

CHACR DIGEST #28



SPREADING CONFLICT IN THE MIDDLE EAST (AND BEYOND)

The Hamas attack of the 7th October 2023 has upended a period of apparent calm in the Middle East. After a few years out of the headlines, conflict in the region – and worries that it could continue to spread, resulting in threats to global security – is firmly back on the agenda. In an effort to make sense of this new period of chaos in the Middle East and beyond, Derek Thompson, host of the [Plain English podcast](#), has launched a mini-series titled *World on Fire*. In the [first episode](#) he interviews Nathan Sachs from Brookings, who offers a number of succinct summaries of the different dimensions of conflict in the Middle East. The [second episode](#) casts the net wider and examines the confluence of wars, conflicts and large-scale violence currently raging across the world. This [analysis](#) by Daniel Byman and Seth Jones is also an excellent tour de horizon of the challenges that the United States faces with regard to restraining Iranian activity across the region. This piece was written before the serious escalation of Iran-backed Iraqi-militias attacking a US base in Jordan on the 29th January, killing three US soldiers and injuring several others – action which now makes the problem of conflict containment even more urgent. For an excellent quick-fire analysis on the Jordan strikes read [this piece](#) by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy's Andrew Tabler.

ISRAEL'S NORTHERN FRONT: IS WAR INEVITABLE?

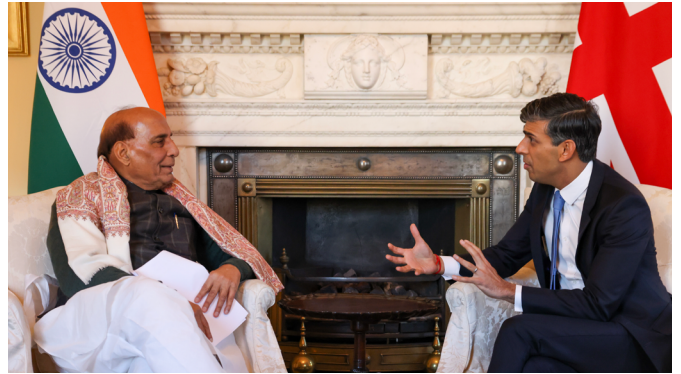
Ever since Hamas' attack on Israel, observers have warned that the war in Gaza could become a wider regional conflagration. Over the past three months, violence at the Israeli-Lebanese border has reached levels not seen since the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war. Both sides have signalled that they do not want a full-scale conflict but there are growing fears a war may eventually be inevitable. In October, the Israeli government ordered the evacuation of dozens of villages and towns near the Lebanese border. Four months later, tens of thousands of people still wait to go home; but unless the Israeli government can credibly argue that the security situation in the north has changed meaningfully, they cannot return. That raises the spectre that Israel will eventually feel the need to use force to change the status quo and push Hezbollah away from the border – something that would almost certainly lead to war. Writing for the Israeli Institute for National Security Studies, Anat Shapria, Orna Mizrahi, Carmit Velnsi and Idit Gittleman suggest that there may be an [alternative way of addressing Israel's northern security dilemma](#).

THE HOUTHJI THREAT TO RED SEA SHIPPING

On several occasions this month, the US and UK have conducted air strikes against the Houthi movement in Yemen. The strikes came in response to a string of attacks on international shipping through the Bab Al-Mandeb and the Red Sea by the Houthis, which have support from Iran. Amongst the many articles written on the subject in recent weeks, two stand out. [Andrew Dorman](#), writing for Chatham House, suggests that the strikes can be seen as highlighting the UK's diminished military capabilities. Meanwhile, Sam Cranny-Evans and Sidharth Kaushal at RUSI offer a very useful [analysis](#) of the Houthis' military capabilities – and how they can be countered. For anyone interested in background on the conflict in Yemen, [this section](#) on the International Crisis Group's website is a good starting point.

UK AND INDIA: A RESET IN DEFENCE RELATIONS

In early January, India's Minister of Defence Rajnath Singh visited the UK; it was the first defence ministerial visit in 22 years. Defence relations between the UK and India have long been difficult. India's close defence ties with Russia, especially highlighted since Moscow's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, have been just one area of contention between the two countries. But Singh's visit, together with the UK's determination to 'tilt' to the Indo-Pacific, indicates that there may now be new momentum for closer engagement between London and New Delhi. In a [commentary](#) for the International Institute for Strategic Studies, Rahul Roy-Choudhry provides a useful overview of how the UK and India's strategic interests are increasingly converging, while also highlighting where the lack of collaboration remains particularly apparent.



Picture by Rory Arnold / No 10 Downing Street

LOOKING AHEAD IN 2024

Amongst the many pieces prognosticating what might and might not matter in international affairs in 2024, two publications by the European Council on Foreign Relations are particularly useful. Carl Bildt, a former Swedish Prime Minister, [highlights](#) the many elections that are due to take place this year – including in the UK and, especially, the US – and how they might shape developments around the world, with the contest for the White House of course being the most consequential one, including for transatlantic relations and the war in Ukraine. Meanwhile, in an entertaining, if worrying, [podcast episode](#), European Council on Foreign Relations directors Mark Leonard and Jeremy Shapiro outline their ten predictions for the year ahead. They of course discuss Russia/Ukraine and the Middle East, but also highlight a few more niche issues.

GERMANY'S ZEITENWENDE: AN UPDATE

In the days immediately following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the German government boldly announced a Zeitenwende – a turning point – in German foreign, defence and security policy. However, how much has actually changed over the past two years remains unclear. In an [interesting piece](#) for the German Council on Foreign Relations, Roderick Parkes argues that German policy-making tends to move in long cycles of drawn-out periods of stasis, followed by sudden dramatic shifts. He suggests that in order to become a more effective pillar of European security, Germany must become more accustomed to a more iterative policy-making process that reacts faster to changes in the global environment. In a [related article](#), Parkes, together with Benjamin Tallis and Florence Schimmel, makes the case for Berlin to become more comfortable with, and eventually embrace, the concept of a grand strategy that can help guide the country in an increasingly uncertain world.

CHINA'S MARITIME RESEARCH FLEET

As China is in the process of massively expanding its blue water naval capabilities, it is not just investing in new warships. To expand its understanding of maritime environments it has thus far not significantly operated in, China has developed the world's largest fleet of civilian research vessels. In a [special report](#) published by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Matthew Funaiolo, Brian Hart and Aidan Powers-Riggs explain how these research activities, portrayed as guided by scientific and commercial objectives, are central to Beijing's geo-strategic ambitions.

RUSSIA'S SIX FLEETS

For centuries, Russian leaders have understood their naval capabilities to be central to their country's status as a global power. Recent Ukrainian successes in striking at navy targets in the Black Sea have drawn attention to questions about the current status of the Russian military's six fleets. A recent [episode](#) of *The Red Line* podcast offers a great overview of how Russia's navy has evolved in recent years, and of the challenges Russia's political and military leadership are facing as a consequence of so much of their country's resources being diverted to the war in Ukraine.





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:

Facing increasing difficulties in its civil war with a paramilitary group, the [Sudanese military has suspended Sudan's engagement with a group of regional countries](#) trying to end the conflict through mediation.

Violence in northwest Nigeria continues as [armed men storm a military camp](#), sending troops fleeing.

[Guatemala's new President Arevalo faces steep hurdles](#) as he seeks to address widespread corruption and powerful organised criminal gangs.

[Beijing has ramped up its hostile rhetoric towards the Philippines](#) after the latter's president commented on the outcome of Taiwan's presidential elections.

North Korean Dictator Kim Yong Un has once again declared South Korea to be his country's ['primary foe'](#) and warned of war.

The [Norwegian government](#) is working on an initiative to facilitate the formation of a unified Palestinian government.

TAIWAN EMBRACES CONTINUITY

Of the many elections in democracies around the world this year, the presidential contest in Taiwan in early January was amongst the most highly anticipated. Lai Ching-te, the previous Vice President, managed to secure a comfortable win that had been foreshadowed by opinion polls. His victory gives the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) an unprecedented third consecutive presidential term – much to China's chagrin, as Lai is expected to hold the China-critical course of his predecessor Tsai Ing-wen. Bonnie Glaser at the German Marshall Fund offers an insightful [summary](#) of the election results and argues that Lai's victory will likely signal the continuation of the, albeit tense, status quo between Beijing and Taipei.

NARCO-TERRORISM IN ECUADOR ESCALATES ON TV

On the 9th January, heavily armed gunmen seized Ecuador's public television station – live on air – while gangs kidnapped police officers and detonated bombs in major cities. The attacks came in response to President Daniel Noboa's declaration of a state of emergency, which he believes is necessary in order to counter the country's increasingly powerful criminal gangs. Christopher Sabatini, writing for Chatham House, provides a succinct [summary](#) of what is going on in the Latin American country. He explains how internationally operating narcotics groups have infiltrated Ecuador and merged with local criminal gangs, leading to a sharp increase in violence and a breakdown of public order. He also outlines how and why Western countries can and should support the country.

IRAN AND PAKISTAN SQUARE OFF

With all eyes distracted by events in the Middle East, both Iran and Pakistan moved to the brink of a highly dangerous escalation as they exchanged tit-for-tat military strikes in each others' territory. Iran's initial incursion into Pakistan on the 17th January killed two and injured three, and in response Pakistan recalled its ambassador from Tehran and launched retaliatory strikes, killing nine suspected Balochi militants. Both sides appear to be trying to step back from the brink of further conflict – [both Foreign Ministers met](#) on the 29th January to announce their "respect for the territory and sovereignty of the other". For those seeking more background into why Baluchistan has proven such a problem for both nations, this [BBC primer](#) is worth reading, and [this piece](#) in *Middle East Eye* explains why both sides are keen to rapidly de-escalate from conflict.

WHY ARE TENSIONS BETWEEN THE TWO KOREAS SO HIGH?

The downward trend in Korean relations has become alarming, and tensions are at their highest point in four years. On the 15th January North Korea's Kim Jong Un [officially announced that he was ending the North's reunification policy](#), noting that South Korea was no longer a partner for reconciliation. Military tensions have risen sharply following several new intercontinental ballistic missile tests in 2023, and the mutual exchange of artillery fire near the border on the 5th January has done nothing to cool hot heads. In [this piece](#) from Brookings, Andrew Yeo argues that Kim Jong Un may have three reasons for ratcheting up tensions: 1) Kim believes reunification is a futile endeavour; 2) increased South Korean US ties behove a North Korean response; 3) Kim is trying to leverage the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's threat to South Korea to attempt to influence the US Presidential election, and Yeo believes Kim may prefer Trump to Biden.

Hopes of a peaceful reunion fast disappearing: The Arch of Reunification – built in the city of Pyongyang in 2000 after a landmark inter-Korean summit – has reportedly been destroyed and can no longer be seen by satellite imagery.

