



Asia

North East Asia

➔ **China/Japan** China maintained high naval activity in East China Sea and conducted joint aerial operations with Russia, while Beijing and Tokyo continued diplomatic engagement.

Maritime and aerial activity continued around disputed East China Sea islands. As of 31 Dec, Japan spotted 91 Chinese vessels in Japan's contiguous zone during Dec and eight vessels within Japan's territorial sea. China's and Japan's coast guards 10 Dec accused other of intrusions previous day in territorial waters of Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands; two Chinese Coast Guard ships 9 Dec and 10 Dec, and four ships 18 Dec entered Japan's territorial waters around Senkaku/Diaoyu. Japanese Coast Guard revealed Chinese vessels made incursions into island's contiguous zone on 352 days in 2023, highest number since records began in 2008. Meanwhile, Japan's defence ministry 14 Dec reported two Chinese H6 bombers flew from East China Sea to Sea of Japan, meeting with two Russian TU95 bombers for joint flight, just as around seventeen Chinese and Russian aircraft flew around Japan, prompting Japanese fighter jets to scramble.

Japan and China continued diplomatic engagement. China's ambassador to Japan Wu Jianghao 6 Dec met with representative of Japan's Komeito political party Natsuo Yamaguchi to discuss promoting exchanges and communication in various fields, including party exchanges. China's foreign ministry 8 Dec stated China holds open attitude towards exchanges and cooperation with Japan, including party-to-party exchanges, and expressed hope that Japan will make efforts to build constructive and stable relationship. Japan's new ambassador to China, Kanasugi Kenji, 19 Dec arrived in China's capital Beijing, expressing his intention to advance dialogue between two countries and address pending issues, including China's restrictions on imports of Japanese fishery products over concerns related to release of treated water from Fukushima nuclear power plant.

In other important developments. Japanese, U.S. and Australian militaries 4 Dec initiated their first trilateral command post drill aimed at enhancing their readiness for Japan's defence. China's defence ministry 14 Dec urged Japan to stop interfering in China's internal affairs and spreading false narratives about "Chinese military threat" as excuse for its military expansion.

➔ **Korean Peninsula** North Korea conducted third test of solid-fuelled inter-continental ballistic missile (ICBM) and kicked off annual ruling party review, while U.S. and South Korea held nuclear consultations.

Pyongyang conducted operational exercise of solid-fuel ICBM. North Korea 18 Dec conducted its third test of solid-fuelled ICBM, marking its fifth ICBM test of 2023; new ICBM HS-18 forms third prong of North Korea's current ICBM armoury. Latest test was described as "launching drill of an ICBM unit", presumably intended to imply new ICBM is operational. State media described launch as being conducted with due regard for other states in region, as missile flew for more than 70 minutes on very lofted trajectory without crossing Japanese territory.

North Korea held annual ruling party performance review. Start of ruling Korean Workers' Party's annual review meeting was reported by state media on 27 Dec; forum, held in capital Pyongyang, serves as review of party performance during 2023, gauging implementation of goals set down in country's five-year plan; leader Kim Jong Un called 2023 "year of great transformation" in fields ranging from military development to construction and warned "war can break out at any time" on peninsula. Results will give clearer indication of regime's foreign policy priorities and stance for 2024.

U.S. submarine made port visit to South Korea after second nuclear talking shop. U.S. and South Korea 15 Dec held second Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) meeting in U.S. capital Washington; NCG, part of Washington Declaration agreed in April 2023, aims to give South Korea more voice in deciding alliance nuclear strategy and, accordingly, to reduce domestic pressure for Seoul to pursue an independent nuclear deterrent capability. Following meeting, U.S. nuclear-powered submarine *USS Missouri* 17 Dec made port visit to Busan in South Korea.

In another important development. International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and U.S. late Nov both raised concerns that North Korea had begun to bring experimental light-water nuclear reactor – type of reactor that Pyongyang has no experience in operating – online at its Yongbyon nuclear research facility.

↓ Taiwan Strait Cross-strait tensions heightened ahead of Taiwan's tight January election as China maintained military activity and described reunification as an "inevitability".

China stepped up stern rhetoric in final days before Taiwan's high-stakes election. Competition ahead of 13 Jan presidential and legislative polls remained fierce, with polls during Dec indicating that support for incumbent Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and opposition Kuomintang (KMT) remain within five percentage points, underscoring chance DPP may secure unprecedented third term. Amid electoral preparation, Taiwan officials warned of China's potential influence through disinformation, including narratives casting doubts on U.S. credibility as partner and competency of DPP. China's Taiwan Affairs Office 30 Dec condemned DPP candidate William Lai's remarks at recent debate, calling him "the instigator of a potential dangerous war in the Taiwan Strait". In New Year's address, China's leader Xi Jinping 31 Dec described "reunification" with Taiwan as "historical inevitability". If DPP wins vote, China will likely opt for show of force, stepping up its military activities in strait as well as economic and other forms of coercion in bid to deter new DPP govt from crossing its red line, namely declaration of formal independence; such actions heighten risk of misjudgement or miscalculation. Alternatively, if KMT or smaller Taiwan People's Party (TPP) wins, cross-strait tensions might ease, at least temporarily, and prospects for cross-strait dialogue could improve.

Chinese military maintained pressure on island ahead of vote. As of 31 Dec, Taiwan spotted 313 Chinese military aircraft around island during Dec, of which at least 92 crossed unofficial “median line” or were detected in Taiwan’s air defence identification zone; Taiwan sighted 172 Chinese navy vessels in surrounding waters. Notably, China’s Shandong aircraft carrier group 11 Dec sailed through Taiwan Strait.

U.S. moved toward deepening military support for Taiwan. U.S. Senate 7 Dec passed 2024 National Defense Authorisation Act, which calls for military cooperation with Taiwan, including comprehensive training, consultation, and institutional capacity-building plans for Taiwan’s military, as well as military cybersecurity cooperation, and authorises information sharing between U.S. and Taiwan militaries.

South Asia

➔ **Afghanistan** **Taliban continued crackdown on Islamic State’s local branch as armed opposition groups raised political profile abroad, while tensions persisted between Taliban and Pakistan.**

Anti-Taliban groups continued armed and political activities. Taliban security forces 8 Dec targeted Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) cell in Herat province (west) and neighbouring Nimroz province (south west). While attacks by ISKP have reduced in recent months, Afghanistan Freedom Front (AFF) has emerged as one of most active armed opposition groups inside Afghanistan: group 24 Nov claimed attack against Taliban in Bagram district of Parwan province (north east). Although no attacks were attributed to National Resistance Front (NRF), group’s leader participated in conference organised in Russian capital Moscow, marking first time Russia has invited anti-Taliban groups to publicly held conference; NRF also held event in Austrian capital Vienna in early Dec, where it presented its roadmap for new Afghanistan, after group’s spokesman 28 Nov attended Herat Security Dialogue in Tajikistan capital Dushanbe. Increased international activity by armed opposition groups suggest level of international frustration with de facto authorities’ refusal to meet external demands.

Relations with Pakistan continued to exhibit strains. Militants 12 Dec conducted major attack in Pakistan’s Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, killing 23 soldiers (see Pakistan); hours later, Pakistani FM Jalil Abbas Jilani delivered strong demarche to Afghan chargé d’affaires, calling for Kabul to take verifiable action against perpetrators.

In other important developments. Taliban’s FM Amir Khan Muttaqi 16 Dec met with Turkmenistan FM Rasit Meredow at Torghundi border crossing of Herat province, marking first such high-level interaction between Taliban and Turkmenistan. U.S. Department of Treasury 8 Dec imposed sanctions on two Taliban officials, Fariduddin Mahmoud and Muhammad Khalid Hanafi, allegedly for their role in restrictions on women; Taliban criticised move, pointing to U.S.’ opposition to Security Council resolutions on Gaza as evidence of country’s duplicitous approach to human rights.

➡ **Bangladesh** Amid govt crackdown on opposition, country braced for potentially chaotic, violent and disputed general election in January 2024.

Govt continued crackdown on opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Ruling Awami League-controlled courts convicted at least 1,600 BNP leaders and activists since 1 Aug, while authorities reportedly arrested up to 25,000 BNP members since late Oct, with most leaders in prison and many members in hiding. Having formally boycotted 7 Jan general election by refraining from registering any candidates before 30 Nov deadline, BNP continued campaign of demonstrations, blockades and “hartals”: party members 10 Dec formed human chains countrywide to draw attention to human rights situation. BNP 16 Dec organised its largest rally since late Oct crackdown, with tens (possibly hundreds) of thousands demonstrating in capital Dhaka. BNP reportedly sought to assemble political parties not participating in vote into single platform. In attempt to lend credibility to vote, ruling Awami League struck series of seat-sharing deals to give impression of opposition participation. While Awami League appeared set to win with large majority, it remained unclear whether it can successfully project image of credible election amid risks of voting descending into chaotic violence between rival supporters within ruling party or so-called opposition parties, as well as clashes involving BNP; if voter turnout proves low, officials could resort to rigging ballots.

Violence and insecurity continued in Rohingya refugee camps. Security forces 15 Dec broke up Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) meeting in camps, arresting four following shootout. Separate attacks 21 Dec killed three refugees – at least one linked to rival group Rohingya Solidarity Organisation. Dire conditions in camps prompted growing numbers of refugees to flee to Indonesia’s Aceh province, bringing total to 1,500 since mid Nov: Indonesian authorities signalled patience was wearing thin, while some locals refused to provide assistance and demanded deportation of refugees.

Chittagong Hill Tracts remained restive. Dialogue between govt and Kuki-Chin National Front was postponed until 2024. Armed group formed by Bengali settlers 11 Dec reportedly killed four activists from armed organisation United People’s Democratic Front in Khagrachari; three others were abducted in attack.

➡ **India** Instability and violence persisted in Manipur state in far north east, Maoist militants increased attacks in centre, and breakthrough on border dispute with China remained elusive.

Ethnic conflict in Manipur state entered seventh month in Dec. Intra-community clashes 19 Dec flared up between Kuki-Zo tribes over naming of tribal burial site ahead of mass burial of 87 victims on 20 Dec by Indigenous Tribal Leader’s Forum, in line with Supreme Court ruling late Nov instructing govt to ensure dignified burials of tribal victims whose bodies had been held in morgues in state capital Imphal. In response, Manipur state govt same day imposed restrictions on Churachandpur district for two months, prohibiting assembly of five or more people and carrying of sticks or weapons. Suspected militants 30 Dec fired RPG rockets in ambush injuring five security forces personnel in Moreh district. Unidentified gunmen 1 Jan killed four Meitei Muslims, who have remained neutral in ethnic conflict, in Manipur’s Thoubal district.

Centre saw uptick in Maoist attacks. Following state elections in Chhattisgarh state (centre) in Nov, Maoist attacks killed several. Maoists 9 Dec killed ruling Bharatiya Janata Party member in Narayanpur district. IED blast 11 Dec injured two security personnel in Sukma district. IED blast 13 Dec killed security forces member in Narayanpur district. IED blast 14 Dec killed one security forces member in Kanker district. Gun battle 17 Dec erupted during anti-Maoist security operation in Sukma district, killing one security forces member.

Border dispute with China continued to smoulder. India and China 30 Nov held fourteenth meeting since May 2020 of Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs, but made no progress despite in-depth discussions on proposals to achieve complete disengagement in Eastern Ladakh; troops from both sides remain forward deployed in Demchok and Depsang friction points. Indian and Chinese commanders reportedly continued to meet during Dec. Reports during Dec indicated counter-insurgency force Assam Rifles will undertake preparations for deployment along Line of Actual Control in event of contingencies.

➔ **India-Pakistan (Kashmir) Deadly militant attack killed five soldiers in Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) despite onset of winter, while Supreme Court in landmark ruling upheld govt's decision to scrap J&K's special status.**

Militants continued attacks, defying harsh winter conditions. Militants 21 Dec ambushed two army vehicles in Jammu's Rajouri district, killing five soldiers and injuring two. Army subsequently launched security operation; three of eight civilians apprehended for interrogation died due to injuries next day, with some family members alleging torture. Earlier, security forces 6 Dec arrested two alleged militants in Rajouri district, recovering arms. Militants 9 Dec shot and injured police officer in Srinagar; The Resistance Force claimed responsibility. Security forces 17 Dec claimed to have arrested cell of three militants targeting police officers in Srinagar.

Supreme Court upheld govt's abrogation of Article 370. Five-judge Supreme Court bench headed by Chief Justice of India 11 Dec upheld govt's decision in 2019 to revoke Article 370 of constitution, which offered J&K semi-autonomous status; court also ordered Election Commission to organise J&K regional polls – last of which were held in 2014 – before 30 Sept 2024 and directed govt to restore J&K's statehood. In response, former chief minister Omar Abdullah vowed “the struggle will continue”, national newspaper *The Hindu* said ruling “legitimises subversion of federal principles”, while Pakistan denounced ruling, saying “international law doesn't recognise India's unilateral and illegal actions” and decision has “no legal value”. Police same day reportedly placed political leaders in Kashmir in detention.

Central govt passed two controversial bills. Parliament 6-11 Dec adopted The Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation (Amendment) Bill, allowing for increase in number of constituencies and nominations by New Delhi, and The Jammu & Kashmir Reservation (Amendment) Bill, declaring two communities – Hindu community of Kashmiri Pandits and hill tribe of Pahadis – eligible for affirmative action; critics of legislation accused govt of attempting to manipulate political landscape to its advantage ahead of 2024 national elections by wooing Pandits and Pahadi community.

↓ Pakistan In deadliest attack of 2023, jihadist militants killed almost two dozen soldiers in north west; authorities prepared for 8 February general election as opposition leaders battled legal challenges.

Militants staged deadliest assault of 2023. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, militants 12 Dec rammed explosive-laden vehicle into gate of military compound in Dera Ismail Khan district and conducted multiple suicide bombings, collapsing building and killing at least 23 soldiers and wounding over 30 – marking deadliest attack of year; Tehreek-i-Jihad Pakistan militant outfit claimed responsibility. Militant attack on military-police checkpoint in Khyber district 15 Dec killed two paramilitary personnel and three police officers.

Relations with Afghanistan continued to exhibit strains. Islamabad attributed spike in militant attacks to Afghan Taliban authorities' refusal to take action against Pakistani Taliban and its affiliates. Notably, hours after 12 Dec attack, FM Jalil Abbas Jilani delivered strong demarche to Afghan chargé d'affaires, calling for Kabul to take verifiable action against perpetrators; Taliban dismissed claims of Afghan link to attack as “baseless”. Meanwhile, Pakistan continued to deport undocumented Afghans to Afghanistan, with more than 500,000 forcibly sent across border since Oct.

Political tensions continued to mount ahead of Feb elections. Supreme Court 15 Dec suspended Lahore High Court's ruling two days earlier in favour of petition of former PM Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) against deployment of bureaucrats (as opposed to judicial officers) to oversee elections on 8 Feb. Election Commission same day issued election schedule, ruling out any further delays in election process. Continuing to criticise appointment of bureaucrats as election supervisors, PTI still vowed to contest polls; Khan's ability to stand for public office, however, rests on whether courts will overturn his corruption conviction. Khan's legal hurdles mounted further as special court 12 Dec indicted him in relation to case of misusing diplomatic cables. Khan's main political opponent, former PM Nawaz Sharif, benefitted from two Islamabad High Court rulings 29 Nov and 12 Dec overturning corruption cases; to stand in election, Sharif requires Supreme Court to overturn life ban on holding office, issued in 2017.

➡ Sri Lanka Govt unlocked new tranches of international financial assistance in bid to raise revenue, while inter-ethnic reconciliation generated debate and allegations of abuse dogged police leadership.

Govt secured international financial support. International Monetary Fund's (IMF) Executive Board 12 Dec announced completion of first review of Extended Fund Facility, opening way for cash infusion of \$337mn; IMF judged gov't's performance “satisfactory” for raising revenue and rebuilding reserves, while noting challenges ahead, including need to further raise revenue, eradicate corruption and enhance governance. Meanwhile, Asian Development Bank 8 Dec announced it had approved \$200mn concessional loan to help stabilise financial sector and World Bank 20 Dec announced release of \$250mn in budget support. Parliament 13 Dec approved gov't's 2024 budget featuring plans for ambitious increase in revenue.

Inter-ethnic reconciliation initiatives provoked controversy. Sangha for Better Sri Lanka, comprising half a dozen Buddhist monks, and members of diaspora-based

Global Tamil Forum (GTF) 7-15 Dec jointly conducted series of meetings with wide range of religious, political, civil society leaders and diplomats in effort to launch “national conversation” based on “Himalaya Declaration” agreed by pair in April 2023; GTF described initiative as attempt to create country based on “pluralistic character”, “equal citizenship” and devolution of power to provinces. Domestic and diaspora Tamil groups attacked initiative for falling short of long-standing Tamil demands and for supporting govt’s reconciliation agenda, including controversial truth and reconciliation commission due for 2024 launch. In eastern district Batticaloa, Buddhist monk-provocateur Ampitiye Sumanarathana physically blocked two Tamil parliamentarians from joining Tamil cattle herders demanding return of land forcibly seized by Sinhala farmers.

Controversy swirled around leadership of Sri Lanka police. Supreme Court 14 Dec ruled that acting Inspector General of Police (IGP), Deshabandu Tenakoon, and three other police officials had illegally detained and tortured man in 2011. Police arrested more than 15,000 people in island-wide anti-drug blitz, amid allegations of excessive force and lack of due process; campaign was personally directed by Tenakoon and public security minister Tiran Alles, who 16 Dec announced police had been authorised to use “maximum force” against suspected criminals.

South East Asia

➡ **Myanmar China brokered limited truce between military and ethnic armed group in Shan State before talks faltered, while fierce fighting persisted in several areas between regime and other ethnic armed groups.**

Armed groups expanded control over northern Shan State. Following launch of “Operation 1027”, Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) – member of Three Brotherhood Alliance – early Dec continued to expand control over northern Shan State by capturing several major bases and outposts, including around Laukkaing town where group established stranglehold; MNDAA 29 Nov said 184 regime soldiers surrendered in area. Elsewhere in Shan State, Three Brotherhood member Ta’ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) continued to press regime along much of Mandalay-Muse highway; clashes 1 Dec took place near Kyaukme town and group 6 Dec seized regime outpost in Monglon town. TNLA 15 Dec captured Namhsan town despite intensive regime airstrikes. Offering respite after six weeks of hostilities, China 11 Dec brokered limited ceasefire between regime and MNDAA in meeting in China, as sides reportedly agreed to halt fighting until end of Dec and create safe corridor for civilians and officials to leave Laukkaing; however, limited fighting continued and then escalated after further talks on 23 Dec broke down.

In Rakhine State, Arakan Army (AA) struggled against well-prepared regime. AA clashed with regime forces in several parts of Rakhine State during Dec, as regime maintained blockade on major roads and waterways that led to skyrocketing food, fuel and medicine prices. In Chin State, AA early Dec captured two large bases on Kaladan River in Paletwa Township, after weeks of heavy fighting.

Hostilities persisted in Kayah and Kayin states and Bago Region. In Kayah State, regime and resistance forces remained locked in month-long battle for state capital Loikaw; Karenni Nationalities Defence Force claimed control of more than half of town, but regime airstrikes destroyed hundreds of homes. Regime artillery fire 9 Dec scorched town's main market. In Kayin State, Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) struggled to capture Kawkareik town on Yangon-Myawaddy highway. In Bago region, KNLA and allied PDF forces 2 Dec captured most of Mone town before subsequently retreating under heavy regime airstrikes.

➡ **Philippines Jihadist bombing killed four Christians in Marawi city in south, while hostilities persisted between military and Communists despite dialogue deal struck in Nov.**

Jihadist bombing killed four in Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). Members affiliated with remnants of Maute Group – also known as Dawlah Islamiyah – 3 Dec bombed church service at Mindanao State University in Marawi city, killing four and injuring over forty individuals. In response, military conducted several air and ground offensives in Maguindanao province and adjacent areas of Cotabato province, particularly Ligawasan marsh area, killing at least nine members of Dawlah Islamiyah 7-9 Dec. Dawlah Islamiyah 8 Dec launched ambush on Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) near Ligawasan marsh on boundary of Maguindanao del Sur and Cotabato provinces, reportedly killing several MILF members. Clashes 18 Dec erupted between armed men associated with MILF's 105 Base Command in Mamasapano town over existing feud, lasting for several days until ceasefire was brokered.

Clashes persisted between Communist rebels and military. Despite agreement struck in Nov in Norwegian capital Oslo between main Communist umbrella group and govt to renew talks after six-year hiatus, hostilities on ground continued. Clashes between govt forces and Communists in Luzon Island (Quezon and Batangas) in north and Visayas Islands (Negros and Samar) in centre killed at least 25 combatants and injured three civilians.

➡ **South China Sea China and Philippines remained in tense dispute over contested South China Sea (SCS) features, leading to maritime collision near Second Thomas Shoal.**

Amid war of words, Chinese and Philippine vessels collided in SCS. Philippines 3 Dec reported "alarming" increase of over 135 Chinese naval ships "swarming" Whitsun Reef in SCS. Manila 9 Dec accused Chinese coast guard of obstructing three military boats on resupply mission to fishing boats near Scarborough Shoal. Further fuelling animosity, Chinese and Philippine vessels 10 Dec collided near Second Thomas Shoal – source of tensions between pair in recent months – after similar incident in Oct: Philippine coast guard accused Beijing of firing water cannons and ramming resupply vessels and coast guard ship, causing "serious engine damage", while China's coast guard accused Manila of intentionally ramming one of its boats. Collision occurred after Manila deployed "Christmas convoy" of around 40 vessels to distribute gifts and provisions to Philippine troops stationed at Second Thomas Shoal. U.S. 11 Dec underscored "ironclad" commitment mutual defence treaty with Philippines. Philippines foreign ministry 12 Dec summoned China's ambassador to protest "back-to-back harassments" in SCS. Philippine ambassador to U.S. next day

warned SCS was more dangerous flashpoint than Taiwan and called for multilateral responses to China's coercive actions. Earlier, USS *Gabrielle Giffords* 4 Dec sailed past Second Thomas Shoal, which China strongly protested. Philippine President Marcos Jr. 19 Dec called for "paradigm shift" in approach to SCS, citing poor progress in diplomacy with Beijing.

In other important developments. Philippines 1 Dec inaugurated new coast guard station on contested Thitu Island to enhance monitoring capabilities. Chinese leader Xi Jinping 12 Dec visited Vietnam, declaring that pair will "enter a new era"; Vietnam elevated ties with U.S. and Japan to "comprehensive strategic partners" in recent months, a status previously reserved for China. Japan and regional bloc ASEAN 17 Dec held special summit commemorating 50 years of official ties; leaders adopted joint vision emphasising security and economic cooperation and respect for rule of law.

➡ **Thailand Militant attacks in deep south subsided as part of annual end-of-year lull, while courts prosecuted activist and opposition MP on lèse-majesté charges.**

Deep south witnessed annual lull in militant violence. Heavy rain and flooding across southernmost provinces brought customary end-of-year lull in militant attacks. Nonetheless, rangers and police 14 Dec detained militant suspect in Si Sakhon district, Narathiwat province, and recovered AK-47 assault rifle and ammunition. Motorcycle-borne militants 21 Dec fired several rounds at army base in Tak Bai district, Narathiwat province, wounding one soldier. Security forces 23 Dec used robot to disarm IED in Panare district, Pattani province.

Courts handed down series of lèse-majesté convictions. Thai Lawyers for Human Rights reported series of convictions in Dec: notably, group 6 Dec reported that South Bangkok Criminal Court convicted online clothes seller of lèse-majesté for three Facebook posts deemed to have defamed king, sentencing individual to six years imprisonment; 12 Dec reported same court convicted computer programmer of royal defamation and resisting arrest, sentencing individual to three years imprisonment. Group 13 Dec reported Bangkok Criminal Court convicted Move Forward Party MP Rukchanok Srinork for posts deemed damaging to people's faith in monarchy. Court 14 Dec convicted pro-democracy activist and protest leader Shinawat Chankrajang for comments made in speech, sentencing him to three years in prison.