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## ISRAEL'S AERIAL TARGETING PUTS STRAIN ON THE US RELATIONSHIP

As Israel's operation to destroy the forces of Hamas moves toward the two-month mark and the casualties mount, Israel's strongest ally – the US – has begun to express reservations. On 12th December President Joe Biden noted that Israel was losing “support by the indiscriminate bombing that takes place”. It was a sharp rebuke which has caused a mini rift. Biden's opinion seems to have been driven by a [report from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence](#), which claims that 40-45 per cent of the aerial munitions dropped by the Israeli air force were unguided or ‘dumb’. In response, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan has flown to the region. This excellent [briefing](#) by the Washington Institute covers the military conflict and explores the relationship between Israel and the United States in greater depth.

## RUSSIA AND THE WAR IN GAZA

There has been much commentary about if and how the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza might be connected to Russia's war in Ukraine. This has ranged from downright conspiratorial notions that Russia might have had something to do with Hamas' attack on Israel to distract the West, to US President Biden's attempts to equate Putin and Hamas and portray support for Ukraine and Israel as part of the same effort to back ‘good’ versus ‘evil’. RUSI Research Fellow Emily Ferris has produced a much-needed sober [analysis](#) of how Russia is looking at the war in Gaza. She explains that Russia is clearly not unhappy that another conflict is distracting the West, but also outlines how Russia is trying to position itself as a reasonable broker between Israel and Hamas – not least to burnish its superpower credentials.

## A HEZBOLLAH DEEP-DIVE

Since Hamas' attack on Israel on 7th October much attention has focused on Hezbollah, the heavily armed political and armed group that controls much of Lebanon and is closely aligned with Iran. The persistent question has been: Will Hezbollah attack Israel and turn what is currently a conflict mostly contained geographically to Gaza into a much larger regional conflagration? Hezbollah has walked a fine line, increasing cross-border attacks, but also signalling that it is not interested in a major war with Israel – at least not for now. To get a better understanding of Hezbollah, it is worth exploring the excellent podcast series *Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule* by Matthew Levitt at The Washington Institute. The [first season](#) was released in early 2022, but is well-worth listening to still; the [second season](#) started in September this year, just before the current conflict erupted.

## ARE HOUTHI “REVENGE” ATTACKS ON SHIPPING LANES MAKING A DIFFERENCE?

In a show of solidarity with the Palestinians, the Houthi movement in Yemen promised to attack ships headed through the Bab-el-Mandeb strait off the coast of Yemen. True to their word, multiple tankers thought to be associated with Israel or its allies have been boarded, or intercepted, and on 13th December [Houthi forces even fired anti-ship missiles at a Norwegian flagged tanker](#). Despite the presence of significant numbers of US and French vessels in the area, the collapse in security of shipping lanes which carry 10 per cent of global shipping traffic is a serious secondary effect of the Gaza conflict. In this [piece](#), the Associated Press discusses the impact of Houthi attacks on global trade. It notes that global oil markets are largely unaffected by the disruption, but there is significant disruption to commercial shipping, with insurance premiums at more than double the normal rate, and for Israeli ships the costs are as high as 250 per cent. For now at least the strait remain open, but it will likely be a perilous few months ahead.



## UKRAINE AFTER THE ‘FAILED’ COUNTER-OFFENSIVE

The war in Ukraine has entered its second winter. The Ukrainian counter-offensive of 2023 is over. A new [episode](#) of the BBC's *The Briefing Room* podcast provides a useful, if sobering, overview of where things stand. *Economist* defence editor Shashank Joshi and Michael Clarke, former director general of RUSI, outline the situation on the ground, concluding that the counter-offensive has failed to achieve its results, and warning that Russia seems poised to try to make renewed gains in 2024. Then, current RUSI director general Karin von Hippel and Daniela Schwarzer from the Bertelsmann Foundation look at the political level and highlight the growing divisions in the Western coalition backing Ukraine, ranging from the political uncertainty in the US to disagreements and lacking industrial capacity in Europe.

## UKRAINIAN POLITICS IN WARTIME

It appears relatively unlikely that the war in Ukraine will end anytime soon. However, even as Ukraine's desperate resistance against Russian aggression goes on, there is such a thing as domestic politics in Ukraine as well. President Zelensky is popular, but not without opposition, and as elections during wartime seem unlikely, Parliament is struggling to keep up with and represent a changing society. Moreover, as Ukraine is pursuing European Union membership, political and economic reforms are required. In a new [policy brief](#) for the European Council on Foreign Relations, Andrew Wilson explores Ukrainian politics in wartime. He highlights how the influence of oligarchs has diminished, but also urges Western governments to continue to press Kyiv to advance reforms and protect democratic gains.

## THE IMPACT OF THE UKRAINE WAR ON RUSSIA'S POSITION IN THE BALTIC AND ARCTIC

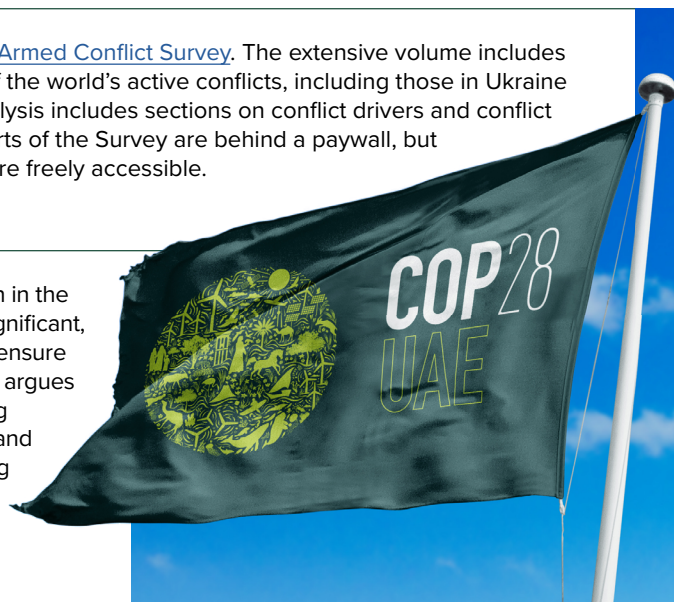
Russia's invasion of Ukraine has reshaped European security – perhaps especially so in Northern Europe – with Finland and Sweden, two Nordic countries and Baltic Sea littoral states, progressing to NATO membership. In a [policy brief](#) for the French Institute of International Relations, Pavel Baev analyses how Russia views the changed strategic landscape in the Baltic and Arctic. He explains that Russia feels that its position in these regions has worsened significantly. Kaliningrad, for example, once a Russian 'fortress', has seen the redeployment of key Russian military assets to Ukraine. Baev also argues that Russia believes that it cannot rebuild its old position of military superiority in the Baltic and that it will therefore likely turn to a strategy more heavily based on the deployment of nuclear weapons.

## 2023 ARMED CONFLICT SURVEY

The International Institute for Strategy Studies has published its annual [Armed Conflict Survey](#). The extensive volume includes overviews of the political, military, and humanitarian dimensions of all of the world's active conflicts, including those in Ukraine and Gaza, but also those in Honduras, Niger and Mozambique. The analysis includes sections on conflict drivers and conflict parties, as well as forecasts of how the conflicts may develop. Some parts of the Survey are behind a paywall, but others – including a very interesting interactive [Conflict Trends Map](#) – are freely accessible.

## COP28 ENDS IN AGREEMENT, BUT IS IT ENOUGH?

The hours of late night negotiating which resulted in a COP28 declaration in the early hours of 13th December to “transition” away from fossil fuels was significant, but there is a widespread belief that it goes nowhere near far enough to ensure permanent alterations to the climate. In this [piece](#), the Brookings Institute argues that the private sector – including the bond markets – must lead in driving finance and innovation. Meanwhile, CSIS looks at the [African case study](#) and notes that there are significant hurdles to overcome, not least the growing distrust between the decarbonising North and the rapidly growing South, whose energy needs can only be met by cheap abundant fuels such as coal and oil.





## NEWS STORIES TO WATCH OUT FOR

As the wars in Ukraine and Israel/Gaza and their multi-dimensional repercussions continue to dominate headlines, here are some other topics to keep an eye on:

Venezuela is posturing to [annex parts of oil-rich Guyana](#) in what could become a crisis that could affect wider parts of South America.

[Argentina has elected Javier Milei](#), a controversial libertarian firebrand, to be its next President; consequences for the country itself, and for the wider region, remain uncertain.

Brazil's largest drug gang, the so-called First Capital Command, has established itself as a [globally relevant crime network](#).

In Sudan, the [civil war rages on](#) as the so-called Rapid Support Forces of renegade general Hemedti have made gains.

In what appears to be a move to spite Europe, the military junta ruling [Niger has rescinded at law that criminalised human trafficking](#), raising the spectre of increased irregular migration through the Sahel country.

As [Taiwan prepares for a crucial presidential election](#), China has increased its military manoeuvres in the Taiwan Strait.

Azerbaijan's President Aliyev has called [a snap election](#) following his victory in Karabakh in an apparent effort to consolidate his power.

Buoyed by his party's strong electoral showings in northern and central India, Prime Minister Modi is continuing to remake his country's [1.4 million strong armed forces](#).

The [maritime dispute between China and the Philippines](#) continues to be seen as a test of America's resolve in the Indo-Pacific.

Purges amongst China's political elite continue, with [the latest person to fall being Defence Minister Li Shangfu](#); the circumstances of his departure remain a mystery.

## AFRICA IN A CHANGING GEOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE

In recent years, the question of which global superpower – China or America, or maybe even Russia – could gain an upper hand in Africa has periodically come to the fore. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but also in the context of a series of coups in several African countries seemingly supported (at least rhetorically) by the Kremlin, the question of how the continent's states might orient themselves in a changing geopolitical landscape has become ever-more important for policymakers in Washington, London and across Europe. The Italian Institute for International Political Studies has published an [extensive volume](#), edited by Giovanni Carbone and Lucia Ragazzi, exploring how African countries are approaching various global developments. Chapters in the collection highlight both growing anti-Western sentiment in Sub-Saharan Africa, but also increasingly self-confident assertions of non-alignment.



## PROSPECTS OF A SECOND ARAB SPRING

The Gaza war has shattered a brief interlude of at least a modicum of stability in the Middle East. Conflicts in Libya, Syria and Yemen were still simmering, but, in general, there was an atmosphere of de-escalation in the region, not least exemplified by the rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Yet, with one of the region's oldest conflicts re-erupting, it is prudent to look at the underlying drivers of instability that continue to plague the region. The latest [episode of The Red Line](#) podcast looks at the prospects for another Arab Spring – i.e. another wave of popular uprisings similar to that of the early 2010s. Expert guests include a former US Assistant Secretary of State and a former US Special Representative for Syria. They note that some of the socio-economic factors behind the 2010/11 uprisings appear to be even worse today, but also highlight how governments across the region have learned how to deal with, and quell, dissent.

## BEHAVIOURAL INSIGHTS TO REDUCE NUCLEAR RISK

International relations and security studies have long grappled with finding a balance between abstract theories and the idiosyncrasies of human behaviour – think: realism versus cognitive biases. A new [research paper](#) produced by Chatham House and the Behavioural Insights Team explores how behavioural insights could inform nuclear weapons policy and, in the process, reduce nuclear risk. The researchers highlight four key areas: reducing overconfidence amongst decision makers, addressing concerns about miscommunication, minimising errors in policy implementation, and increasing public and political engagement. Reading the paper, many of its findings appear relevant to other areas of security and defence policy too.

## WHAT IS THE TRUE LEGACY OF HENRY KISSINGER?



Henry Kissinger's death at the age of 100 has stirred up a 50 year debate. Was he truly the greatest statesman of the 20th century and master of realpolitik, or an unapologetic war criminal with blood on his hands? You can find plenty of praise and criticism, but the reality is far more complex. Kissinger's own traumatic childhood fleeing Nazi Germany aged 15 left him with a keen sense of moral judgement, which he carried with him throughout his life. In this [article](#) Robert Kaplan argues that Kissinger "thought more deeply about morality than many self-styled moralists". [Timothy Naftali's analysis](#) in *Foreign Affairs* describes Kissinger as: "A man of contradictions. Gifted with a steely intellect... but emotional and, at times, gripped by insecurity." The picture emerges of a thoughtful man, disdainful of reactive tactical policy, and far more concerned with overarching strategic clarity, whose partnership with Richard Nixon was less close than many assume. Kissinger's undoubted brilliance built relationships with Mao's China, and brought the 1973 Yom Kippur War to a close, but as Naftali points out the man had blind spots: "He could only see the world at 30,000 feet, or through the eyes of the powerful."