by the PCC, resulting in the imprisonment of over 700 individuals on charges of sedition, assault, and vandalism. While the Cuban Constitution of 2019 grants citizens the right to protest, the PCC has continuously stalled legislation defining the parameters of this right. However, the recent protests underscore growing dissatisfaction with worsening living conditions, potentially leading more Cubans to defy government opposition and protest in pursuit of better standards of living. The deteriorating situation in Cuba is likely to create opportunities for possible future US efforts to apply political pressure on Havana. The embargoes enforced by the US since the 1960s have hindered Cuba's ability to recover from external economic shocks, and Cuba's limited avenues for regional trade have led to an increasing dependence on tourism. This reliance left Cuba vulnerable to the restrictions on global movement brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, a key factor behind the hardships that sparked the 2021 protests. Currently, the PCC remains steadfast in openly condemning the US for both the embargo and its alleged influence over Cuba's politics. The harsh crackdowns likely to follow such protests will only exacerbate tensions between the US and Cuba.

Haiti:

US citizens evacuate the island with no political solution in sight.

The clashes and gang violence that broke out in the country weeks ago, after gang collective "G9" orchestrated a mass jailbreak, continue to increase in severity. During this reporting period, gang violence reached the suburb of Petion-Ville, located on the outskirts of the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince, one of the city's more affluent areas. With no authority still standing in Haiti, and lack of any overarching structure capable of managing the country, foreign embassies are increasingly carrying out evacuation operations for their stranded nationals. On 18 March, the first

US State Department charter flight evacuated dozens of US citizens from Haiti, following various European countries.

Assessment: Reports indicate that police officers in Haiti are increasingly taking part in looting and civil unrest, with arbitrary killings of civilians now a common occurrence. The talks initiated last week in Jamaica by members of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) trade bloc, which involved other Caribbean states, as well as the US, France, and Canada, are unlikely to result in a viable solution in the short term. With the likelihood of Kenyan troops being deployed to the island having essentially disappeared after the African country announced that it would pause the plan until after a government is formed, there is no prime candidate to lead an international intervention to bring stability back to the country. The ongoing international impasse is likely driven by an understanding of the possible costs and risks of deploying a force in Haiti. With a widespread lack of basic infrastructure and the collapse of all administrative bureaucracy, intervening forces would need to carry out considerable nation-building efforts while simultaneously trying to implement stopgap measures to lessen the severity of the humanitarian crisis. Moreover, although described as “gangs”, the militant groups currently competing for supremacy more closely resemble paramilitary groups, and have access to great quantities of weapons, many smuggled from the US, and could pose a serious threat to foreign civilian and military actors in the country. Even if a force is assembled, its deployment is likely to be unpopular with the population of Haiti, as the island’s history is fraught with cases of botched interventions, invasions, and brutal imperial domination that dates to its past as a Spanish and French colony.

AMER Summary and Forecast:

Politics, Economics and Civil Unrest.

The **Canadian** Foreign Ministry announced on 19 March that the country will halt future arms sales to Israel. The announcement comes after a non-binding parliamentary motion passed in the House of Commons. The change likely does not represent a fundamental shift in Canada’s relations with Israel and, despite Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz stating that it “undermines” the country’s self-defence, will not be felt in Tel Aviv – Ottawa remains a minor supplier of weapons to the country. Nevertheless, the announcement likely further highlights the West’s increased weariness of Israel’s offensive into Gaza. It is also likely a response to recent Israeli preparations for an attack on the southern city of Rafah. In the **United States**, the Supreme Court is set to hear arguments on the legality of oral abortion pills. After Roe v. Wade’s overturning, abortion is now almost completely banned in 14 states and limited depending on gestational age in 28 more. The upcoming decision could further limit options for abortion in the United States, especially for people who live in rural areas or face difficulties finding transportation. The commencement of this hearing is likely to generate civil unrest and protest action in large urban areas across the US. The President of **Guatemala**, Bernardo Arevalo, is set to visit the **United States** on 25 March. He will meet Vice President Kamala Harris to discuss migration at the White House. Immigration has become a major issue for US voters, with Republicans seeking to use the spike in migration patterns against Biden, blaming the current administration’s reversal of former President Donald Trump’s migration policies. The Biden administration has criticized Republicans for not passing the bipartisan border bill, which would have strengthened funds for border agents and other immigration operations along the U.S.-Mexico border. It is likely the White House will seek to announce a deal of some sort with Arevalo around tackling Guatemala’s socioeconomic conditions as the White House seeks to try and tackle the “root causes” of migration from the central and Latin American regions. On 16 March, **Venezuelan** President Nicolas Maduro announced that he would run for a second re-election in the voting planned for next July. Maduro’s support base has significantly waned in recent years, and his United Socialist Party of Venezuela appears to be far behind opposition candidate Maria Corina Machado, with the latter receiving a projected 54.5 per cent of the vote according to recent polls, against Maduro’s 13.9 per cent. It is extremely likely that the government will seek to affect and doctor the election’s outcome. Public unrest is also very likely to take place, with overall risk levels rising as the vote of 28 July approaches. On 18 March, riot police were deployed against protesters in Buenos Aires,

Argentina. The demonstrations took place as the Milei administration reached its first 100 days, and were a response to high inflation rates, and the massive social security cuts operated by the government. In recent weeks, Milei's administration has taken increasingly draconian measures against public dissent. Clashes between police forces and protesters, which may grow in volume due to the ongoing government repression, will likely increase risks for journalists, travellers, and humanitarian workers in large urban centres. Transport and business will also face an increased chance of disruptions.

Security, Armed Conflict and Terror.

On 17 March, **Colombian** President Gustavo Petro suspended the ceasefire with the Estado Mayor Central (ECM) armed groups. The EMC is an offshoot of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). It continues to clash with various other paramilitary groups for control over various illicit income sources, including drug trafficking and illicit mining. The ceasefire will be interrupted in the provinces of Nariño, Cauca, and Valle del Cauca, all in the southwest of the country. It is likely that the decision signifies the government's increased confidence in its military capabilities and will likely lead to increased fighting and violence in the area. Urban centres like Cali, and particularly police and government installations, will face increased risks of attack.

Environment, Health and Miscellaneous.

On 18 March, the **US** Supreme Court continued to block a **Texas** state immigration enforcement law that would allow state agents to essentially arrest migrants suspected of unlawfully crossing the US-Mexico border. The southern border is a central issue in American politics. Earlier this year, Texas started a federal crisis when it refused to comply with a White House order to allow border patrol agents to access a part of the border under its control. It is likely that, with the 2024 election on the horizon, border states will further seek to push back on federal institutions. Conditions at the southern border are likely to remain dire, with high risks faced by migrants, and by humanitarian activists and journalists. If implemented, the Texas bill may increase overall risks in the area, especially for migrant women and children. The **Atlantic coast of South America** continues to experience weather-related disruptions and damages, caused by ongoing heavy rains and strong winds. On 21 March, strong winds were reported in Bogota, **Colombia**, with videos emerging of homes being left without roofs. The region is currently dealing with flooding and heavy rain. Localised travel and transport disruptions are likely. Storms also affected the **Brazilian** region of Rio Grande do Sul, where more than 300,000 households were left without electricity. Blackouts are likely to disrupt travel and businesses, possibly affecting international travel as well. **Buenos Aires** experienced severe flooding after 130 millimetres of rain fell in 24 hours on 12 March. In the last reporting period, **Argentina's** eastern regions experienced a "supercell" storm, characterised by strong winds and high rain volumes. Some flights were put on standby due to the meteorological conditions.



Europe, Middle East & Africa (EMEA)

South Ossetia (Georgia):

Georgian breakaway region discusses the idea of joining the Russian Federation.

On 17 March, Russian state-run news agency RIA Novosti reported that officials in the Georgian breakaway region of South Ossetia were discussing the idea of being incorporated into the Russian Federation. The news article cited South Ossetia's parliament speaker, Alan Alborov, who, in answering a question on a potential referendum of joining Russia stated that the region's government is "discussing all these issues in close coordination with Russia, taking into account [its] bilateral relations and treaties". This most recent statement follows on from South Ossetian President Alan Gagloev's comments in 2023 about the breakaways region's desire to join Russia. No officials from Russia or Georgia have commented on Alborov's recent remarks.

Assessment: Calls from South Ossetian officials to join Russia are not uncommon. The entire economy of South Ossetia is almost wholly reliant on Russian aid and trade, with the Russian Ruble being the de facto currency. In comparison to Georgia and Russia proper, the territory of South Ossetia is considerably economically deprived and almost entirely dependent on subsistence agriculture for survival. Since the 2008 Russo-Georgian War all land borders between South Ossetia and Georgia have remained closed with the frozen border being secured by Russian soldiers. This recent announcement from South Ossetian officials came uncoincidentally a day before NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg was due to meet with Georgian President Zourabichvili in Tbilisi. Georgian officials have repeatedly stated their wish to join both NATO and the EU, although both South Ossetia and its other Russian-backed breakaway region of Abkhazia remain major obstacles to both integration hypotheses. Under NATO's Article Ten – which stipulates that invitation to NATO must be unanimous – and as the Georgian-South Ossetian territorial dispute has not yet been resolved, the potential for Georgia to join NATO as a full member remains improbable. South Ossetia proving an obstacle for Georgian NATO membership is likely why Moscow seems reluctant to incorporate South Ossetia into Russia proper. Russia has used this tactic of refusal to federally incorporate its allied breakaway states in several areas including Transnistria, Abkhazia and its pre-2022 occupied areas in eastern Ukraine. By having political influence, economic dependence and troops on the ground acting as 'peacekeepers' Russia does not need to incorporate these breakaway territories. Despite South Ossetia's historic and cultural linkages with the Russian Republic of North Ossetia–Alania there will likely be no incorporation into the Russian Federation as the benefit to Moscow for the territory to remain a de facto allied breakaway state outweighs the benefit of its federal incorporation. This ongoing status quo of South Ossetian 'independence' will undoubtedly remain a political headache for Georgia as it continues its pivot towards the West. However, retaking South Ossetia by diplomatic means remains all but lost and any attempt to forcefully reintegrate the territory as Georgia attempted in 2008 will most definitely be met by a Russian armed response despite its ongoing war in Ukraine.

Armenia:

War with Azerbaijan if villages aren't returned.

On 19 March, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan stated that Yerevan would face a new war with neighbouring Azerbaijan if it did not compromise on returning four of eight disputed villages to Baku. Baku and Yerevan are currently working to sign a formal peace treaty and demarcate their 1000-kilometre border in the wake of Baku regaining full control of the long-disputed region of Nagorno Karabakh. The status of these border villages continues to be an important obstacle in these negotiations. Four were on the Azeri side of the border until Armenian occupation in the

1990s, the other four, however, are village-sized exclaves of Azerbaijan and Azeris, surrounded by Armenia. In Yerevan, there is also concern over the fate of 31 villages situated in roughly 200 square kilometres of land that are recognised as being Armenian despite being controlled by Baku.

Assessment: Of the eight villages, the four which Pashinyan has stated Armenia should hand back are the ones which are historically Azeri. However, they also hold strategic value for Armenia. A highway to Georgia, as well as a pipeline carrying Russian gas to Armenia, pass through these villages. In a bid to try and ward off accusations that this proposal undermined Armenia's security, he has stated that these should be rerouted to pass only through Armenia's de jure territory. Through this declaration, Pashinyan is acknowledging that Armenia fundamentally lacks leverage vis-à-vis Azerbaijan. His offer therefore to unilaterally hand over four of the eight villages is likely intended to deprive Azerbaijan of a pretext to launch new military action to seize territory, including any assault that could cut Armenia's direct access to neighbouring states such as Georgia or Iran. It is also likely to allow Yerevan to gain some negotiating leeway when it comes to the return of land historically and internationally recognised as Armenia. This likely is where Pashinyan's statement that the newly demarcated border must proceed from the de jure reality of what is and what is not Armenia stems from. However, the announcement was greeted with accusations of treachery, and as such is likely to drive nationalist-based civil unrest across Armenia and perhaps also abroad in countries with large Armenian diasporas. The unilateral offer to hand over villages will further boost Armenia's standing in the West, to whom Yerevan has increasingly pivoted in recent months. This pivot has been driven by Russia's inability to maintain the post-1990s status quo in the region regarding the status of Nagorno Karabakh and gained momentum since the invasion of Ukraine and Russia's seeming disengagement from the Caucasian region leading to Baku regaining control last year. Most recently, senior officials suggested it might one day apply for European Union membership, and as such fully settled negotiated borders and a peace treaty with Azerbaijan will be seen as key to furthering this goal and strengthening relations with the West.

Israel & the Gaza Strip:

Israeli offensive on the horizon as US submits ceasefire resolution.

During this reporting period, Israel announced plans for a future offensive into Rafah, thus bringing the operation, which has been decried by international observers as a possible humanitarian disaster, closer to becoming a reality. The Israeli plan would entail the relocation of the 1.5 million Palestinians in Rafah, many of whom are internally displaced persons (IDPs), to humanitarian zones in areas of the Gaza Strip under Israeli control. In the meantime, the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) have increased efforts to clear Gaza's north from Hamas militants, conducting a raid on Al-Shifa hospital in Gaza City, which led to the killing of Faiq Mabhouh, head of the Operations Directorate of Hamas' Internal Security. According to the Hamas-run Gaza Ministry of Health, more than 30,000 people, including medical staff, patients, and IDPs seeking shelter, are trapped in the hospital complex. In a major diplomatic development, the US envoy to the UN stated, on 21 March, that the US would submit a UN Security Council (UNSC) resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire "tied to the release of hostages".

Assessment: Tel Aviv continues to remain ambiguous regarding the offensive, although it is likely that this reporting period has seen the likelihood of its future materialisation increase. The operation – which is likely to have only partial strategic significance, as Hamas and other Palestinian groups continue to operate in areas declared "cleared" by the IDF – would likely impose extremely severe conditions on the Palestinian civilians trapped in the city, and result in widespread international condemnation. Furthermore, as Hamas has repeatedly sought to use Palestinian civilians as human shields to prevent Israeli strikes, it is a realistic possibility that the militant group will seek to prevent the exodus of civilians envisioned by the Israeli plan as a prelude to the offensive. The intensification of Israeli clearing operations in the north of the Gaza Strip, including the ongoing destruction of one of the largest underground tunnels used by Hamas,

likely signals that Tel Aviv continues to rate the risk of “stay-behind” attacks as particularly significant. While the successful decapitation strike on Mabhouh in Al-Shifa could contribute to further reducing Hamas’ viability in the north, the ongoing difficulties faced by the IDF in other areas of Gaza such as the Hamad suburb of Khan Yunis likely demonstrate that Israel cannot realistically achieve its preparatory operations before launching the offensive, and may be forced to accelerate its launch while keeping significant forces engaged to control dispersed Hamas cells. Recent diplomatic developments, most importantly US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer’s calls for a new Israeli election, which President Biden supported, likely show how mounting international pressure is now increasingly being directed at Prime Minister Netanyahu, who remains the main supporter of the Rafah offensive plan. By applying more focused pressure on Netanyahu, who continues to be an extremely divisive figure in Israel itself, Western allies of Israel may hope to more effectively curtail the chances of an offensive, while simultaneously launching a subtle signal to Netanyahu’s coalition allies. In this light, the recent US proposal for a UNSC resolution calling for a ceasefire appears particularly relevant, as it directly goes against the stated aim of the campaign for the Prime Minister, which is to destroy Hamas’ military capabilities. The proposed resolution is unlikely to result in a ceasefire, as it imposes on Hamas a security risk that it cannot accept. The clause that emphasises the release of hostages as a precondition for a lasting ceasefire will likely be rejected by the leaders of Hamas – as the Palestinian militant group cannot afford to release hostages without substantial guarantees of a halt of IDF operations. However, regardless of its chances of success, this proposal constitutes the strongest signal yet that the rift between Netanyahu and the White House has reached a critical point.

Niger:

Niger military junta ends cooperation with US.

Just days after holding high-level diplomatic talks with US diplomats and military officials, the ruling military junta of Niger announced that it would suspend its security cooperation with the US, thus seemingly ending the presence of US troops in the country. Despite last July’s coup, Washington continues to see Niger as a key player in the fight against jihadism in the Sahel. Recently, Washington began operating a major airbase in Agadez, and around 650 US troops are currently stationed in the country.

Assessment: Despite the coup, Niger remains fundamental for US operations in the region, which is currently one of the hotspots for global Islamist insurgency. Indeed, the timing of the announcement is unexpected, and likely took Washington by surprise. Soon after the coup, which followed a pattern seen in five other West African states that underwent government overthrows in recent years, the newly installed junta demanded the removal of French troops from its territory, building on widespread, historically rooted anti-imperialist sentiments. US forces, instead, remained relatively unscathed by the change in government, with Washington seemingly confident that a deal could be negotiated. In the aftermath of the announcement, reports emerged that claimed that Niamey’s drastic move was provoked by a diplomatic faux pas that happened during last week’s meetings. According to these claims, US officials made some poorly timed accusations regarding the extent of Niger’s relations with Russia and Iran, which allegedly angered the host delegation. It is, however, more likely that the decision has been in the works for much longer, and that the summit’s fallout constitutes a useful pretext. Moscow, and particularly its paramilitary, mercenary wing known as the “Wagner Group” (currently known in Africa as the “Expeditionary Corps”), have been particularly protective of the Nigerien junta, essentially threatening the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) when it called for the restoration of the legitimate government in the coup’s aftermath. Through Wagner, the Russian government has increasingly sought to build a stable presence in West Africa. Wagner forces have been known to provide strongmen with the firepower necessary to assert their political authority, while also conducting operations against local rebels and jihadists. Iran, too, has fundamental strategic interests in Niger, which is one of the region’s main producers of uranium, which has important implications for Tehran’s nuclear program. It is still unclear what the

next developments in the US-Niger partnership will be, but it is likely that reports that US forces could remain operative in the country through a future agreement are overly optimistic. It is very likely that the American departure will be hailed as a diplomatic victory in Tehran and Moscow, although it may have unforeseen, adverse circumstances. With the removal of the main anti-jihadist force in Niger, local jihadists will almost certainly double their recruitment operations and may increase military actions to probe the government's retaliatory capacities, a phenomenon already observed in Mali. Jihadists may also become freer to use Niger as a launching point for operations in neighbouring West African states, especially richer countries on the Atlantic coast like Ghana or the Ivory Coast. Moreover, it is possible that the US presence in Niger will not be replaced by another foreign, anti-jihadist force. Wagner's influence in the region has declined massively since the group's poorly timed rebellion against the Russian government last year, which was rapidly followed by the death of the group's founder Yevgeny Prigozhin, and its capabilities have likewise been exhausted on the battlefields of Ukraine. Regular Russian forces are also unlikely to be deployed to the country – outside, perhaps, in a minor, symbolic way. Significant deployment of Wagner forces could happen as part of an overarching deal between Niamey and Moscow, likely focused on Niger's uranium and rare earth material deposits. It is also unlikely that the recent announcement of the creation of a counterterrorism joint force by Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso (all three ruled by juntas) will fundamentally threaten jihadist operations in the region, as all three states lack the necessary equipment and resources. Finally, in the medium term, the announcement could accelerate Washington's transition to relying on other regional powers as bases for its counterterrorism operations. Washington has reacted to the wave of coups in the Sahel by developing stronger ties with Ghana, the Ivory Coast and Benin, seeking to use their airfields as bases for drone operations.

Nigeria:

A new mass kidnap further raises security concerns.

On the night of 17 March gunmen kidnapped 87 people, including women and children, in the Kajuru area of Kaduna state. Eyewitnesses state that the kidnapers wore army uniforms and parked their motorbikes away from the village they targeted. Upon entering the village at around 22:00 local time, they began shooting, beating, and going door to door capturing people. This was the second major attack in Kajuru after gunmen abducted "dozens" last week from another village. The governor of Kaduna state - where Kajuru is situated - has stated he is doing everything possible to free those kidnapped, and that troops and security forces are searching the region's forests to rescue all those abducted.

Assessment: This latest abduction comes after an armed group seized over 280 students and staff from a school earlier this month, also in Kaduna. This earlier attack was the country's worst kidnapping in several years. However, whilst the country has not seen such large-scale kidnaps for many years, smaller-scale ones have continued unabated, as evidenced by the prior attack on a village in Kajuru. Since the incumbent President Tinubu took office in May 2023 the country has seen over 4,700 kidnaps. It is now believed that the country's overlapping security crises have displaced around one million people. Historically, kidnap victims in Nigeria have been freed following negotiations with the authorities, though a 2022 law banned handing money to kidnapers and officials have always denied ransom payments are made. Tinubu was elected on promises to help bring internal security back to Nigeria, and the fact that March 2024 has seen over 300 abducted in just two events highlights how little progress has been made on this matter. Given Nigeria's other issues such as its economic challenges, corruption, and a lack of trust between citizens and the state, it is highly likely that that Tinubu will be unable to comprehensively reorganise the country's security architecture to prevent further attacks. Meanwhile, the success of these recent mass kidnappings may only further inspire bandits, gunmen and violent extremist organisations (VEOs) to perpetrate further actions. The promises of rescuing those abducted are also likely to seem hollow to the families of those impacted given that nearly 100 of the 276 schoolgirls abducted by Boko Haram in Chibok in 2014 remain missing.

EMEA Summary and Forecast:

Politics, Economics and Civil Unrest.

Slovakia is set to hold presidential elections on 23 March. Two candidates, Peter Pellegrini and Ivan Korčok, are expected to advance to the second round, which will be held in April. The office of President is largely a symbolic post; however, the office assumes significant sway at times of divided government, which Slovakia has operated under since Prime Minister Robert Fico's election last year. Since his election, he has shifted Slovakia's foreign policy in a direction that is more amicable to Moscow. The election of Pellegrini, a former member of Fico's party, who shares many of the prime minister's Russophile positions, would likely mark a further tilt towards Moscow in Bratislava, whilst the election of Korčok, who played a heavy role in overseeing significant Slovakian military aid to Ukraine in 2022 would mark a continuation of the status quo of the presidency thwarting Fico's pro-Russian policies when possible. Given these two contrasting foreign policies, the vote is likely to have an impact on Slovakia's future international alignment, and therefore also on the EU. Domestically, the election will likely constitute an informal referendum on Fico's tenure in office, and on the quasi-illiberal democratic model he espouses. Minor civil unrest in urban centres is possible but is likely not to have any major impact. During this reporting period, **Egypt** finalised two deals with the World Bank and the European Union, respectively worth USD six billion and USD eight billion. The two financial packages are meant to address Egypt's ongoing economic instability, with the country experiencing a foreign currency crunch, a budget deficit, and a struggling private sector. It is extremely likely that EU states – and especially southern EU countries like Italy and Greece – will increase efforts to prop up Egypt's economy and government in the face of mounting pressure, including humanitarian ones at the border with Gaza. Egypt remains a fundamental asset in Brussels' ambition to curb migration flows in the Mediterranean. The military junta leading **Guinea** announced, on 16 March, the dismissal of multiple executives of the nation's electricity and oil companies after protests broke out due to blackouts that particularly affected the capital city Bissau. Guinea's energy infrastructure continues to be plagued by ageing facilities and severe corruption, and blackouts are not uncommon. The announcement is likely meant to absolve government officials from responsibility, especially after two children were shot and killed in clashes between protesters and police forces. Further civil unrest remains a possibility and will likely be met by violent government repression. In **Senegal**, voters will head to the polls on 24 March in the country's delayed election. The election comes as Senegal faces a tough economic situation, with more than 36 per cent of people living in poverty and nearly a third of young people out of the workforce. The country, usually considered the most stable democracy in a coup-prone West Africa, has been plagued with tension since the attempt to delay the vote and the subsequent protests. In the aftermath of these protests, top opposition leader Ousmane Sonko was released from prison in the aftermath and has vowed to help his team win the election despite being barred from the ballot. The governing party's candidate and former Premier Amadou Ba is considered most likely to win. Across **West Africa**, widespread internet disruption is expected to persist for the next five weeks in the wake of disruption to the region's undersea cable connectivity during the last reporting period. Consequently, the region's nascent digital economy will be impacted by the outage as businesses will face limited access to basic services such as email and online banking. Network issues could lead to a rise in disinformation in the region, with the public unable to access verified and contemporaneous information. Countries likely to remain impacted include **the Ivory Coast, Liberia, Benin, Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger and Burkina Faso.**

Security, Armed Conflict and Terror.

On 17 March, a group of around 50 people assaulted a police station in the **Parisian** suburb of La Courneuve following the death of a teenager after a police chase. In June 2023, the killing of another teenager, Nahel Merzouk, by the Parisian police caused widespread violence and riots affecting the capital as well as most other major urban centres. The riots following the death of Nahel had an important class- and race-related sub-context and were linked to more general grievances about France's history and structural economic inequalities. While this recent case has

not yet caused an explosion of public dissent, it is still likely that the next weeks will see a rise in acts of vandalism targeting police and government assets, and some demonstrations in urban centres. Moreover, it is almost certain that the approaching Olympic Games will heighten the risk of disruptions and violence in the French capital, especially in the suburbs on its outskirts. Also, on the outskirts of **Paris**, at least five secondary schools were sent bomb threats as well as graphic videos, supposedly by an Islamic State affiliate, in what the authorities claimed to have been a hacking operation targeting an IT platform used by students, teachers, and parents. While the possibility that the incident was the result of a prank, not involving actual terrorist intent, is not to be discarded, it is likely that extremist actors will use cyber tools to cause disruptions and spread fear in target countries like France, especially in the weeks leading up to the Olympics. On 15 March, the government of the **Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)** lifted a more than two-decade-long moratorium on the use of the death penalty. This drastic measure is meant as a response to the ongoing low-intensity conflict in the country's east, where more than 100 armed groups are fighting for political primacy. In the last weeks, there has been a marked increase in violence, with militant groups – some, like “M23”, with possible ties to Rwanda – having conducted severe attacks against the civilian population. The measure is unlikely to meaningfully affect the future of the conflict but will almost certainly have an adverse spillover effect on the DRC's civil society.

Environment, Health and Miscellaneous.

Iceland declared a state of emergency on 17 March, after another volcanic eruption was reported in the Reykjanes Peninsula. The eruption is the fourth pyroclastic event since December and has prompted the government to take some precautionary measures, including some evacuations. As the Reykjanes Peninsula is scarcely populated, and Iceland has an advanced system of infrastructure and measures in place to deal with volcanic phenomena, it is very unlikely that this eruption will affect travel or physical assets on the island. On 19 March, flash floods in **Iraqi Kurdistan** led to at least two deaths in the city of Duhok. While Kurdistan experiences a rainy season during the fall and winter, recent years have seen a rise in the number of devastating flash floods. The floods, caused by sudden rains starting at the beginning of the week, have submerged more than 100 houses in less than a day, and warnings have been extended to the entire province. It is very likely that flooding will lead to the displacement of thousands in Kurdistan and will damage infrastructure and public services. **South Sudan** is taking drastic measures, including school closures, and experiencing power cuts as temperatures soar past 40C. Next week, the heat wave will possibly record temperatures of up to 45C. It is extremely likely that the heat wave will cause numerous deaths and massive disruptions in the country's business and travel. South Sudan's already poor healthcare system will likely face excessive strain, with a severe impact on the quality of care. Water and power outages are also extremely likely across the country, especially in rural areas.



Asia Pacific (APAC)

Pakistan:

Tensions with Afghanistan continue, as Balochi militants seize strategic opportunity.

This reporting period saw a significant rise in the levels of violence and low-intensity conflict across Pakistan. On 16 March, a newly formed armed group, named Jaish-e-Fursan-e-Muhammad, possibly linked to the Pakistani Taliban (TTP), attacked an army post on the country's northwestern border with Afghanistan. Islamabad then carried out airstrikes on the Khost and Paktika provinces of Afghanistan, in what uncorroborated reports have called an act of retaliation. In the following days, elements from the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) launched attacks on Pakistani forces in Tump, Zamuran and Mastung, as well as on the strategic Gwadar port. Further clashes likely involving TTP-linked militants were recorded in the region of North Waziristan. On 21 March, another suicide attack was conducted against Pakistani forces in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa frontier province.

Assessment: The Pakistani state is currently facing a series of severe destabilising forces. Civil unrest has increased in the aftermath of the government's ban of former Prime Minister Imran Khan from running for office. With the administration's credibility in question, last month's elections were plagued by protests and claims of manipulation, and Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's new government is perceived as illegitimate by a significant proportion of the population. Acts of domestic terrorism, as well as ongoing issues with inter-ethnic mob violence, are currently being exacerbated by the tensions between Islamabad and Baghdad, and by the ongoing standoff with Iran. Attacks on Pakistani forces by Islamist and separatist groups associated with the TTP are a common occurrence, as fighters can take advantage of the rough terrain, tribal networks, and little government presence throughout the Durand line, as well as sympathetic local Taliban elements in Afghanistan. Other militant groups with independentist aspirations, such as the BLA, are likely redoubling their efforts to capitalise on the government's severe internal difficulties. The attack on Gwadar port is notable both due to its intensity and to the strategic and economic importance of the target itself, which is one of the key assets at the core of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). While the BLA is markedly anti-Chinese – both due to Beijing's perceived imperialistic ambitions and due to China's treatment of the Uyghurs – and has previously targeted the port, the timing of this attack hints at it being aimed at further having a destabilising effect on Islamabad beyond its tactical and immediate impact. While an escalation of Iran-Pakistan tensions is unlikely and not in the interest of either state, there is a distinct possibility that Afghanistan-Pakistan relations will further sour in the coming weeks. The latest declaration, on 19 March, by the Pakistani government that a new round of deportations of Afghan citizens will begin after Eid represents the latest development in this process and will likely further complicate the political and military situation in Pakistan's border regions. It is likely that Islamist and separatist groups will react to the worsening of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations by intensifying their attacks, possibly targeting Pakistan's economic infrastructure. Finally, such a development is made more likely by the close ties that exist between TTP and BLA elements. Albeit with different strategic aims, both groups may, in the coming weeks, increase the volume of their attacks with the common goal of destabilising the state.

North Korea:

Pyeongyang carries out multiple launches, makes claims of having hypersonic technology.

Pyeongyang resumed missile tests just days after Seoul and Washington finished their joint military drills, and while Seoul was hosting a Democracy Summit. The launches are North Korea's first so far this month. The defence ministry of Japan stated that they recorded three missile launches, two simultaneously at 7:44 am on 18 March, and the other about 37 minutes later. Following these launches on 20 March, North Korean authorities announced that they had also successfully tested

a solid fuel engine for a new intermediate-range hypersonic missile. This test allegedly took place on 19 March at the Sohae Satellite Launching Ground. Also on 19 March, the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), the country's official news agency, reported that Kim Jong Un had overseen a series of live fire drills involving newly equipped nuclear capable "super-large" multiple rocket launchers.

Assessment: Before the tests on 19 March, the last missile tests that the North had carried out were in mid-February and saw them fire cruise missiles into the Sea of Japan. Tensions have remained high on the Korean peninsula since 2022 when Pyongyang radically increased the number of missile and weapons tests it has conducted. Since then, the peninsula has seen intermittent periods of escalating tensions, intertwined with relatively quiet ones. Currently, tensions have been exacerbated by the January 2024 announcement that dictator Kim Jong Un intends to rewrite the constitution to eliminate the country's long-standing goal of seeking peaceful unification of the Korean Peninsula, and to instead cement South Korea as its "invariable principal enemy". While this announcement is primarily to be understood as a propaganda gesture, it likely relates to the ongoing spike in missile tests. While outright escalation into an open conflict remains unlikely, the recent wave of tests, including those of the new "super large rocket" launchers just a day after the launches of ballistic missiles, realistically exacerbates the risks of conflict in the peninsula, possibly making any possible future miscalculations more likely. For instance, seeking to prepare its constitutional reforms through confrontational public diplomacy, North Korea may seek to launch limited provocations along the South Korean border, including by carrying out live-fire artillery exercises. While the possibility of a North Korean provocation resulting in fatalities is low, such a scenario would likely ignite an escalatory cycle, which may be made harder to escape than in previous instances due to the limited communications between all involved parties, and the growing tensions. Furthermore, North Korean provocations and tests are almost certainly intended as attempts to shape public opinion and sentiment in South Korea preceding its legislative elections in April, whose campaign is already characterized by widespread unrest and political confusion. More broadly, it is possible that North Korea's aggressive posturing will continue apace in the run-up to the US Presidential election in November. Washington remains Pyongyang's key foreign adversary, and the ruling Communist regime builds much of its domestic support through demonstrations of its anti-American policies. Here, reports that the country has also tested a new solid fuel engine, the second one so far, as part of its hypersonic missile programme, will further raise concerns in the West, and in neighbouring Seoul and Tokyo. Hypersonic missiles move at more than five times the speed of sound and can alter their flight patterns while en route to a target, making them almost impossible to intercept, especially compared to ballistic weapons. While China and the US have hypersonic weapons programmes, Russia is considered by many to be the main pioneer in this area. Worries about Pyongyang's possible tests are likely underscored by the growing military cooperation between Russia and North Korea, as part of which the Kim regime may be acquiring vital technological expertise. Many of the tests recorded during this reporting period almost certainly pertain to ongoing major efforts being undertaken by the country under the modernisation campaign that remains one of Kim's main commitments. While it remains unclear to what extent the tests, and North Korea's hypersonic weapons programme, are progressing, Pyongyang's increasingly confrontational posturing may lead to a deterioration of the region's security environment.

Hong Kong:

Hong Kong government approves amendments to 2020 National Security Law.

On 19 March, the Hong Kong Government (HKG) approved Article 23, a contentious amendment to the National Security Law (NSL) imposed on the region by China in 2020. This amendment introduces draconian penalties for state security-related crimes, such as treason, espionage, sabotage, and collusion with foreign entities, ranging from 20 years to life imprisonment. The HKG has justified this expansion as necessary to maintain general stability, especially in the aftermath of the mass protests of 2019-2020. Critics outside Hong Kong instead described it as another instance of Beijing's encroachment on the region's freedoms. The British Foreign Office has condemned Beijing for further violating the terms of the Sino-British Joint Declaration (S-BJD) of 1997, which stipulated that Hong Kong's constitution, known as the Basic Law, should remain unfringed for 50 years following its transfer to Chinese control.

Assessment: The approval of Article 23 is almost certainly part of a broader strategy aimed at accelerating the integration of Hong Kong from a Special Administrative Region (SAR) into a fully incorporated Chinese city, therefore neutralising it as a possible epicentre of anti-government unrest. This highly punitive and ambiguously worded legislation provides the pro-Beijing government in Hong Kong with the means to silence individuals, organisations, and ideologies that oppose Chinese authority within the territory, and is, therefore, likely intended to provide the pro-PRC administration with tools to quickly silence future demonstrations. By enacting laws that bear closer resemblance to mainland China's penal codes, the Hong Kong government gains greater latitude to crack down on dissent and curtail the city's distinct freedoms. The HKG's increased interest in a comprehensive legislative apparatus to quash dissent can be seen in this month's ruling by Hong Kong's Court of Appeals, which indicted pro-democracy activist Tam Tak-Chi on counts of sedition based on laws dating back to the British colonial system. Article 23 therefore allows Beijing to eliminate legal discrepancies, in essence creating a standard through which Hong Kong's civil society can be more efficiently managed. The remnants of pro-democracy movements, weakened by the draconian crackdowns of 2020, now face legal constraints and are almost certain to disappear as a political force capable of challenging the HKG like in 2019. However, it is also possible that the new security law will have unintended consequences. While the likely decrease in the risk of civil unrest will make interruptions to business and transportation less likely, as well as reduce risks to physical assets in Hong Kong, the emphasis on external interference within the legislation also raises the prospect of international businesses pre-emptively withdrawing from the city. Companies operating in Hong Kong, particularly those handling sensitive state information like financial and media organisations, risk being targeted by pro-Beijing authorities if deemed to be in opposition to the Chinese state. The resulting costs of complying with such laws may drive Western organisations away from the region. While Beijing may see this as a means to limit Western influence in Hong Kong and further mould its population into alignment with mainland China, such legislation also calls into question the city's future economic and political significance as a bridge between China and the West.

APAC Summary and Forecast:

Politics, Economics and Civil Unrest.

India is set to hold the first phase of its general election on 19 April. Incumbent Prime Minister Narendra Modi is likely to win a third term, as the coalition of parties that forms the opposition has not seemingly managed to provide a viable electoral alternative. Modi's government, which espouses an extreme Hindu-nationalist ideology known as "Hindutva", is increasing its campaign efforts, often through the adoption of controversial measures, such as the demolition of mosques. With India experiencing considerable civil unrest in past years, it is likely that the multi-phase elections, which will last for six weeks, will see an increase in the country's risk levels. **Japan's** central bank raised interest rates this week, the first time in 17 years, thus scrapping its long-standing loose monetary policy and negative interest rates. The change had been expected for months and may have been prompted by a major salary hike following the government's negotiations with trade unions and by inflation continuing to exceed Tokyo's predictions. While the impacts of the shift, which still maintains interest rates at around zero, are still unclear, rising interest rates may hurt the government's capacity to fund Japan's sovereign debt, and certainly will increase borrowing costs for households. A **Hong Kong** court on 16 March sentenced 12 people to imprisonment, with sentences ranging from four to seven years, in a high-profile rioting case linked to the storming of the city legislature during a pro-democracy protest in 2019. The ruling further exemplifies China's approach to stifling the chance of future dissent and popular mobilisation in Hong Kong, which also depends on the implementation of the newly approved security law. **Chinese** foreign minister Wang Yi met with his **Australian** and **New Zealander** counterparts in a tour of Oceania. It is the first time that Wang Yi visited New Zealand since 2017. The meetings primarily focused on trade-related matters. While it is unlikely that a meaningful rapprochement between Wellington, Canberra and Beijing will occur, some tariff reductions could

be announced in the coming weeks. A notable point of Wang Yi's visit was his meeting with former Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating, who recently criticised Australia's nuclear submarine deal with the US and is generally considered to be friendly to Beijing. While not particularly meaningful in itself, the visit likely shows China's ongoing scepticism regarding the two countries' security policies. On 20 March, Prabowo Subianto was confirmed as the president-elect of **Indonesia**, following the vote that took place in February. Subianto, who already unsuccessfully ran for president twice and is currently acting as defence minister, has pledged to continue in the path of the incumbent president Joko Widodo. With no major changes in government policies on the horizon, it is likely that the new administration will continue with a spending-prone, populist domestic economic policy, primarily aimed at modernising Indonesia while fostering integration in global markets. Allegations of fraud raised by Subianto's electoral opponents may result in some civil unrest, albeit its impact will likely not be severe.

Security, Armed Conflict and Terror.

On 21 March, the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) conducted a suicide bombing in the city of Kandahar, a stronghold of the **Afghan** Taliban regime. At least 20 people were killed in the attack, with casualty figures as high as 100. ISKP continues to carry out attacks on Taliban forces with the aim of overthrowing the Kabul government. With tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan increasing, as well as the Taliban regime's ongoing international isolation, ISKP may seek to increase the frequency of their attacks in order to capitalise on possible vulnerabilities. The Indian Navy announced, on 16 March, that it had recaptured a vessel hijacked by Somali pirates in the **Indian Ocean**. The navy's operation concluded with no fatalities and the arrest of the pirates. The hijacking constitutes the first time that Somali pirates have managed to board a cargo ship since 2017. It is likely that pirates in the Indian Ocean are emboldened to act due to reduced military presence in the region, as global attention is directed to the neighbouring Red Sea. While unlikely due to the protective measures taken by vessel operators, further hijacking attempts remain a possibility. On 16 March, the **Taiwanese** coast guard sent warnings to four Chinese coast guard ships after they entered Taiwanese territorial waters. China regularly conducts patrols near Taiwanese territorial waters, often deliberately entering them. Such occurrences often create disruptions in maritime traffic near Taiwan, but major incidents are rare. There is a realistic possibility that an escalation will happen around 5 November, the date of the upcoming US elections, as Beijing may seek to capitalise on Washington's domestic preoccupations around the vote to take greater risks in its aim of taking control of the island. The representatives of the **US** and the **Philippines** met on 19 March in Manila after repeated clashes between Chinese and Filipino vessels in contested regions of the South China Sea. During the meeting, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken reiterated Washington's "ironclad commitment" to defending its Mutual Defence Treaty (MDT) ally. It is likely that China, who reacted negatively to the declaration, will continue to conduct deliberately aggressive naval operations in the South China Sea to force Manila to accept some of its territorial claims. The risk of escalation, which would affect maritime operations and trade in the area, is therefore likely to increase in the coming weeks. On 16 March, **Fiji** announced that it would uphold a comprehensive security deal with China. Fiji originally signed the deal in 2011, when the country was under military rule. The provision gives Beijing important leverage, allowing Chinese officers to be embedded within the Fijian security forces, and making it the prime security technology provider, including cameras and drones. The deal also entails intelligence sharing and allows for Fijian personnel to be trained in China. The announcement is likely to be hailed as a diplomatic victory in Beijing, as China seeks to expand its influence among Pacific Island states and counter the West in the region. While immediate effects are unlikely to be felt by Fiji's civil society, the deal's extension could pave the way for important reforms.

Environment, Health and Miscellaneous.

The Nowruz, or Persian New Year, commenced on the Spring Equinox, 21 March. The holiday is mostly celebrated in countries located in **Central Asia** and will last two weeks. Some minor disruptions in travel within large urban centres are possible, but the risks associated with the holiday are minimal. **India's** third most populous city Bengaluru (Bangalore) and the areas that

surround it are facing critical water shortages. Further issues have also been reported in Karnataka, Telangana and Maharashtra. Water scarcity in these regions is mostly driven by widespread low rainfall levels, which increasingly characterise Indian monsoon seasons. As summer approaches and temperatures rise before the arrival of the first monsoon rains in June, water shortages are likely to be recorded in other Indian regions. In such cases, high-density urban centres will see exponentially rising risk levels, with a high threat of social unrest. At least 23 people were reported dead in **Papua New Guinea** following torrential rain and landslides that affected the highlands province of Chimbu, as well as coastal regions. The country's poor infrastructure has likely contributed to exacerbating the issue. Papua New Guinea ranked 16th most at-risk country for climate change and natural disasters according to the 2022 World Risk Index.

