

# Conflict Weekly

*A brief review of conflict and peace processes across the world*

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The Philippines accuses China of carrying out aggressive actions in the South China Sea,. (Image Source: Philippine Coast Guard via AP)

## Tensions in the South China Sea and Ukraine Terror attack in Pakistan



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Gender | Environment | Ethnic Violence

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## China-Philippines: Rising tensions in the South China Sea

Annem Naga Bindhu Madhuri

### In the news

On 8 December, the Philippines accused the Chinese coastguard of using a water cannon to obstruct three government boats conducting their regular resupply mission near Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea.

On 9 December, a Philippine boat and a Chinese ship collided near a contested reef.

On 11 December, the Philippines condemned China's actions as a "serious escalation" and urged restraint for regional stability. It accused China of violating its sovereignty and jurisdiction and called on China to cease illegal actions and dangerous manoeuvres against Philippine vessels. The Philippines accused China of violating its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), while China claimed the collision occurred due to the Philippine vessel's "sudden turn." The US and the UK expressed support for the Philippines and condemned China's actions.

On 11 December, the US urged China to halt its "dangerous and destabilizing" actions in the disputed South China Sea following the collision. The US called on China to abide by the 2016 international tribunal ruling, emphasising its commitment to support its ally against "dangerous and unlawful actions."

### Issues at large

First, collision and water cannon incidents. The recent tensions between the Philippines and China surged following Chinese aggression near the Second Thomas Shoal and accusations and counter-accusations that followed. In October, the Philippines had accused Chinese coast guard vessels of intentionally colliding with a Philippine ship. The ship was supplying the BRP Sierra Madre, a warship placed since 1999 that serves as an outpost for the Philippines Navy in the Second Thomas Shoal. In August, the Philippines accused China of using water cannons to obstruct another supply mission to the shoal.

Second, territorial disputes and resource exploitation. China claims the entire South China Sea through its nine-dash line, overlapping with claims from Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei. These claims are fuelled by the potential rich oil and gas reserves and strategic control of vital shipping lanes. The overlapping claims create tension and uncertainty leading to the potential for conflict over resource exploration and strategic trade routes.

Third, unresolved legal disputes and lack of cooperation. The 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling invalidated China's expansive maritime claims. However, China rejected the ruling, hindering a peaceful resolution. Efforts of multilateral cooperation through regional forums like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have been unsuccessful in resolving the conflicting claims and promoting joint resource exploration.

Fourth, Chinese military presence and threat to freedom of navigation. China's increasingly assertive actions in the region, including militarisation of islands and land reclamation activities, are viewed as threats to freedom of navigation by the international community. The US and its allies conduct freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea to

challenge China's excessive maritime claims and maintain international law. This military presence in the region further heightens tension and raises the risk of escalation of tensions and miscalculations.

Fifth, the role of external actors. China views the US and Australia's statements as interference in its South China Sea disputes, undermining its territorial claims and emboldening the Philippines. China perceives these pronouncements as biased fuelling regional tensions and jeopardising stability. China emphasises its commitment to bilateral solutions and rejects external meddling, urging the US and Australia to respect its sovereignty and refrain from actions that could further complicate the situation.

#### In perspective

First, the escalating tensions in the South China Sea are deeply concerning. The frequent collisions and aggressive manoeuvres by both sides raise serious concerns of a conflict with far-reaching consequences. The lack of a clear legal framework and effective regional cooperation mechanisms further fuels instability and hinders peaceful resolution.

Second, the South China Sea dispute is a complex geopolitical game with high stakes. China's assertive actions are driven by a combination of resource nationalism, strategic ambitions and historical grievances. While the Philippines and other claimants have legitimate rights, their limited military capabilities make it difficult to effectively counter China. The US, caught between allies and its strategic interests, faces a delicate balancing act.

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## Ukraine: Missile attacks, US divide over military aid and the Hungarian block

Padmashree Anandhan

### In the news

On 12 December, Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelensky, held a meeting with the US President, Joe Biden. During the meeting, Zelensky pledged to keep fighting and stated that it would be “insane” to give up territory for a peace deal. The meeting was aimed at winning the USD 61 billion military deal between Ukraine and the US which has been blocked by the Republicans as they believe the US is providing over-the-limit military aid to Ukraine.

On 12 December, in a joint press conference, Biden stressed that the US would continue to supply Ukraine with critical weapons and equipment and would “not walk away.” Biden assured support despite the lack of support from the Republican party. He also announced USD 200 million of military assistance to Ukraine.

On 13 December, Kyiv’s Mayor, Vitali Klitschko, reported on a missile attack resulting in many injuries and damage to buildings. Klitschko stated: “According to medics, there are already 25 injured in Dniprovsky district of the capital, 13 were hospitalized.” In response, Kyiv’s air defence was activated.

On 13 December, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) stated in a report that Russian forces this year have “continued to use explosive weapons with wide area effects in their attacks on densely populated urban areas of Ukraine ... both in areas close to heavy fighting and in cities far from the contact line.”

On 13 December, Hungary’s Prime Minister, Viktor Orban, reiterated his objection to the EU’s agenda for Ukraine’s accession ahead of the EU summit. Orban proposed a strategic partnership instead of membership as according to him Ukraine is yet to fulfil the criteria for membership.

### Issues at large

First, increased large-scale missile and targeted attacks in Ukraine. Since November, Russia has targeted Kyiv firing cruise missiles for the first time, especially at the infrastructure facilities. The key zones that have come under constant attacks include Kyiv, Avdiivka located in the north of Donetsk Oblast and energy infrastructures in Kharkiv and Kherson. Russia has begun to use strategic aviation for attacks and it underscores the continuing threat to Ukraine. The same was confirmed by the UK Ministry of Defence on Russia stockpiling air-launched cruise missiles and heavy bomber fleet. This resonates with the 2022 attacks by Russia targeting Ukraine’s power grid and energy infrastructure.

Second, diverging views on the US support for the war in Ukraine. The Biden administration and Congress have until now directed more than USD 75 billion in assistance to Ukraine. This includes humanitarian, financial and military support. However, in 2023, the continuity of aid in the same measure seems to be uncertain due to the political deadlock over border security and the Israel-Gaza war. A recent study by the Pew Research Center survey in December 2023 found that 48 per cent of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents believe that the US aid to Ukraine was excessive, whereas only 16 per cent of Democrats and Democratic leaners viewed the same.

Third, Poland and Hungary's block. The eastern European countries of Poland, Slovakia and Hungary formed a block in November halting Ukraine's grain transit. Besides, Poland and Hungary have constant barriers in granting financial aid and imposing sanctions on Russia at the EU level. The key reasons behind the block were expected to be close economic ties with Russia. However, with a change in the government in Poland under Prime Minister, Donald Tusk, the border block has been lifted. Whereas Hungary's Prime Minister, Victor Orban, continues to block military and financial aid. According to Orban, the aid prolongs the war.

#### In perspective

First, a sticky road ahead for Ukraine. The Ukrainian counteroffensive began in late June, but was unable to materialise due to a lag in weapon delivery and continued defence from Russia. This added to Ukraine's prolonged demand for air power and advanced weapon systems from the West. The current ambiguous outset in the US between Republicans and the Democrats further adds to the concerns about the support to Ukraine. Uncertainty over strong military support and with winter ahead, the road for Ukraine will be uneasy.

Second, Biden's dilemma. With the emergence of a debate over excess military aid sent to Ukraine, Biden's immediate challenge will be to deal with the Republicans to pass the bill on USD 61 billion military aid. If not to eventually break the pause on sanctioning military aid to Ukraine through another package. Next, the 2024 elections and balancing the support at the domestic level will be the task with 53:45 divided support for military aid to Ukraine.

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## Pakistan: Another terrorist attack

Rohini Reenum

### In the news

On 12 December, the Inter-services Public Relations (ISPR), reported on six terrorists attacking a security forces' checkpoint in the Dera Ismail Khan district in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. The militants killed 23 security personnel. The same day, Dawn reported that the attack was the deadliest this year, leaving the highest military death toll in a day. Tehreek-e-Jihad Pakistan (TJP) had claimed responsibility for the attack.

On 12 December, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that the Foreign Secretary had called on the Afghan charge d'affaires to deliver Pakistan's strong demarche. Afghanistan was asked to investigate and hand over the perpetrators and the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) leadership, to make efforts to eliminate terrorist groups in Afghanistan and put an end to their use of Afghan soil for cross-border terrorism.

On 13 December, Tolo News quoted the spokesperson of the Islamic Emirate, Zabihullah Mujahid: "Every incident in Pakistan should not be linked to Afghanistan because this incident happened hundreds of kilometres away from our country. There are security forces and intelligence there (Pakistan), they should be cautious about their duties."

### Issues at large

First, the increase in terror attacks in Pakistan since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. Dawn in June 2023, reported that there had been a 73 per cent increase in the number of terrorist attacks in the corresponding period. There has been a further upsurge in the attacks after the TTP unilaterally ended a ceasefire in November 2022. According to a report by the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS), around 600 militant attacks had taken place this year until November, causing nearly 900 fatalities which is an 81 per cent escalation compared to 2022.

Second, the emergence of TJP. According to the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), the TJP announced its formation this year to enforce an Islamic system in Pakistan through armed jihad. The group is ideologically aligned with the TTP and has been described as its affiliate by several media. In its short existence, it has targeted military personnel and security establishments. It had claimed responsibility for several deadliest attacks this year including the Bolan Suicide Bombing, the Muslim Bagh attack, the Zhob garrison attack in Balochistan, the Mianwali airbase attack in Punjab and the latest Ismail Dera Khan attack in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Third, the geographical concentration of attacks. According to the third quarterly report of the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is the most affected province with 51 attacks followed by Balochistan which recorded nine attacks. Both provinces share a border with Afghanistan and are the stronghold of terror organisations operating out of Pakistan. This geographical proximity leaves the region accessible and vulnerable to cross-border terror groups including TTP. Despite repeated intelligence-based operations to flush out terrorists from these regions, the number and intensity of attacks have continued an upward trend.

### In perspective

First, the deteriorating relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan. When the Taliban took over in Afghanistan, Pakistan expected its cooperation in its campaign against TTP. The former, however, suggested talks and ceasefires. The initial disappointment of Pakistan has slowly turned into hostility due to Afghanistan's continued inaction. Pakistan consistently blames the Afghan Taliban for providing safe harbour to the TTP and reiterates the involvement of Afghans in suicide bombings. The forcible deportation of Afghan refugees has further increased tensions. The Taliban regime denies the allegations and asserts that Pakistan's internal security issues are its concerns.

Second, the geographical factor. Terror outfits operating in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan have benefitted from the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, the withdrawal of the US and the porous borders. This has complicated Pakistan's counter-terrorism strategy. Given the cross-border nature of its terror problem, Pakistan would require Afghanistan's cooperation to address the issue.

Third, the role of new actors. The emergence of new terror outfits including IS-K (regional chapter of ISIL) and TJP has further complicated the situation. These outfits have different agendas and modus operandi and are competitive for regional influence. New terror groups carry out deadly attacks to gain attention. The presence of multiple actors and threats arising thereof has impeded Pakistan's counter-terrorism strategies.







Image source: Ronen Zvulu, Reuters

### **Conflict Weekly Special**

## **The War in Gaza: Seventh Week**

Authors: Rosemary Kurian, Nuha Aamina, Rishita Verma and Gananthula Uma Maheshwari

### **War on the ground**

On 8 December, Al-Qassam Brigades, the armed wing of Hamas, stated that one Israeli soldier who had been taken hostage was killed early on the same day in a fight between the militants and an Israeli special forces unit that was carrying out a rescue operation.

On 8 December, BBC reported that a resolution proposed by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) demanding an "immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza" would be put to a vote by the UN Security Council (UNSC).

On 7 December, BBC reported that Israeli tanks were encircling the Jabalia refugee camp in northern Gaza, where there had been intense fighting.

On 7 December, Al Jazeera reported that the Israeli army had increased the intensity of its bombardment of Gaza, targeting locations from Khan Younis in the south to Jabalia in the north.

On 6 December, Al Jazeera reported that tanks from the Israeli army advanced into the heart of Khan Younis following a night of artillery bombardment and fighting near Gaza.



On 5 December, the BBC reported that Israel claimed to have surrounded Gaza's largest refugee camp, Jabalia. According to the Israeli military, the camp in northern Gaza was being used as a base by the Hamas.

On 4 December, the Israeli military announced that it was extending its ground operation into "all areas" of the Gaza Strip. It issued a new order on social media, asking people to leave roughly 20 areas within the Palestinian enclave.

On 3 December, BBC reported that on the third day of renewed fighting, the Israeli military was refocusing its offensive on the southern part of Gaza.

On 2 December, BBC reported that for the second day in a row, Israel was bombarding Gaza, and the military was advising residents in some areas to flee.

### **Regional responses**

On 7 December, Egypt's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sameh Shoukry, praised the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, for the way he was handling the war in Gaza.

On 6 December, the President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, rejected Israeli plans to establish a post-war buffer zone in Gaza. He said that even debate on the issue was "disrespectful" to his "Palestinian siblings."

On 5 December, the Qatari-Saudi Coordination Council expressed their "deep concern about the humanitarian catastrophe" in Gaza.

On 5 December, six nations of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) condemned the violation of humanitarian law by Israel in Gaza. They expressed their discontent with Israeli aggression and reiterated their demand for it to end, at the 44th session of GCC.

On 4 December, the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) spokesperson stated that mortar shells were launched from Lebanon towards an Israeli military post in Shtula, injuring three IDF soldiers.

On 3 December, an anti-tank missile was fired from Lebanon into Israel territory. It landed near Beit Hillel, injuring four soldiers. The IDF retaliated by attacking Hezbollah targets in Lebanon.

On 1 December, Libya released four terrorists belonging to Hamas, at the request of Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

### **Global responses**

On 8 December, the US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, urged Israel to complete its investigation of the artillery strikes that killed a journalist and injured six others in Lebanon. After human rights groups raised concern over possible "war crimes" committed by Israel, Blinken stated that it was "important and appropriate" that Israel conclude and present its findings of the investigation.

On 8 December, Bloomberg reported that the Palestinian Authority was engaged in talks



with the US, to prepare a plan to run Palestine after the war ends.

On 7 December Austria's Ministry of Foreign Affairs claimed that there was "no indication that Austrian development projects funded by the ADA (Austrian Development Agency) were misused to fund or promote terrorism or to spread anti-Semitic content."

On 6 December, Guterres invoked Article 99 of the UN Charter, which allowed him to bring the attention of the UN Security Council (UNSC) to any matter that "may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security."

On 6 December, the Prime Minister of Japan, Fumio Kishida, and the Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, engaged in a telephone conversation. The former urged the latter to "minimise civilian casualties" and observe international law, "especially international humanitarian law."

On 5 December, the US House of Representatives passed a resolution equating anti-Zionism to anti-Semitism. Human rights groups in the US responded by stating that the Republican-led bill set a "dangerous" precedent, aiming to distract the public from the war in Gaza and limit free speech.

On 5 December, the US announced that it was imposing visa bans against Israeli settlers spreading violence in the West Bank despite continued warnings.

On 5 December, France imposed asset freezes on the Hamas' chief in Gaza, Yahya Sinwar, adding him to the other individuals on its national sanctions list.

On 4 December, a Dutch court opened a case in which human rights groups accused the Netherlands of complicity in Israeli war crimes. Amnesty International and Oxfam accused the state of war crimes due to its supply of parts for F-35 fighter jets to Israel, which were used in the Gaza bombing.

On 4 December, the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported that a second group of Thai hostages who were released by Hamas had returned to Thailand.

On 3 December, according to Al Jazeera, the UK's military would start sending "unarmed and unmanned" surveillance aircraft to locate hostages in Gaza. The British Ministry of Defence confirmed that it would be joining the US in its efforts to aid Israel in the war against Hamas.

On 3 December, the Vice President of the US, Kamala Harris, called for Israel to limit its strikes in southern Gaza to protect civilian lives.

On 2 December, the Prime Minister of Belgium, Alexander De Croo, told the President of Israel, Isaac Herzog, that Belgium wanted "no more civilian killings" in Gaza.

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## Issues in Peace and Conflict This Week: Regional Roundups

Rohini Reenum, Rishika Yadav, Anu Maria Joseph, Femy Francis, Padmashree Anandhan, Dhriti Mukherjee, Shamini Velayutham and Narmatha S

### East and Southeast Asia

#### **China: Crackdown on Myanmar-based telecommunication fraud gang**

On 10 December, the Chinese Ministry of Public Security ordered all the suspects and members of the organised crime group, leading the telecommunication fraud in Myanmar, to surrender. Chinese authorities were able to capture ten major actors behind the fraud that operated from the Konkang region of Myanmar. China offered rewards worth USD 18,900 to anyone providing information. They claim that the accused openly carry arms to field their illegal activities. Chinese authorities commented that these gangs have been defrauding Chinese citizens and carrying out violent crimes including murder, assault and kidnapping.

#### **China: Confrontation with Japan near the disputed island of Senkaku**

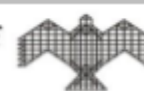
On 10 December, Chinese coast guards accused Japanese fishing boats of intruding on the water near the contested island of Senkaku. Both countries blamed each other for violating maritime laws after both vessels engaged in a confrontation. The island is currently administered by Japan and China has repeatedly stressed its claims on the Island. Japanese coast guards issued instructions that the Chinese vessels patrolling the contiguous region left after receiving a warning.

#### **China: Accused of “vanishing” 600 North Korean defectors**

On 7 December, Transitional Justice Working Group (TJWG), a Seoul-based human rights group, informed that up to 600 North Koreans have allegedly “vanished” after being forcibly deported by China. TJWG issued their protest against China’s suspected role in the forced repatriation of North Korean defectors trying to flee to South Korea. The group claims that hundreds of defectors were transported in buses from the Chinese detention centre and decried it as the largest mass repatriation. TJWG stated: “Those forcibly returned face the prospect of torture, sexual and gender-based violence, imprisonment in concentration camps, forced abortions and execution as their authoritative regime brands them criminals and traitors.” In October, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs refuted the allegation and claimed that the North Koreans “illegally” entered China for economic reason and that they handled the situation by law.

#### **China: Xi on EU-China relations**

On 7 December, Chinese President Xi Jinping at the 24th EU-China Summit issued that the EU and China should not view each other as rivals and engage in confrontation owing to the differences in political systems. It was the first in-person meeting in four years where they discussed China-EU economic trade prospects and science and technological sectors cooperation. Xi stressed that they need to eliminate “all kinds of interference” and that both sides need to develop the “right perception” of each other. Xi stated: “We hope that the EU will be prudent when introducing restrictive economic and trade policies, and when using trade remedy measures to keep its trade and investment markets open.”



### Taiwan: Accuses China of planned “intimidation” tactics ahead of elections

On 13 December, the Strait Times reported on the Taiwanese military accusing China of attempting to infiltrate a sensitive region near the island. They added that China has ramped up its “intimidation” tactics as Taiwan approaches its presidential elections. Taiwan alleges that China is attempting to sway the votes towards candidates who have a pro-China policy. In November, Chinese air and naval forces coordinated four aggressive incursions in the contiguous zones near the Taiwan Strait.

### North Korea: Trilateral cybersecurity group targets North Korea’s threats

On 7 December, the US, South Korea and Japan convened for the cybersecurity working session to combat North Korea’s cyber threats. They discussed disrupting illicit cyber operations funding Pyongyang’s nuclear and missile programs. Emphasising the crackdown on cryptocurrency thefts and overseas Information Technology (IT) networks aiding the regime, the trio pledged cooperation to bolster cybersecurity capabilities. Meanwhile, the US and Japan bolstered extended deterrence dialogue highlighting concerns over North Korea’s missile launches.

### South Korea: Conducts key military drills

On 7 December, Seoul’s Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) announced that the Republic of Korea Armed Forces (RKAF) has initiated the Taeguk Exercise following the breakdown of the inter-Korean military accord. The computer-simulated drill is an annual exercise that focuses on diverse North Korean provocations. The move comes after Pyongyang’s unilateral withdrawal from the 2018 Comprehensive Military Agreement (CMA) in November. Seoul emphasised the need for a robust posture to counter North Korean provocations on land, sea and air. The exercise, starting on 11 December, is significant in the context of North Korea’s reinstatement of border posts and weaponry.

### South Korea: Military helicopters fly near the demilitarised zone

On 5 December, North Korea News released images of three South Korean military helicopters flying towards the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ). This move comes after the suspension of the Comprehensive Military Agreement (CMA) between South Korea and North Korea. The images reveal the choppers’ apparent movement near the Tongil Unification Observatory which highlights heightened military activity following the breakdown of the CMA. The increased presence near the border signals a potential escalation of tensions between both countries.

### North Korea: Arrest of Alejandro Cao de Benos by Spain

On 1 December, Spain’s National Police Corps (NPC) detained the founder of the pro-North Korea sympathiser group, Korea Friendship Association (KFA), Alejandro Cao de Benos. He was arrested under the charges imposed by the US over advising North Korea on cryptocurrency. He refuted the fraud charges and objected to the Federal Bureau Investigation’s (FBI) “red notice.” The KFA leader, facing earlier controversy for alleged sanctions breaches, condemned the US move as “purely political.”

### **South Korea: Responds to unannounced flights in air defence zone**

On 14 December, the South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) announced the deployment of fighter jets in its Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ). The move was a response to unannounced incursions by four Russian and two Chinese aircraft into the ADIZ. However, the foreign aircraft, detected by the JCS, did not breach South Korea's territorial airspace. The incident follows similar occurrences in November 2022 and June 2023 raising tensions over North Korea's ties with Russia and China.

### **Australia: Passes laws for detention of former immigration detainees**

On 6 December, the High Court landmark ruling permitted the re-incarceration of ex-immigration detainees if they pose risks of serious offences post-release. The legislation enables courts to detain offenders, particularly those posing threats of violent or sexual crimes. Minister of Home Affairs, Clare O'Neil, compared the legislation to anti-terrorism measures aiming at prevention and safety of the public.

### **New Zealand: Protests erupt against new government's policies**

On 5 December, thousands rallied decrying the perceived racial tilt in the new government's policies. Te Pāti Māori, a political party advocating for the rights of the Māori community, called for country-wide protests, coinciding with the opening of the country's 54th Parliament. The recently elected right-leaning coalition of the National Party, New Zealand First and ACT New Zealand vowed to review Maori language use, affirmative action and the interpretation of the country's founding treaty in legislation. Te Pāti Māori's co-leader Rawiri Waititi labelled the movement an "activation." Police reported traffic disruptions and two arrests during the demonstrations.

### **South Asia**

#### **Pakistan: Blast opposite school in Peshawar**

On 5 December, Al Jazeera reported on a blast that happened near a school in Peshawar. An improvised explosive device went off in the morning on 5 December injuring seven people including four children. The police could not ascertain the target of the attack and no one has claimed responsibility. Peshawar is a city in Pakistan's north-western province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa which borders Afghanistan and has witnessed a surge in violence since 2022 with majority responsibility claimed by the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

#### **Pakistan: Poliovirus strains detected in six samples collected from different districts**

On 14 December, Dawn reported that the Regional Reference Laboratory for Polio Eradication (RRLPE) at the National Institute of Health had found wild poliovirus type-1 (WPV1) in six samples collected from five districts of the country. The samples were collected between 13 and 20 November from the districts of Quetta, Malir (Karachi), Peshawar, Hub and Tank. The virus identified is of an imported strain. Minister of Health, Nadeem Jan, highlighted the threat of cross-border poliovirus transmission and stated that 84 out of the 90 positive samples this year detected were imported strains.



### **Afghanistan: India allows reopening of Afghan embassy**

On 1 December, Tolo News reported that the Afghan embassy in India which was closed down previously due to lack of support from India and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan has been reopened. The embassy was reopened by the acting Consul General of Afghanistan in Mumbai, Sayed Mohammad Ibrahimkhil, and the Consul General of Afghanistan in Hyderabad, Zakia Wardak. The two officials stated that the Indian officials at the Ministry of External Affairs have asked them to take charge of the consulate services of the embassy.

### **Afghanistan: UN Conference held on “Accountability for Crimes Committed in Afghanistan”**

On 9 December, Tolo News reported that a UN conference for “Accountability for Crimes Committed in Afghanistan” was held on 8 December. The conference highlighted the lack of accountability for crimes against humanity committed in Afghanistan. Referring to the conference, the UN special rapporteur for Afghanistan, Richard Bennett, stated: “I really like to stress the importance of this event, as accountability is the bedrock of the human rights system and Afghanistan has been experiencing impunity for decades ... for war crimes, crimes against humanity, and violations of human rights or international humanitarian law.” Norway’s Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN, Andreas Løvold, emphasised the importance of creating a platform for Afghan women and facilitating their participation.

### **Bangladesh: Opposition party protest**

On 11 December, the supporters of the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party protested on the day of International Human Rights Day ahead of the country's general election on 7 January. The protest led by former Prime Minister, Khaleda Zia, intends to boycott the election under Sheikh Hasina which Zia claims will not be free and fair. The opposition urges the polls to happen under a non-partisan caretaker government. The protest to boycott the polls was brought after the months-long rally which saw many opposition politicians jailed. During the protests, many demonstrators reportedly carried banners stating “we want the unconditional release of all prisoners.”

### **Central Asia, the Middle East and Africa**

#### **Iran: President Ebrahim Raisi visits Moscow**

On 7 December, Al Jazeera reported that the Iranian President, Ebrahim Raisi, was hosted by the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, in Moscow. They discussed the Israel-Gaza war. While Raisi termed the situation as “genocide” and “a crime against humanity,” Putin blamed the US for its failed diplomacy in the region. Putin suggested Russia as a potential mediator to the conflict. The development comes amidst the US raising concerns about the increasing military cooperation between Iran and Russia.

#### **Iran: Narges Mohammadi’s children accept the Nobel Peace Prize on her behalf**

On 10 December, Al Jazeera reported that the children of Narges Mohammadi, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize 2023, accepted the prize on her behalf. Her seat was left empty. Mohammadi fought against the compulsory wearing of the hijab and the death penalty in Iran. She has been incarcerated in the Evin Prison in the capital Tehran since 2021. Previously, she denounced the “tyrannical and anti-women religious” government in Iran stating that the government of Iran is isolating its people, adding that she is hopeful that “the Iranian people will dismantle obstruction and despotism through their persistence.”



### **Iran: Authorities stop Mahsa Amini's family from travelling to collect the Sakharov Prize**

On 9 December, the BBC reported that Mahsa Amini's parents and brother were stopped from boarding their flight to Strasbourg. They were travelling to receive the EU's Sakharov Prize which is the EU's top human rights prize. The EU awarded Amini and the freedom movement, "Women, Life, Freedom," associated with her in October this year. On 12 December, the European Parliament President, Roberta Metsola, expressed disappointment in the restriction on Amini's family to collect the prize stating: "This year's Sakharov Prize serves as a tribute to all the brave and defiant women, men and young people in Iran who, despite coming under increasing pressure, are continuing the push for change."

### **Lebanon: One soldier killed in Israeli bombardment**

On 5 December, according to Lebanon's army, a soldier was killed in an Israeli shelling on a military station along the country's southern border; the first fatality since cross-border confrontations that began in October. The army officials reported that three people were injured. They stated: "An army military position in the Odaisseh area was bombarded by the Israeli enemy, leaving one soldier martyred and three others injured."

### **Lebanon: Israel extends its target in southern Lebanon**

On 10 December, the Israeli forces carried out an attack on Southern Lebanon in the town of Aitaroun. According to Arab News, the attack is one of the deadliest carried out by Israeli forces. The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) building was targeted during the raid. In retaliation, Iran-backed Hezbollah targeted the Israeli army's Yara base which is situated near the Lebanon border. The UNIFIL spokesperson, Andrea Tenenti, stated: "Any targeting of UNIFIL sites and any use of the area adjacent to our sites to launch attacks across the Blue Line is unacceptable, as attacks against civilians or UN personnel constitute violations of international law."

### **Yemen: Houthi forces warn cargo ships in the Red Sea**

On 13 December, Arab News quoted an unnamed Yemen's Houthi rebel spokesperson warning several cargo ships to avoid sailing towards the Palestinian territories. In a gesture of solidarity with the Palestinians, the group threatened to block ships from any country bound for Israel until Israel ends its offensive in Gaza. The Houthis additionally warned to avoid falsifying flags in the region and requested to turn on the radios while crossing Yemen. The warning came after the Iran-backed group claimed responsibility for attacking a Norwegian commercial tanker with a missile on 12 December. According to Houthi military spokesperson, Yahya Saree, the Norwegian commercial tanker, MT Strinda, was carrying oil to Israel. However, the ship's owners maintained that it was carrying feedstock for biofuel to Italy.

### **UAE: An overview of the COP28 Summit**

On 13 December, the Conference of the Parties 28 (COP28) was concluded in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE). The conference was held from 30 November to 13 December. The UN's 28th annual climate summit discussed getting ready and limiting climate change issues. It reached an agreement, Global Stocktake. The agreement marks the first time that countries have agreed to "transition away from fossil fuels in energy systems" which will be carried out in a "just, orderly and equitable manner." The Global Stocktake "calls on" countries to "contribute" to moving away from coal, gas and oil to "achieve net zero by 2050."



However, countries that are more vulnerable to climate change issues, including several African countries, asserted the agreement to be more ambitious in terms of the timeline. Although COP28 President, Sultan Al Jaber, called the agreement a “paradigm shift that has the potential to redefine our economies,” the matters within the agreement are weak allowing countries to take minimal action. This narrative was mirrored by the energy justice director at the Center for Biological Diversity, Jean Su, that “cavernous loopholes threaten to undermine this breakthrough moment.”

#### **Sudan: UN terminates mission**

On 1 December, the UN Security Council voted to end its mission, UNITMAS, in the war-torn Sudan. 14 members voted to end the mission while Russia abstained. The mission would come to an end on 3 December. The Sudan military government stated that the mission failed to reach its objectives. UN Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, DiCarlo, stated: “The Security Council just voted to close down UNITAMS, but the UN is not abandoning the Sudanese people.” UNITAMS was established in June 2020 to support the country in a 12-month transition towards a civilian government. Its mandate was extended in 2021 and 2022.

#### **Somalia: Death toll due to floods rises to 110**

On 4 August, BBC Africa quoted the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) that the death toll due to the ongoing floods in Somalia has risen to 110. According to OCHA, more than one million people have been displaced and nearly 2.4 million people are affected due to the calamity. The agency has warned of the risk of spreading several diseases including cholera in the states of Hirshabelle and Galmudug. Somalia and neighbouring countries of Kenya and Ethiopia have been experiencing heavy rains for the past week causing widespread casualties and displacement. According to the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO), the floods are caused by the El Niño weather phenomenon causing extreme weather patterns.

#### **Ethiopia: Severe drought kills 176 people**

On 13 December, BBC Africa quoted Ethiopian authorities that at least 176 people were killed in the Tigray region due to drought-induced hunger. The Governor of the district of Emba Sieneti stated that nearly 45,000 people are facing severe hunger worsened by the conflict and drought. The previous week, Tigray’s interim administration announced a state of emergency after more than 200 people died from drought-related hunger. A failed four consecutive rainy season in the region has caused severe drought in the Horn of Africa region.

#### **Uganda: 200 ADF militants killed in military operation**

On 14 December, Ugandan President, Yoweri Museveni, stated that at least 200 Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) militants were killed in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo during a military operation carried out by Ugandan troops. Museveni stated that “we have been carrying out air attacks on the terrorists in Congo” adding that “200 of them were killed.” In 2021, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo began a joint military offensive against the Islamic State-linked ADF group in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. However, the group has been carrying out frequent attacks. In June, at least 42 people were killed in western Uganda in an ADF attack.

### **The Democratic Republic of Congo: M23 rebels agree to a three-day ceasefire ahead of polls**

On 13 December, the March 23 (M23), a rebel group active in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, agreed to a three-day ceasefire brokered by the US. M23 spokesperson, Lawrence Kanyuka, stated that they accepted the deal “since it is in line with the M23's existing signed ceasefire of 7 March 2023.” He added that the group would “not hesitate” to defend themselves and the civilian population that is under their control. The ceasefire comes ahead of the elections that are scheduled on 20 December. Authorities have commented that the elections cannot be held in the regions of Rutshuru and Masisi due to instability.

### **Guinea-Bissau: Another coup attempt says Guinea-Bissau's president**

On 2 December, Guinea-Bissau's President, Umaro Sissoco Embaló, who arrived in the country after attending the COP28 in UAE, stated the violence in the country during the week was a coup attempt. The unrest between members of the National Guard and special forces of the Presidential Guard on Thursday night in the capital Bissau left at least two people dead. Guinea-Bissau has suffered a series of coups and attempted coups since its independence from Portugal in 1974.

### **Niger: ECOWAS officially suspends country's membership**

On 15 December, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) officially suspended Niger's membership to the bloc. The move comes after the ruling military government refused to reinstate deposed President Mohamed Bazoum. On 11 December, ECOWAS stated that it would not revoke sanctions imposed on Niger after the junta rejected to free the ousted president.

## **Europe**

### **Russia: Putin signs decree to increase Russian troops' capacity**

On 1 December, Russia's President Vladimir Putin signed a decree announcing the increase in Russia's troops by 170,000, totalling 1,320,000. According to the Russian Ministry of Defence, the move comes after increased threats due to NATO's expansion. The ministry stated: “The increase in the number of servicemen of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation is being implemented in stages, based on citizens who express a desire to undergo military service under a contract.”

### **Denmark: Bill to ban Quran burnings**

On 7 December, Denmark's parliament passed a bill imposing a ban on “inappropriate treatment of religious texts.” The bill, known as the Quran Law, was passed after the continued burning of the Quran in Muslim-majority countries. Denmark and Sweden experienced a series of protests over the Quran burning leading to security concerns. Denmark's Prime Minister, Mette Frederiksen, claimed that “criticising religion would remain legal” and the bill would only have a peripheral effect.

### **Ukraine: Czech Republic and Denmark announce new military aid package**

On 10 December, the Ministry of Defence of the Czech Republic and Denmark vowed to provide 50 infantry fighting vehicles, 2500 pistols, 7000 rifles, 500 light machine guns and 500 sniper rifles. Denmark's Minister of Defence, Troels Lund Poulsen called the package a “substantial donation” for Ukraine. It also includes anti-tank weapons and modernised armaments which are expected to be delivered in future. On 13 December, the Denmark government promised to support Ukraine with new military aid worth EUR one billion. Denmark's Prime Minister, Mette Fredriksen, announced the package in the Nordic Summit



and is expected to be presented on 14 December in the parliament for approval. Once adopted, ammunition, tanks, drones and equipment will be sent to Ukraine.

### Latin America and the US

#### **Guatemala: Arevalo faces legal challenges to election victory**

On 7 December, announcements were made by prosecutors in an attempt to overturn President-elect Bernardo Arevalo's victory. Arevalo has spoken out against corruption in the country, one of the potential reasons prosecutors declared on 8 December that his victory was "null and void." After accusations including the narrative of the investigation result as an "attempted coup" and further attempts to strip Arevalo of his political immunity, the country's electoral court ruled that the election results were "unchangeable."

#### **Guatemala: President responds to new US visa restrictions**

On 12 December, a day after the US announced new visa restrictions on 300 Guatemalan citizens, Guatemala's President, Alejandro Giammattei, rejected these "intimidating actions." The US holds that Guatemala's officials, including its top prosecutor, undermined democratic values during the country's elections. These restrictions target 100 lawmakers and several private-sector individuals. Giammattei, while affirming that the transition of power in January 2024 would be carried out in an orderly manner, called out the "media and political manipulation" by members of the US government.

#### **Mexico: Violent Confrontation Kills 11**

On 7 December, Al Jazeera reported that at least 11 people were killed following the violence between suspected gang members and residents of a Mexican town. According to the report, the armed men were part of a drug cartel, Familia Michoacana, and had demanded local farmers pay extortion fees. The state police are working with the National Guard to gather more details on the people involved.

#### **El Salvador: Amnesty International attributes the human rights crisis to the anti-gang crackdown**

On 5 December, Amnesty International released a report titled "Behind the veil of popularity: Repression and regression of human rights in El Salvador." The report asserted that El Salvador under President Nayib Bukele's anti-gang crackdown is witnessing one of its worst human rights crises. The group stated that 74,000 arrested individuals under the crackdown experienced the "systematic use of torture and other mistreatment" and "deterioration in human rights" as "extremely worrisome." Although the crackdown has lowered, following the country's homicide rate and increased Bukele's popularity, has left 327 people missing and 190 dead.

#### **Mexico: Authorities detain 102 African migrants in Oaxaca**

On 12 December, Mexican authorities in Oaxaca detained two buses filled with 102 migrants from African countries including Senegal, Guinea, Djibouti and the Republic of Congo. Besides, they arrested three suspected smugglers who were on the buses. Although it is unknown how the African migrants arrived in Mexico, Nicaragua's lax visa laws have made it a common transit point. The Mexican immigration agency added that the migrants were being processed in Oaxaca in southern Mexico, however, it may face financial struggles in deporting them back to Africa.

### **The US: Blinken affirms US support to Guyana amid border dispute**

On 6 December, the US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, assured Guyana's President, Irfaan Ali, of US backing on Guyana's sovereignty over the Essequibo region, which Venezuela has threatened to annex. This follows a development on 3 December when Venezuelans voted to annex the oil-rich area of Guyana which the former holds as a natural part of its territory. Ali has emphasised that Guyana is taking the threat "very seriously" and has "initiated a number of precautionary measures to ensure the peace and stability" of the region. While expressing US support for Guyana's stance, Blinken asked Ali to deal with the issue peacefully.

### **The US: First charges filed under war crimes law, with relation to the Ukraine war**

On 6 December, Attorney General Merrick Garland announced the arrest of four Russian soldiers for allegedly abducting and torturing a US citizen in Ukraine. This is the first time the US has filed charges under war crime laws with Garland, describing it as "an important step towards accountability for the Russian regime's illegal war in Ukraine." However, Garland stated that the US would "not forget the atrocities in Ukraine" and that their work "is far from done." The US citizen was allegedly abducted from his home in south-east Ukraine and was tortured and threatened.

### **The US: New sanctions imposed to isolate Russia's "wartime economy"**

On 12 December, the US Departments of State and the Treasury announced new sanctions on more than 250 individuals from countries including Turkey, China and the UAE, in an attempt to isolate Russia amid the ongoing war in Ukraine. The Treasury Secretary, Janet Yellen, explained that as "Putin's war machine cannot survive on domestic production alone," the sanctions will "tighten the vice on willing third-country suppliers and networks providing Russia the inputs it desperately needs" to continue the war. These sanctions focus on individuals involved in weapon procurement for Russia, those who have a network with Russia's energy sector and companies developing a natural gas processing facility in Russia.

### **The US: Biden warns Israel of the consequences of their "indiscriminate bombing" in Gaza**

On 12 December, during a fundraiser, US President, Joe Biden, warned Israel that its "indiscriminate bombing" could lead to it losing support from the US and the EU. Biden added that the "conservative" Israeli government was making the war "very difficult" calling on the prime minister of Israel to "change this government." On the same day, Israel's Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, appreciated the US for blocking "international pressure to stop the war." Although Biden underscored that Israel "can't say no" to a Palestinian state, Netanyahu asserted that there "is disagreement about "the day after Hamas."



### The US: Resolution on humanitarian ceasefire receives overwhelming support in UNGA

On 12 December, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) voted on a resolution calling for a humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza. 153 members voted in favour, ten voted against and 23 abstained. The non-binding resolution showcases the global political opinion that has shifted in favour of an end to the war. Saudi Arabia's UN Ambassador, Abdulaziz Alwasil, stated that the success of the resolution "reflects the international position to call for the enforcement of this resolution." Earlier on 8 December, the UN Security Council (UNSC) failed to pass a similar resolution calling for a ceasefire. The resolution, which was described as "balanced and neutral" by Egypt's UN ambassador, Osama Mahmoud, was opposed by the US and Israel. Israel's envoy, Gilad Erdan, while calling the UN a "moral stain" on humanity, stated that "the time has come to put the blame where it belongs: on the shoulders of the Hamas monsters."

### The US: Biden announces new weapons to Ukraine while Zelenskyy appeals to Republicans

On 13 December, Al Jazeera reported that as US President Joe Biden announced weaponry worth USD 200 million to Ukraine, the White House stated that the package could be "one of the last." This is following increasing opposition from Republicans, who prefer investing more in border crossings than the Russia- Ukraine war. In response to this, Biden stated: "Putin is banking on the United States failing to deliver for Ukraine." On 12 December, Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelensky, wrapped up his third diplomatic mission to Washington since the beginning of the war. During his visit, he appealed to the Republican lawmakers to approve the new USD 61.4 billion military aid plan, stating: "Thanks to Ukraine's success – success in defence – other European nations are safe from the Russian aggression."

*(The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors. They do not purport to reflect the opinions or views of any institutions or organisations.)*

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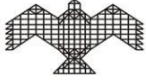
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### About NIAS-International Peace Research Initiative(IPRI)

National Institute of  
Advanced Studies



The International Peace Research Initiative (IPRI), initiated in 2018 at the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS), is a part of the Conflict Resolution and Peace Research Programme at the School of Conflict and Security Studies.

IPRI undertakes research on various issues relating to peace with special emphasis on radicalisation, sustainable peace, gender roles in peacebuilding and global protest movements. IPRI researches are published as briefs, reports and commentary.

### About Konrad Adenauer Stiftung



The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) is a political foundation. Established in 1955 as “Society for Christian-Democratic Civic Education,” in 1964, the Foundation proudly took on the name of Konrad Adenauer, the first Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany. KAS cooperates with governmental institutions, political parties and civil society organizations, building strong partnerships along the way. In particular, KAS seeks to intensify political cooperation in the area of development cooperation on the foundations of its objectives and values. Together with the partners, KAS makes a significant contribution to the creation of a global order that empowers every country to determine its own developmental priorities and destiny in an internationally responsible manner.

KAS has organized its program priorities in India into five working areas: Foreign and Security Policy; Economic, Climate, and Energy Policy; Rule of Law; Political Dialogue focused on Social and Political Change; and Media and Youth. The India Office of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation takes great pride in its cooperation with Indian partner institutions that implement jointly curated projects and programmes.

### About Conflict Weekly



The Conflict Weekly an academic endeavour to bring every Wednesday/Thursday a weekly analysis of the conflict and peace processes in the world; aiming to look at the larger peace picture. It is published by the NIAS-IPRI in collaboration with the KAS India Office.

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