

What if...?

12 Dragon King scenarios for 2028

Edited by

Florence Gaub

With contributions from

**Giacomo Andolfatto, Silvia Colombo,
Pierre de Dreuz, Andrea Gilli,
Eya Jrad, James Lee, Shawn Leonard,
Andrew Monaghan, Sitara Noor,
Marc Ozawa,
Torill Settemsdal Hansen
and Mark Webber**

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INSIGHT

The NATO Defense College was established in 1951 in Paris based on General Dwight D. Eisenhower's suggestion that the Alliance needed an institution that could "develop individuals both on the military and on the civilian side who will have a thorough grasp of the many complicated factors which are involved in creating an adequate defense posture for the North Atlantic Treaty Area." In 1967, it moved to Rome, where it has been located since.

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Introduction to The Dragon's King's edition

Florence Gaub

Whenver something surprising happens, we have the urge to head to the foresight zoo. On the right we have the Black Swans¹ – big events we couldn't even imagine to happen – and on the left are the Grey Rhinos² – big events we saw coming, but decided to ignore anyway. But one animal has gotten little attention: the Dragon King.³

This is not some side character in Game of Thrones, but an event that is very unique (“a dragon”) and large in size or effect (a “king”). In contrast to the Black Swan, a Dragon King is imaginable and therefore to some, even if minor, extent, predictable. This makes the Dragon King a more operational, and therefore useful, concept than the Black Swan because a Dragon King surmises that surprise *can* be reduced if we use imagination, careful causal thinking, and of course, we monitor the area where we think it could materialize.

Seeing them coming

The original Dragon King concept is based on large-scale data sets and applied to complex systems that look for statistical outliers in mathematical

models. has been used to anticipate financial crashes, surges in electricity prices, and earthquake monitoring, amongst others. Our challenge is that, at least for the time being, we lack such data sets in several areas that matter to NATO. But this doesn't mean the low probability end of the spectrum is closed off to us. Instead of sitting back and waiting for the Black Swan to land, we search for weak signals which help us identify a Dragon King event early. Weak signals are signs that something is about to change, which could have significant effects in the future.

As a tool of strategic foresight, weak signals were conceptualized in the 1970s when the oil crisis led to a first wave of thinking about strategic surprises.⁴ Their main idea is that the best way to deal with surprises is to spot them just as they are hatching, thereby raising early awareness.

To qualify as a weak signal, a development must be new and surprising. It must challenge existing assumptions, and is not yet mature, meaning it is not yet fully developed. Once a signal is identified, we build causal relationships, meaning we think through what it could lead to, and under what circumstances. While we use data and evidence, we also have to use imagination to fill in the blanks.

The authors of the scenarios in this publication were tasked exactly that: identify a weak signal in their area of expertise that could lead to a major disruption, and follow one causal chain to 2028 and beyond. They

were free to identify the location, the causes, and the effects, as long as the causal chain proved to be plausible and evidence-based. Of course, each scenario presented in this publication is only one of several pathways a development could take. They therefore should not be judged by their predictive accuracy, but by their utility in increasing adaptability and effectiveness as we think through scenarios we have never thought about before.

How to ride the dragon

At first glance, this publication appears to be a collection of Early Warning essays – they are, to some extent, but they should not be exclusively read as such. Conventional Early Warning systems have a much shorter time horizon – normally hours, perhaps months at most – than these scenarios, and they are solely mitigation mechanisms, that is to say they provide no insight into how the event they are warning of can be avoided. They are thus not an intellectual thought exercise, but solely an alarm bell.

Our Dragon Kings in this volume provide insight into how they can be avoided, but they also challenge our assumptions in more ways than one. They are therefore awareness-raisers no matter how credible or plausible you will find them. Just reading them will have a readiness-increasing effect. (In fact, the more absurd you find them, the more pronounced this is because your mind will learn more when the emotion they generate is greater.)

These scenarios can become even more useful, however, if you use them for simulation exercises in a team. You can use them as a blueprint for a wider scenario exercise, whether one

¹ Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable* (Random House Publishing Group: 2010).

² Michele Wucker, *The Gray Rhino: How to Recognize and Act on the Obvious Dangers We Ignore* (New York, St. Martin's Press: 2016).

³ Didier Sornette & Guy Ouillon, “Dragon-Kings: Mechanisms, Statistical Methods and Empirical Evidence,” *The European Physical Journal*, Special Topics, 205.1 (2012): 1–26.

⁴ H.I. Ansoff, “Managing Strategic Surprise By Response to Weak Signals,” *California Management Review*, 18 (2) (1975): 21–33.

Introduction to The Dragon's King's edition

Dragon King

Dragon King

2023 - 2028

2028

Beyond 2028

EGG

DRAGON

FIRE

A detailed illustration of a dragon-like creature with a scaly, greyish-brown head and horns, wearing a dark blue military uniform. The creature is seated in the pilot's seat of a cockpit, with its hands on the controls. The uniform is adorned with several medals and ribbons on the chest and a pilot's wing on the sleeve. The cockpit is filled with various instruments, dials, and a control panel with a small screen. The background shows a view of a cloudy sky through the cockpit window. The entire image is framed by a white geometric border.

**The classic: wars
between states**

What if...

Russia harasses NATO in the High North?

Andrew Monaghan

The event

Silence fell as the Marine Engineer Officer completed his report. It had been a difficult three weeks. Not only had the ship hurriedly put to sea before all the checks had been completed to the Commander's satisfaction, but pressure on the navy's already stretched resources had meant that just one support vessel was available. When that support ship had encountered technical problems and been obliged to seek port in Tromsø, Norway, the political imperative to press on and not be seen to be backing down or giving up, had remained strong: the Type-45 destroyer, one of the finest ships in the British Royal Navy, would have to cope on its own.

Conditions at sea – as everyone anticipated – had been challenging. And the Russians had made their presence felt all along the route, with ships, submarines and naval aviation of the Northern Fleet shadowing their every move. Now, engine problems had again emerged.¹

“Thank you. Do what you can, please, and inform me immediately of any developments,” replied the Commander.

Where some would have become angry, he had a calm temperament that made him popular with the crew. It would take a week until support could reach them from Norway, he estimated, and Russian activity was bound to make both their time, and the passage of the relief, as uncomfortable as possible. He imagined dealing with intensified buzzing, or “fly-pasts” as his crew had come to call the close attentions of Russian aircraft, and torpedoes in the water.

Another report: “Helicopters approaching, Sir.” “Naval aviation or FSB Border Guard?” “Civilian, Sir.” That was all he needed – the Russian media.

Two thousand miles to the south in Moscow, the Russian Defence Minister mounted the podium and slowly donned his spectacles. After a brief pause as he glanced at the audience and arranged his speaking notes, he began to address the senior international gathering.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, respected friends, I am glad to welcome you to the 16th annual Moscow Conference on International Security.² About the situation in the Kara Sea, and how it is unfolding: disregarding our national legislation,³ a British warship has tried to force passage along the Northern Sea Route. We have many times tried to warn our international partners of the risks inherent in such an enterprise, of the hazardous natural conditions for those insufficiently versed in the many practical difficulties of navigating in that region.” A fleeting note of satisfaction could be detected in his voice. “With regret, it now appears that the British have discovered this for themselves, and the warship – well-known for suffering mechanical problems – has broken down.”

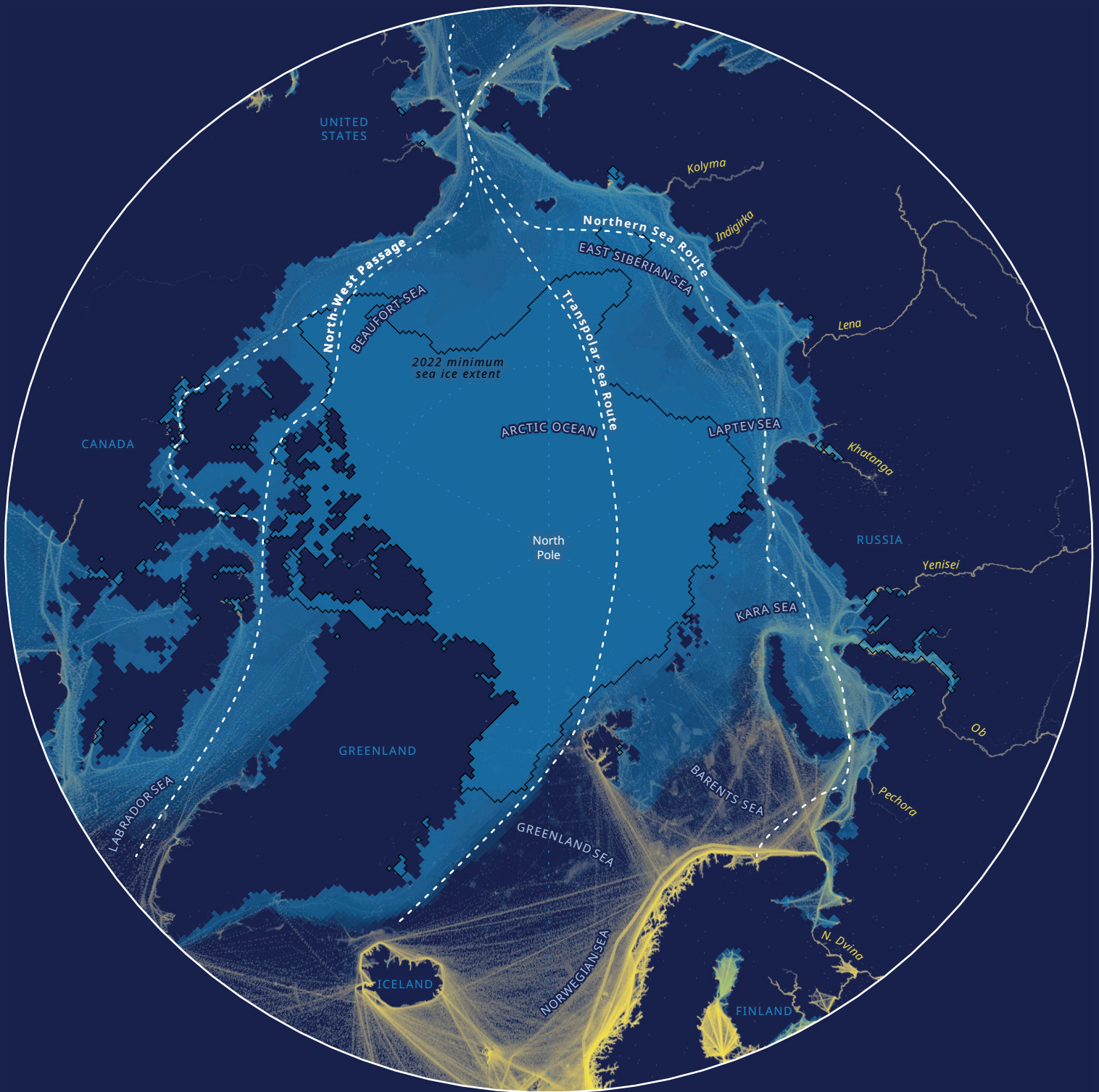
¹ Type-45 destroyers had long suffered with engine problems, though mostly in warmer waters. An extended six-year repair programme addressing the unreliability of engines was recently completed. <https://www.portsmouth.co.uk/news/defence/delays-in-fixing-navy-destroyers-branded-bloody-disgrace-3586918>

² This annual event gathers senior defence officials from across what Moscow calls the “post-West” world. The Chinese, Indian and Iranian Defence Ministers were scheduled to speak after their Russian counterpart. Western nations have boycotted the event since the early 2010s. Since 2012, when Moscow confirmed the Northern Sea Route as Russia's historic national transport route expanding Moscow's jurisdiction, legislation has become increasingly restrictive, tightening control on foreign vessels' use of the passage in 2017, and then adding further restrictions regarding warships. In 2020, the Northern Sea Route Administration published an English language version of navigation rules, before modifications and annexes were classified: http://www.nsr.ru/en/ofitsialnaya_informatsiya/pravila_plavaniya/f137.html

Arctic shipping routes

Shipping traffic density

Low High



“This is not the first occasion that, under the pretext of ‘responding to Russian activities’, the Royal Navy has conducted an aggressive operation to dispute our national waterways.⁴ But the Northern Sea Route is the guarantee of Russia’s future sovereign independence, and, as our national transport artery, is vital for ensuring our national interests.⁵ I remind our international partners that the Northern Fleet is currently fulfilling its duties in conducting scheduled live fire exercises in the region, and the illegal intrusion will not put these activities under threat. Nevertheless, the nearby presence of our navy allows us to provide assistance to the crew should London require it.”⁶ The Defence Minister then turned to address well-rehearsed themes on continuing tensions with the Euro-Atlantic community.

As he did so, in London, the first reports were coming in that maritime observation had lost track of two patrolling Russian submarines, one off the west coast of Norway, the other north of the Shetland Islands.

The consequences

The immediate problem – how to deal with an Allied ship in distress in dangerous waters – is serious enough, presenting several technical challenges. Relief might well take longer than one week to arrive: apart from navigating the ice, the Russian “welcome” is warming up, with more live fire exercises starting in the Barents Sea, effectively closing the Kara Straits, and a PR/media pile-on. The Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson is making hay.

But it is the bigger picture that presents the real dilemma. The reasons for launching the operation were understandable: the desire to show a firm response to persistent Russian aggression has long characterized Euro-Atlantic thinking. Alongside imposing sanctions, conducting Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) has been one of the more persistent policy options featuring in the discussion about how to address adversarial states such as Russia and China.

Not all Allies favour such an approach, though, emphasizing Russian security sensitivities in the north and precedents for the Northwest passage. This meant that when last month’s events precipitated a political need to do something, this operation was undertaken as a UK

national, rather than a NATO, operation. The result was that, instead of working to a coherent, resourced and coordinated longer-term strategy, a decision was made that it was better to act and to work out the details as necessary.

Consequently, trying to force through a relief mission with inadequate resources in the face of Russian opposition (against a background of very strained relations) risked triggering a serious escalation, even military confrontation. But the alternative – seeking and accepting Russian assistance – posed more problems than simply working out whom to call to open such a discussion.⁷

Solving the situation now will require withdrawing capabilities and forces from elsewhere, and spending considerable diplomatic and political capital to finesse the situation with Moscow, while enduring inevitable Russian gloating. It will also likely strengthen Russia’s position in the north, at least for the short term.

So many moving parts, in such a complex and volatile environment, left the Royal Navy Commander anxious. “From where will help arrive, and when?” he mused, “What will the upshot be?”

The real question, though, emerging amidst the internal recriminations in London and Brussels, was whether the whole situation could have been avoided. Certainly, the political imperative to act had drowned out questions and doubts about potential perils. But more importantly, as one senior officer reflected, the Alliance had for too long merely responded to what appeared in front of it – “chasing after the football,” as he put it – rather than shaping its own strategic approach tailored to the evolving context and to the challenge that Russia posed. Indeed, this delicate dilemma is not so much a “black swan”-type event, emerging from nowhere, as a “grey rhino”: something we probably could – and ought to – have seen coming.

How did we get there?

The wider, global maritime contest with Russia emerged in fits and starts throughout the last fifteen years, but often only in the background of the contest in Europe on which attention has focused. Certainly, there were warnings, even in the 2010s, even about an emergent “Fourth Battle of the Atlantic.”⁸

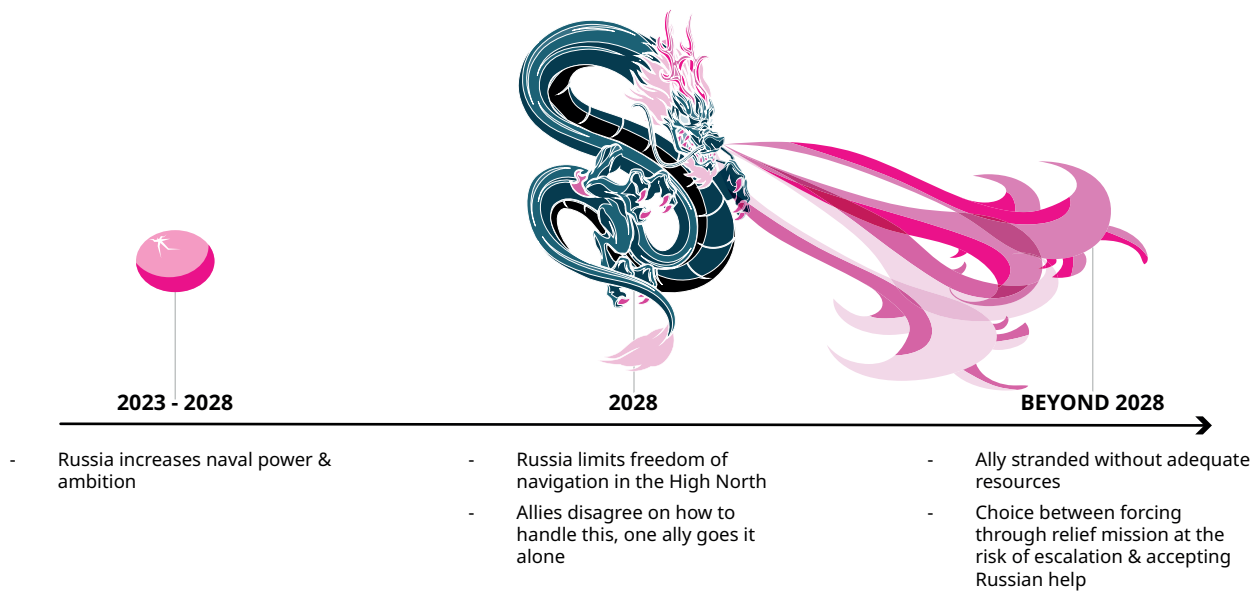
⁴ Presumably, he means the freedom of navigation patrol conducted by HMS Defender through the disputed waters around the Crimean peninsula in 2021, which generated media headlines and intensified tensions between London and Moscow.

⁵ This echoed numerous statements by senior Russian officials (https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12449283@egNews) and Russian strategic planning documents (<http://scrf.gov.ru/security/military/document34/>).

⁶ The Defence Minister used an ambiguous term: “poprosit,” “to require,” can also be translated as “to ask, with humility.”

⁷ For several Western states, relations have become so estranged over a decade that functioning relationships between policy-making counterparts barely exist. In this situation, though, the Russian chain of command is complex, involving the Russian navy, MoD, FSB border guards, NSR Administration, and Foreign Ministry. Much depends on the role the President chooses to play.

⁸ See the statements by NATO’s then Maritime Commander in 2016: <https://thediplomat.com/2016/02/russian-submarine-activity-at-highest-level-since-cold-war/>



Moscow's assault on Ukraine in 2022 strongly influenced Western thinking about Russian power. But the emphasis was placed largely on Russia's military operational and tactical failures, and then on the reconstitution of the ground forces and their import for Europe's security. As one Western Chief of Defence put it in late 2026, "before Ukraine, we fretted that they were 10' tall, now many people assume they are only 3'. And so we essentially stopped worrying about the Russian military, thinking instead about China. Besides, as shown by the re-establishment of the Moscow and Leningrad military districts, Russia is a *land* power, not a sea power."

But this missed an important dynamic of Russian strategy, one accelerated by the events of 2022. Moscow made its intent to turn Russia into a leading seafaring power clear – again – in updated official statements and plans in 2023, setting an agenda and anticipating a persistent, if troubled, subsequent policy effort through the middle of the decade.⁹ At the heart of this agenda was a competition for the global commons. Western sanctions have driven Russian economic diversification through the mid-2020s, emphasizing sea-borne trade. And the Russian military establishment often points to the maritime nature of threats to Russia's security, especially in the Arctic/NSR and Asia-Pacific regions.¹⁰

In the meantime, the Russian navy has taken on an increasingly prominent and active purpose during the reconstitution of the ground forces. The navy plays a central role in conventional and especially nuclear deterrence: Russian submarines are very busy in the Atlantic. Although it faces problems and weaknesses, the navy has become ever more active across the world, especially in defence diplomacy, conducting another circumnavigation

as well as regular exercises and port calls in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Port agreements have enabled it to play a "persistent presence" role off both the Horn of Africa and Africa's west coast.

The upshot is that, somewhat by stealth while attention has focused elsewhere, Russia has used its maritime capability to mitigate weaknesses, pursue a strategic agenda and, importantly, put subtle pressure on NATO by stretching its naval resources thin across several distant regions.

⁹ The Maritime Doctrine (2022) and the Foreign Policy Concept (2023) both frame a five-year outlook.

¹⁰ This message, delivered in a speech to Defence Attachés in 2022, was repeated in 2024, 2026 and last year. See website of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12449283@egNews

What if...

India's election campaign goes nuclear?

Sitara Noor

The event

Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh Yogi Adityanath, the third-time Chief Minister of India's most populous province and one of the top contenders for the position of next Prime Minister, is leading a massive election rally in his home constituency in Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh as a show of power. With roughly 500,000 BJP supporters on the streets, the rally holds great political significance, not only because it demonstrates Yogi's popularity, but also because he is likely to formally announce his candidature for the position of Prime Minister in the upcoming elections to be held in April 2029.

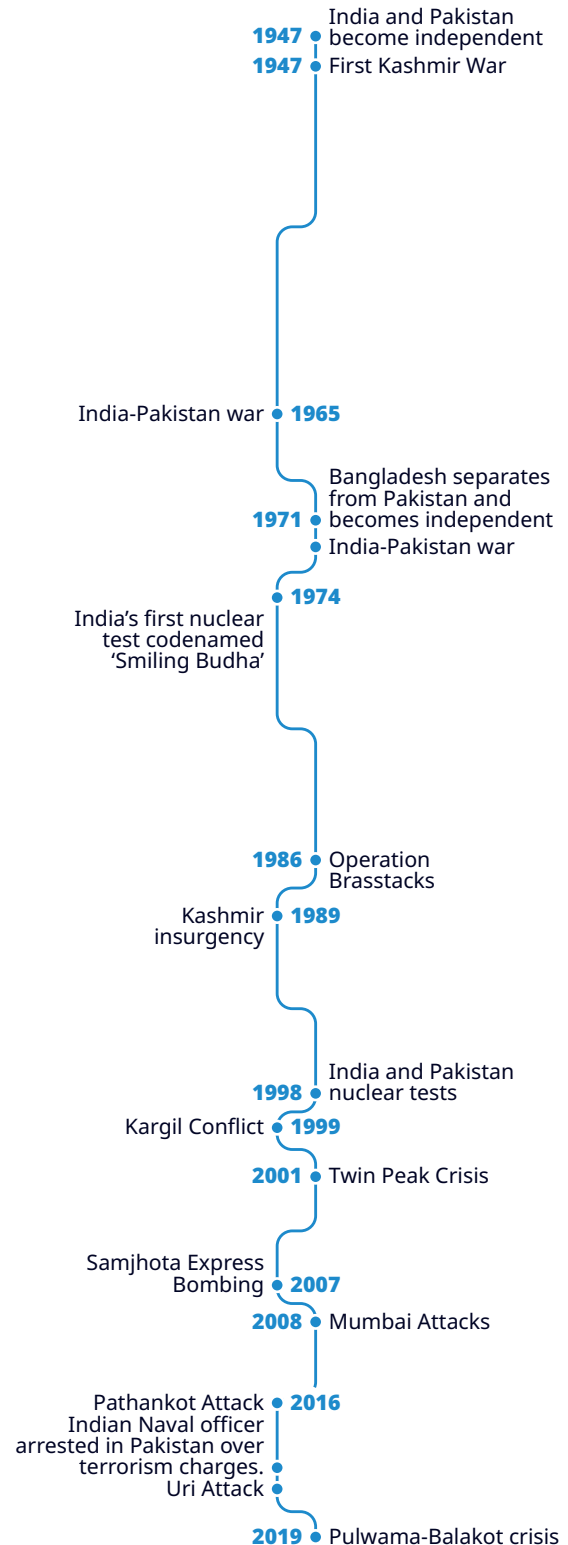
With incumbent Prime Minister Modi's announcement that he will retire after completing his third term in office, the BJP is yet to announce PM Modi's successor, but the obvious competition is between Union Home Minister Amit Shah and Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh Yogi Adityanath.¹ Due to his unapologetic religious outlook and clear-cut stance on establishing a *Hindu Rashtra*,²

¹ Minhaz Merchant, "Will Shah take the crown in a post-Modi era?" *Times of India*, August 23, 2023, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/will-shah-take-the-crown-in-a-post-modi-era/articleshow/102974470.cms?from=mdr>

² Uday Chandra, "The making of a Hindu India," *Aljazeera*, August 24, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/8/24/the-making-of-a-hindu-india>

A timeline of wars and crises

between India and Pakistan



Yogi has already emerged in the polls as the most popular Chief Minister in India and is gaining huge support for his PM candidature from Hindu voters, who make up 80% of the total population in India.³ Amit Shah, on the other hand, has growing support within the BJP ranks as he has made his mark as a long-time confidant of PM Modi, especially since Modi's time as Chief Minister of Gujarat and his purported role in the 2002 Hindu-Muslim communal riots in Gujarat.⁴

The saffron-clad monk turned politician Yogi Adityanath has generated many controversies since his first appointment as the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh a decade ago, in 2017. His repeated incendiary anti-Muslim rhetoric has made him hugely popular among the majority right-wing Hindu voters. The political atmosphere is tense because of bloody clashes last week between some Muslim groups and a Hindu vigilante group.

While Yogi is leading the rally through the crowded streets of Gorakhpur, a car full of explosive rams into his truck causing a massive blast. The blast results in at least 50 casualties, including Yogi Adityanath and his five ministers, who died on the spot.

The assassination sends shockwaves across the country, leading to massive protests. There are news of Hindu-Muslim riots erupting in various parts of the country with some violent clashes in Delhi, Gorakhpur and Prayagraj.

Prime Minister Modi has called an emergency meeting of the National Security Council and has vowed to go to every length to bring the perpetrators to justice. The international community, including P-5 states, has offered condolences and extended their full support to the government of India. India also received condolence messages from the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and the EU. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan has issued a statement condemning the attack and offering its support to India for any investigation.

Even before an official statement is issued by the Indian government, Indian news channels start calling out Pakistan's purported role in sponsoring/carrying out this terrorist attack on India's political leadership. The right-wing news channels are calling for revenge. They are especially focusing on the date of the incident, i.e. 16 December, viewing it as Pakistan's response to India

on the anniversary of Pakistan's defeat against India in the 1971 war, which resulted in the dismemberment of Pakistan's eastern wing.

There are a few voices demanding a full investigation of the incident, and hinting at the possibility that a local militant group who have gained strength over the past five years could be responsible for the attack. The Congress Party President, Rahul Gandhi, has condemned the assassination in the strongest terms. Gandhi also called into question the security lapses and, while demanding a full investigation of the event, warned against using this incident for political purposes as in the Pulwama episode back in 2019.⁵ The BJP leadership blasted Gandhi for what they termed was his dangerous insinuation and criticised him for playing politics at a time of national tragedy.

The consequences

After a National Security Council meeting, Prime Minister Modi announces that he has credible evidence that Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) was involved in carrying out the terrorist attack that killed the Chief Minister of India's largest province and potential candidate for the PM slot.⁶ He demands that the international community declare Pakistan a state sponsor of terrorism.⁷ In view of ongoing internal clashes, he declares a state of emergency across the country and orders an immediate military mobilization along the international border. Pakistan immediately rejects Indian assertions and draws attention to previous terror incidents, and especially to 2019 as a false flag operation where according to Pakistan, the Indian government hid its complicity and used the incident to attack Pakistan for political gain.⁸

The accumulated tensions turn into a serious crisis. On the night of 19 December 2028, two Indian Dassault Rafale aircraft carry out an air strike with air-to-surface Hammer smart weapons in the Poonch sector of Azad Jammu and Kashmir and Astor in Gilgit Baltistan, targeting what India claims are militant hideouts, resulting in 20 casualties, including children. Another attempted aerial ingress closer to Lahore (likely aimed

3 Robert F. Worth, "The Billionaire Yogi Behind Modi's Rise," *New York Times Magazine* 26, 2018. Also see Uday Chandra, "The making of a Hindu India," *Aljazeera*, August 24, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/8/24/the-making-of-a-hindu-india>

4 Ashis Ray, "New BBC Documentary Puts Narendra Modi Back in the Dock," *The Hindu*, January 19, 2023, <https://frontline.thehindu.com/the-nation/new-bbc-documentary-puts-narendra-modi-back-in-the-dock/article66409146.ece>

5 Poulomi Ghosh, "Rahul Gandhi Interviews Satya Pal Malik, Asks Him About Pulwama, Adani," *Hindustan Times*, October 23, 2023, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/rahul-gandhi-interviews-satya-pal-malik-asks-him-about-pulwama-adani-pm-modi-101698220303392.html>

6 Indian and Pakistani leadership routinely accuse each other of fomenting terrorism in their respective countries. India has a history of squarely putting the responsibility of every terror incident on Pakistan, thereby disregarding a domestic angle. In few instances, terror attacks were carried out by local right-wing Hindu militants to implicate Pakistan, such as in the 2007 Delhi-Lahore Samjhauta Express train blast, which killed 68 passengers including 40 Pakistani nationals. See for example Vinay Kumar, "Swami Aseemanand's Confession Reveals Hindutva Terror Activities," *The Hindu*, January 8, 2011, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/Swami-Aseemanands-confession-reveals-Hindutva-terror-activities/article15540830.ece>

7 Edith M. Lederer, "India, Pakistan Envoys Trade Heated Accusations of Terrorism," Associated Press, December 16, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/pakistan-india-united-nations-hillary-clinton-terrorism-4b56ace894fadd0d0bc1199ec9b0b613>

8 Abid Hussain, "Pakistan Reacts to Ex-Kashmir Governor's Revelations on Pulwama," *Aljazeera*, April 17, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/4/17/pakistan-reacts-to-ex-kashmir-governors-revelations-on-pulwama>

at Jamaat-ud-Daawa's headquarters in Muridke) was thwarted by the Pakistan Airforce after a fierce dogfight between Pakistan's JF-17s and F-16s and Indian Tejas MK1A.⁹

Similarly, reports of forward movement by Indian Navy aircraft carrier INS Vikramaditya, along with a near encounter between India's INS Arihant and Pakistan's newly acquired nuclear submarine PNS Khizer, have raised alarms of a brewing nuclear crisis.

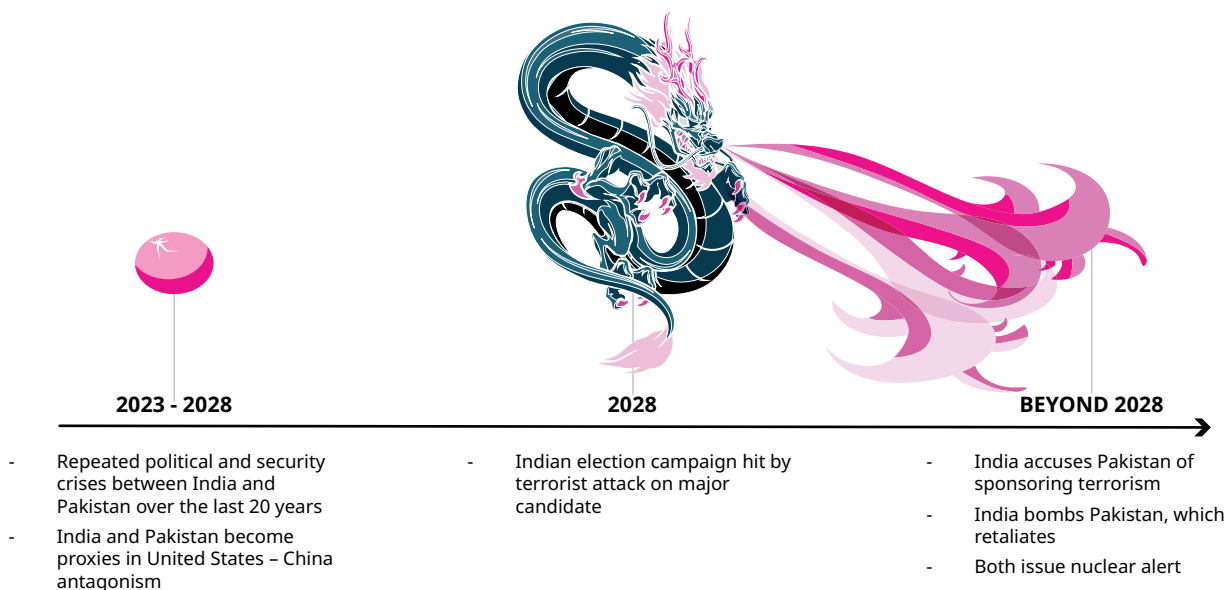
20 December 2028: Pakistan's Prime Minister calls an urgent meeting of the National Command Authority. The meeting considers the evolving situation and warns India against any further escalation. The NCA meeting press release reiterates Pakistan's resolve to defend itself against any aggression. On the same day, the Indian PM calls another meeting of the National Security Council to assess the latest developments. India had officially revoked its No First Use (NFU) posture two years ago, thereby indicating a first and potentially early use of nuclear weapons in any future crisis with Pakistan.¹⁰ Reports indicate that India has also made significant strides in its nuclear doctrine's shift from countervalue to counterforce.¹¹ 21 December 2028: India and Pakistan engage in limited conventional strikes on each side. US and China immediately activate back-channel communications.

22 December 2028: Both countries issue a nuclear alert. The Washington Post shares the story that, fearing a bolt from the blue counterforce attack from India, Pakistan has dispersed its nuclear arsenal and moved the assets and delivery systems to some unknown locations.

Reportedly, the US has shared the same information with India and called for an immediate de-escalation. The movement is interpreted in India as preparation for pre-emptive countervalue targeting. Reportedly, India's Prahar and Pakistan's Nasr missiles, tipped with nuclear warheads, are placed at the forward sites.

How did we get there?

Since their overt nuclearization in 1998, India and Pakistan have experienced multiple crises. From Twin Peak (2002) to Mumbai (2008) and from Pathankot (2016) to Pulwama/Balakot (2019), all attacks in India have led to a bilateral crisis.¹² The Indian reaction to these attacks has varied depending upon the severity of the incident. In the past few years, however, India has displayed a reduced tolerance, reacting more harshly with every passing incident. This has also resulted in reducing the space for peaceful talks to resolve longstanding bilateral issues, especially Kashmir. The Indian leadership, over the past few years, have become more vocal about their intent to take over not just Azad Kashmir, i.e. the area under Pakistan's administrative control, but also Gilgit-Baltistan, the northern part of Pakistan that connects Pakistan to China, which India claims is part of Jammu and Kashmir and therefore belongs to India.¹³ After the 2019 Pulwama/Balakot crisis, when India carried out air strikes



⁹ Muridke is a small city near Lahore where Hafiz Saeed's Islamist organization Jamaat-ud-Daawa has its headquarters. India has accused Hafiz Saeed in connection with his alleged role in the Mumbai blasts in 2008.

¹⁰ Herman Kahn, "India's NFU Stance: Need to Change Amidst the Changing Strategic Landscape," Centre for Land Warfare Studies, Issue Brief 351, July 2022.

¹¹ Christopher Clary and Vipin Narang, "India's Counterforce Temptations: Strategic Dilemmas, Doctrine, and Capabilities," *International Security* 43, no. 3 (2018): 7-52.

¹² Krepon, Michael, and Liv Dowling, "Crisis Intensity and Nuclear Signaling in South Asia," *Investigating Crises: South Asia's Lessons, Evolving Dynamics, and Trajectories* (2018): 187-218.

¹³ "Indian minister speaks of annexing Gilgit-Baltistan," *Dawn*, October 28, 2022. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1717261>

without sharing any solid evidence, there was a risk that another terrorist attack in India would lead to a new crisis. An incident of this scale involving a high-profile assassination, is unprecedented, but it is likely to follow the previous template, whereby India will put the blame squarely on Pakistan, disregarding any role played by domestic factors, and a major crisis will ensue. In the past crises, the US had played the role of mediator and ensured that they did not escalate to nuclear level. Nonetheless, in the wake of the Pulwama/Balakot crisis, US National Security Advisor John Bolton's statement supporting "India's right to self-defence" was perceived in Pakistan as a visible tilt in favour of India as a result of New Delhi's role in the US Indo-Pacific strategy and Islamabad's growing security cooperation with China.¹⁴

While India is undergoing internal transformations, its external outlook is on a steady upward trajectory. Much to China's chagrin, India's multinational rail and ports deal, announced on the sidelines of the G20 summit in 2023 and aimed at linking the Middle East and South Asia, is progressing well, despite some initial hiccups involving financing and infrastructural challenges.¹⁵ While this project is still far behind China's One Belt and Road Initiative, it is taking off well, with the potential to offer strong competition. With the Maldives, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan on its side, China is further strengthening its regional outreach. The full activation of Pakistan's Gwadar port, resulting in massive Chinese presence in the port city of Pakistan, has strengthened the suspicion that China is likely to use Gwadar not just as an economic "exit to the sea" but eventually also as a military base for People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) operations, along the Djibouti model.

India's significance as a counterweight to China has further increased in the wake of Russia's growing alignment with and reliance on China, a trend that has intensified following the conclusion, albeit in a stalemate, of the Ukraine conflict.¹⁶ In reaction to China's more extensive patrolling in Pangong Tso Lake, resulting in another bloody clash and leaving ten Indian soldiers dead in early 2027, New Delhi has further aligned itself with the US position.

In response to NATO's increasing presence in the region, China has threatened grave consequences if the Alliance were to pursue direct involvement in regional affairs. The region was on the verge of a serious crisis as a result of a near collision between the US Virginia-class submarine, on a forward rotation mission to Australia (under the AUKUS agreement), and a patrolling Chinese vessel. Tension in the Indo-Pacific region, especially the South China Sea, is at its highest.

The potential scenario of a limited but gravely consequential nuclear exchange between India and Pakistan serves as a reminder of the fragile peace in South Asia, where the evolving nature of the India-Pakistan rivalry portends an uncertain future. Any small error or miscalculation can lead to a major nuclear disaster. Any future crisis that leads to war will have a far-reaching impact on South Asia, as well as the larger Indo-Pacific region. It is likely to create a massive humanitarian crisis, leaving millions of people dead and others vulnerable to disease, hunger, and social deprivation.¹⁷ This will transform the regional security dynamics and deeply affect US engagement and policies in the region. It will also impact India's ability to compete with China, as it is likely to diminish New Delhi's military strength and bring its economic development to a halt. Even a limited use of nuclear weapons will cause environmental degradation and may render a large part of the region uninhabitable for a long period, affecting global food supply chains too.

¹⁴ Sitara Noor, "Pulwama/Balakot and the Evolving Role of Third Parties in India-Pakistan Crises," *Stimson Center* (2020).

¹⁵ Nandita Bose, "U.S., India, Saudi, EU unveil rail, ports deal at G20 sidelines -White House official," *Reuters*, September 9, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-india-saudi-eu-unveil-rail-ports-deal-g20-sidelines-white-house-official-2023-09-09/>

¹⁶ Gilbert Rozman, "How Did the Ukraine War Change Putin's 'Turn to the East'?" *Asian Perspective* 47, no. 3 (2023): 349-370.

¹⁷ Alan Robock, et al. "Opinion: How Nuclear Winter has Saved the World, So Far," *Atmospheric Chemistry and Physics* 23, no. 12, June 2023.

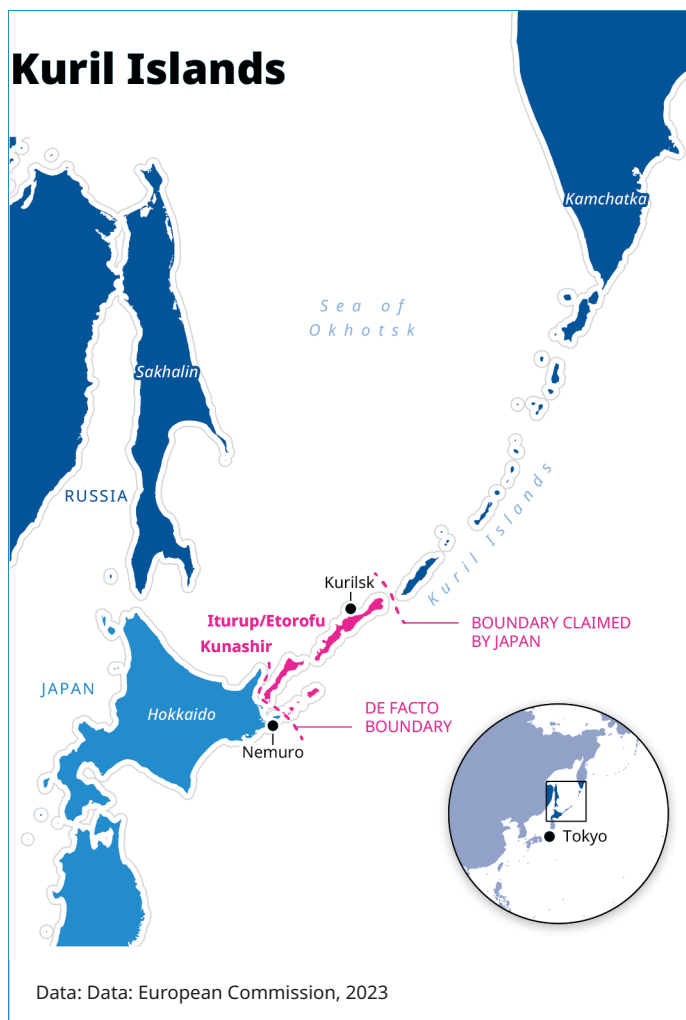
What if...

Russia and Japan clash over the Kuril Islands/
Northern Territories?

Marc Ozawa

The event

While conducting surveillance activities in the Yuzhno-Kurilsky District on a brisk and sunny July morning, the Sovershennyy, a Steregushchiy-class Russian corvette from the Pacific Fleet, navigated around the island of Kunashir, the southernmost island of the disputed Kuril Islands (Russian)/Northern Territories (Japanese) just 15 km off the coast of Hokkaido. Russia refers to the islands as the “Kuril Islands” (Курильские острова) while Japan designates them as the “Northern Territories” (北方領土). Before 2022, Russia and Japan were in peace talks to resolve the territorial dispute stemming from the conclusion of World War II between the USSR and Japan. The island of Kunashir is home to Yuzhno-Kurilsk, a town with a population of close to 7,000 inhabitants. With a crew of 110, the ship was officially monitoring the disputed waters for unlawful fishing by Japanese boats. Unofficially, the corvette was conducting signals intelligence on military installations on the Japanese island of Hokkaido. Knowing that the bulk of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces are stationed in Hokkaido, Russian intelligence increasingly used its civilian outpost as a station for monitoring the Japanese military. After circling around the southern tip of Kunashir and changing course



northward toward Sakhalin, Sovershennyy’s radar spotted two ships changing course in the trajectory of the Sovershennyy. While not unusual for Russian naval vessels to cross paths with the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) fleet, it was unusual for not one but two ships to change course for interception. The captain of the Sovershennyy, Captain 1st rank Irina Malinina, became nervous because of the clandestine nature of the mission and immediately turned off signals monitoring devices as is protocol when faced with an unscheduled encounter. She then informed Pacific Fleet headquarters

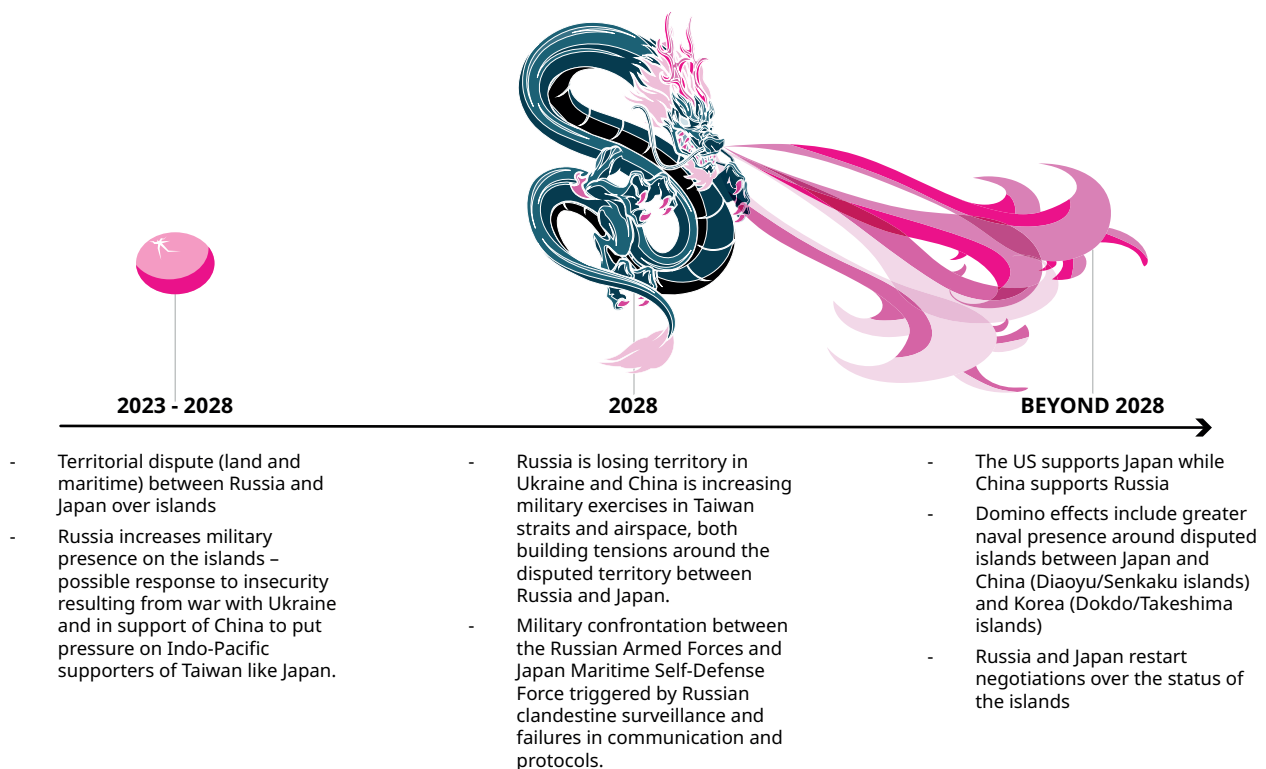
in Vladivostok and requested further instructions on how to engage. Headquarters responded with orders to remain silent and stay the course. By late morning, the two JMSDF vessels were in sight including one destroyer, the JS Akebono, and a patrol boat, the JS Umitaka. As the vessels approached, the Sovershennyy was signalled to stop and await boarding by two representatives from the JS Umitaka, Lieutenant Commander Seiji Tanaka and Warrant Officer Nobuko Kato, in accordance with the protocols of the bilateral Japan-Russia Agreement on Maritime De-escalation.¹ Warrant Officer Kato made the announcement in English, and the Sovershennyy radio operators misunderstood the announcement, having understood that the ship would be boarded by a large team rather than two individuals. Captain Malinina followed orders from headquarters, staying on course without responding. After informing Vladivostok that the JMSDF aimed to send a team on board, headquarters concluded that a Japanese team on board could only mean one thing, an inspection to uncover signals equipment, which was illegal according to the bilateral treaty. The Sovershennyy was ordered to continue in the direction of Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk and eventually return to Vladivostok. In the meantime, one SU-35 and one SU-57 took off from Uglovoye Air Base near Vladivostok to intercept the Japanese vessels and give a fly-by warning signal.

However, before the fighter jets could leave Russian airspace and be detected for unusual activity, the Umitaka approached the Sovershennyy. After repeated audio announcements requesting the Russian ship to slow down, the Sovershennyy veered off course toward the

JMSDF patrol boat, having run into a strong current. For a moment, the captain of the Umitaka thought the Russian corvette, which was twice the size of the Umitaka, would ram it. The Umitaka then fired a warning shot across the bow of the Sovershennyy. The shot set off the 5th-generation monitoring system of the SU-57 at the same time that the two fighter jets briefly entered Japanese airspace to intercept the JMSDF vessels in time. The SU-57 monitoring system automatically initiated the missile targeting system, arming one of the missiles at the Umitaka. The pilot hesitated to override the launch and within a minute of firing, the aircraft was hit by a Japanese anti-aircraft missile. Shortly thereafter, the Umitaka was struck by the SU-57 missile.

The consequences

The speed of the chain of events leading up to the missile exchange did not allow for communication between Russian and Japanese authorities at the political level. After the downing of the SU-57 and impact on the JS Umitaka, the Russian and Japanese foreign ministries stepped in to deescalate in accordance with the bilateral treaty. The naval vessels and remaining aircraft were recalled to their bases. The governments then sent out comments of condemnation, calling at the same time for an investigation of events. In this way, the diplomatic outcome mirrored the 2015 Turkish-Russian clash. In a



¹ Richard Moss, "Revisit Incidents at Sea," *Proceedings* 144, no. 1, March 2018, U.S. Naval Institute.

break from the Turkish episode, the Japanese government was under additional pressure to deescalate in light of Japan's treaty with the US (to avoid a US response and direct military engagement with Russia). The maritime and aviation assets in the region, particularly those of Japan, Russia, the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) were put on temporary alert. The PRC perceived the episode as Japanese military resolve, a test of Japan's reinterpretation of constitutional military limitations. This caused Beijing to put off an invasion of Taiwan for fear of how Japan may react. An emboldened Japan with a post-Ukraine, weakened Russia put pressure on Russia to return to negotiations with Japan to resolve the maritime border dispute. Before Russia pulled out of the process in 2022, both parties discussed a shared custody arrangement for the four southernmost islands (Kunashir/Kunashiri, Iturup/Etorofu, Shikotan and the Habomai island group). Another example of a shared custody arrangement is the Svalbard archipelago between Russia and Norway. In this case, the four islands would be under administrative management of Japan. The US would support Japan in a negotiation but China, concerned over the trajectory of Japan's military reconstitution, would back Russia. A negotiation over the Kuril Islands/Northern Territories could ignite a diplomatic backlash against Japan with the PRC over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and with the ROK over the Takeshima/Dokdo Islands. However, given the growing cooperation between Japan and the ROK over mutual concern about the PRC and North Korea, the ROK restrained its concerns to private diplomatic channels.

How did we get there?

The military clash had its roots in geopolitical tensions in both Europe and the Indo-Pacific. The current dispute began at the end of WWII when the USSR withdrew from a non-aggression treaty with Japan and invaded the Kuril Islands/Northern Territories along with South Sakhalin, which was then Japanese territory. The Soviet invasion of Japanese territory occurred after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, when Japan was in talks with the US for surrender.

The Russian Armed Forces (RAF) had stepped up clandestine intelligence operations in the Kuril Islands around Hokkaido over growing concerns that Japan had been building up its military forces in recent years. More recently, Russia's war with Ukraine created a sense of insecurity for Russia to secure its "rear flank."² This reinforced a militarization process on the islands that

began in 2015 with the introduction of a Tor-M2U surface-to-air missile system, followed by a Bastian anti-ship missile battalion and Bal anti-ship missile battalion, both implemented in 2017.³ Moscow identified the Kuril Islands and Yuzhno-Sakhalin Oblast as particularly vulnerable because of the border dispute with Japan over the islands, Japan's defensive alliance with the United States (which Russia views as its primary enemy) and recent developments in Japan that strengthened the military. These include a reinterpretation of Japan's constitutional limitations for external military activities and a growing defence budget, which allows for "collective self-defence." In other words, by conducting military operations in defence of an ally, Japan may overcome its pacifist constitutional limitation (Article 9), which forbids military intervention in response to international disputes.⁴ Since 2017, Russia has progressively militarized the disputed region, and the process has accelerated since 2022. This includes both military personnel and construction of new installations on the closest of the Kuril Islands/Northern Territories off the coast of Hokkaido – barracks, infrastructure and Bal ASM on Kunashir/Kunashiri Island; barracks, Bastian ASM and S-300 SAM on Iturup/Etorofu Island.⁵

Another incentive for Russia to militarize the region concerns support for the PRC, who continues to intimidate Taiwan with more intense and frequent military exercises. In planning for an invasion of Taiwan, PRC may exert pressure on Russia to strengthen its military posture against potential supporters of Taiwan. Japan could be distracted by military activities to the north, which would hinder a military response to a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. The cumulative impact of these geopolitical developments is a greater Russian military presence in the disputed island territories and greater Russian signals intelligence (SIGINT) monitoring in the area. This greater presence raises the risk of an unintended military clash and pushes the limits of the bilateral maritime agreement between Russia and Japan.

A second category of factors concerns communications and procedures. Firstly, Russia broke the bilateral agreement with Japan by using fishing boat patrolling as a pretext for SIGINT. Given the proximity of Kunashir island to the coast of Hokkaido (about 5 km from the Russian patrol boat route) and the preponderance of Japanese military on Hokkaido, Russia retrofitted patrol boats with SIGINT equipment in the scenario. This made the captain of the Sovershennyy more paranoid about being discovered and concerned about Japanese personnel aboard. Likewise, the clandestine dimension put pressure on Pacific Fleet headquarters in Vladivostok to avoid any contact between the Sovershennyy and the Umitaka. Alerted by the US of Russian SIGINT moni-

² Dmitri Trenin, "Here's why Xi's Moscow Visit is a Key Moment in the Struggle to End US Hegemony," Russian International Affairs Council, 21 March 2023.
³ "Russia's Bal System To Hit Targets At Over 500 Km With New Missile," *Naval News*, 2 November 2021.
⁴ Jeffrey Hornung, "Revising Japan's Peace Constitution: Much Ado about Nothing," *War on the Rocks*, 21 March 2018.
⁵ Ike Barrash, "Russia's Militarization of the Kuril Islands," *New Perspectives Asia*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 27 September 2022.

toring, the JMSDF sent a patrol boat to make contact and communicate that signals surveillance would constitute a breach of the Russia-Japan bilateral maritime treaty. For security reasons, the JS Akebono accompanied the Umitaka; however, the Russian captain interpreted the Umitaka as accompanying the destroyer, JS Akebono, which could potentially block the Sovvershennyy. At the same time, Vladivostok headquarters rushed to send fighters as a warning to the Japanese vessels. In a rush to intercept the ships in time, the pilots of the SU-35 and SU-57 briefly crossed into Japanese airspace at the same time that the SU-57's 5th-generation AI system responded to the JS Umitaka's warning shot by firing a missile at the patrol boat. The warning shot was in response to an unintended change of course caused by water current fluctuations. The misunderstanding by Russian participants combined with a lack of communication, maritime protocols and AI aviation systems led to the SU-57's targeting the JS Umitaka and the Japanese air defence system firing on the SU-57 when it was still over Japanese airspace. A similar chain of events led to Türkiye shooting down a Russian fighter jet in 2015.

Much like the confrontation between Türkiye and Russia, NATO's role in this Indo-Pacific case is secondary. NATO has no presence in the region. However, the extent to which NATO's activities influence bilateral territorial tensions between Russia and Japan is indirect. Russia began to install more military equipment and personnel in the disputed territories in a context of different factors. The first was Japan's reinterpretation of its constitutional limitations on military activity in 2015. This happened at a time when the US focused more strategic attention on the Indo-Pacific over concerns with China's growing assertiveness in the region. As a staunch ally of the US and engaged NATO partner, Japan is viewed by the Russian leadership as part of the "collective West," and as such, as a security concern. This did not stop Russia from engaging in peace talks over the same period, incentivized by Japanese offers of economic aid and development for the Russian Far East. Ultimately, Japan's support for Ukraine, NATO and EU sanctions against Russia caused Russia to withdraw from bilateral peace talks in 2022. This demonstrates how both regions, Europe and the Indo-Pacific, are linked in terms of security and defence. For NATO, the onus is to understand these links and how developments on the Eastern flank can and will impact the Indo-Pacific and NATO's partners in the region. Likewise, these links can have a reverse effect on security in Europe. Indo-Pacific partners have supported NATO and Ukraine at a high diplomatic and economic cost. There is an implicit expectation that NATO and Allies will also offer reciprocal support to partners should the need arise (such as a Chinese invasion of Taiwan). If this is not the case, it will undermine the credibility of the Alliance among partners.

What if...

Russia occupies the Svalbard Islands?

Shawn Leonard

The event

Ase Jeglund glanced at her watch instinctively as she usually wakes up about now to get in a workout before she makes her daily trek up to the radar facility southeast of town. Yet this past night was anything but usual. Shortly after midnight, Åse and her fellow residents were awakened by commotion descending upon their sleepy village of Longyearbyen on the western edge of the Svalbard Archipelago. Peeking through her frosted window, Åse was able to make out in the faint light what appeared to be soldiers taking up a position at the end of the alley. Her mind struggled to comprehend: “Why would there be soldiers anywhere on Svalbard?” However, her observation was soon confirmed by a series of loudspeaker announcements demanding that residents remain calm and stay inside.

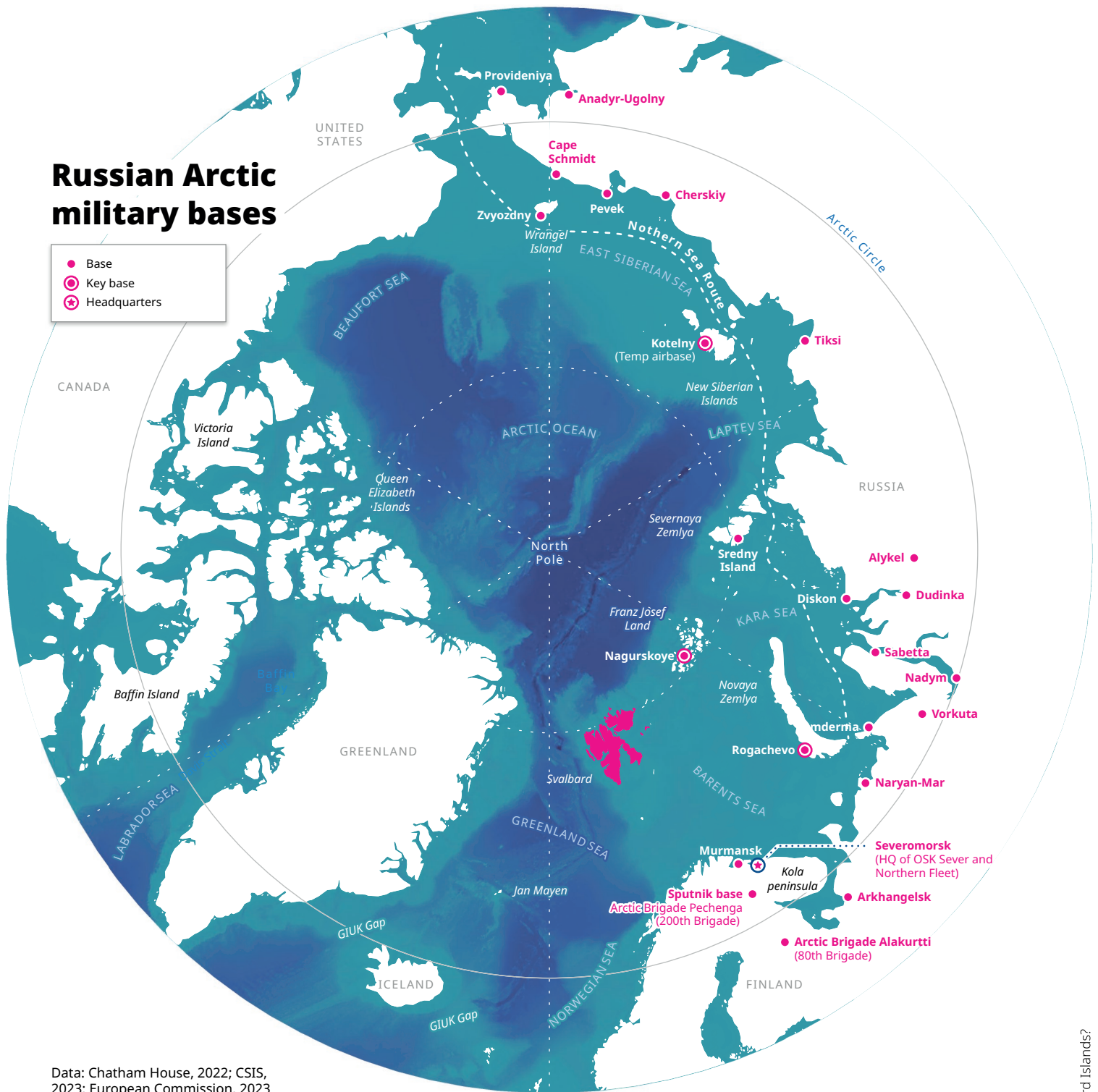
While half-listening to the lengthy statement in what sounded like Russian, Åse tried to calm her rising anxiety. She scanned her iWatch and mindlessly registered the information – it was 0800 on Thursday, 04 April 2028 – until she found dashes in place of the current temperature and weather conditions. That’s weird, she thought, as she raised her phone. The reason – no internet or cellular service – felt like a gut punch as the loudspeaker began the statement in Norwegian:

“Residents of Longyearbyen, Russian forces landed on Spitsbergen last night and peacefully secured the islands for Russia in keeping with Russia’s longstanding claim. Russian forces have no intention to harm you or anyone residing on these islands. Most of you, if you so choose, will be allowed to continue with your livelihoods in the coming days, after we take accountability and establish governance. In the meantime, we ask that you remain in your homes until a representative of the Russian government contacts you there. You will be asked to provide the representative with any weapons and communication devices, including radios and mobile phones. Once governance is established, we will return your phones and resume internet and cellular services. If there is an emergency, please exit your homes slowly with your hands in the air and await a Russian soldier to approach and render assistance. Russian forces reserve the right to self-defence and will use lethal force if necessary.”

The consequences

In an emergency summit of NATO leaders in Brussels, the American president and Norwegian prime minister failed to gain consensus from the members to trigger Article V. During a joint press conference, the two leaders thanked Canada, the UK, the Nordic members, and the Baltic members for supporting the Article V resolution. They expressed hope that France and Germany and the other members would eventually offer their support, while acknowledging their concerns about taking the focus off Ukraine and starting a war with Russia. In response to a question on whether risking war was necessary over some remote Arctic islands, the exasperated American president blurted: “Look, I was told recently that the Soviet Union signed the treaty governing these islands – still binding, mind you – back in the 1920s in exchange for Norway’s recognition of the communist government in Moscow. Now, a son of the Soviet Union, a KGB agent, and a revanchist in the form of Vladimir Putin decides treaties don’t apply to him. His contempt of international rules is becoming a broken record. But

Russian Arctic military bases



now he's taken it too far! He attacked NATO territory! I don't understand the mindset of some of our Alliance members. The reason for NATO's existence is founded on the principle that an attack on one is an attack on all. We were attacked! And the Svalbard islands aren't obscure. They are of vital, strategic importance to the Alliance in the Arctic, especially an Arctic impacted by climate change. And they're Norwegian territory! We cannot capitulate because we are afraid of war. We are a military alliance!"

In the days following Russia's occupation of the Svalbard islands, Norway sought US and NATO assistance, but there were few immediate options without risking war with Russia. Russian forces occupied Longyearbyen and the other small villages, and they seized the multiple space and scientific research facilities arrayed around the archipelago. Norway neither possessed the unilateral capability to dislodge the Russian forces nor did they want to endanger its civilian population and infrastructure with

maritime and aerial fires. While the US did possess such capability, the American president was reticent to risk war without NATO countenance.

After receiving a morning briefing from his Northern Fleet Joint Strategic Command commander on the efforts to rapidly expand the airbase and port facilities on Spitsbergen, Vladimir Putin sat alone as news of the West tearing itself apart over his masterstroke streamed in. Who knew that attacking Ukraine would unify NATO while reclaiming Spitsbergen would divide it? Perhaps he pushed too far in Ukraine, he reflected. NATO was too distracted to care when he took South Ossetia or Crimea, but his attempt to take all of Ukraine galvanized the Alliance. Much too easy for the Americans to whip up support with the Europeans who convinced themselves that aiding the Ukrainians was equal parts righteousness and prevention. Those same Europeans, now faced with a direct confrontation on their northern fringe, were finally regressing to their mean – arguing over the value of remote islands with their own blood and treasures on the line.

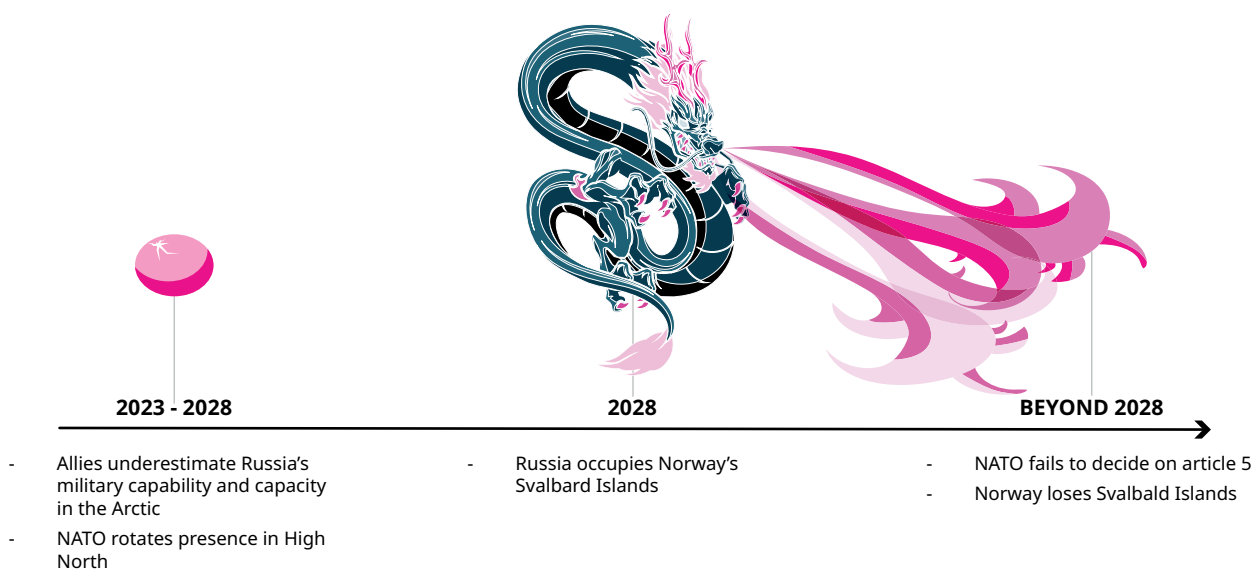
How did we get there?

The West's singular focus on Ukraine and a near consensus that the Russian military machine was incompetent and unable to improve are a start. It was relatively easy to fall into this trap. After years of Western analysts raising the spectre of Russia's military prowess with little evidence other than Russian Ministry of Defence propaganda films, it was generally accepted that Russia would overwhelm and occupy Ukraine within days. When

this failed to materialize and Ukraine began to score counterpunches, the humbled Russian military was left to defend ground seized in 2014. Moreover, Yevgeny Prigozhin's attempted coup scored a broadside hit on Putin's dreadnaught. The Wagner Group head staged a remarkably debasing power-struggle with Putin and his military leaders that eroded confidence in the Russian commander-in-chief.

Russia's proud military tradition is not alone in rotting during eras of peace. In "The Rules of the Game," historian Andrew Gordon depicted a Royal Navy that had rested on its laurels in the hundred years since its monumental victory over the Spanish Armada at Trafalgar only to be humbled by an upstart German fleet in the arcane WWI Battle of Jutland.¹ While the British were not defeated that day in 1916 – they fought to what can best be called a draw – it drove a reawakening within the Admiralty that needed to reform, reorganize, and reclaim its dominance over the high seas. After being bloodied and shamed by both the Ukrainians and the Wagner Group, the Russian military faced a similar inflection point in 2023.

As Ukraine dominated our attention, the West underestimated Putin's need for a win and Russia's ability to learn from its mistakes on the battlefield. With the formidable deterrence presented by NATO to his west and no other former Soviet states easy for the taking, and still smarting from the Prigozhin affair, Putin sought an off-axis, non-nuclear win against NATO. Spitsbergen offered a compelling opportunity: greater claim and control over the Arctic basin; closer naval and air facilities to threaten the North Atlantic routes and the GIUK Gap and control the Bear Gap; prized oil and gas deposits off Spitsbergen's coast; a wedge driven into NATO's northern flank; a shot in the arm for his beleaguered but improving military; a win on the domestic front by demonstrably



¹ Andrew Gordon, "The Rules of the Game: Jutland and British Naval Command," Naval Institute Press, 21 February 2013.

sticking it to NATO. The risk: triggering NATO's Article V. The risk mitigation: threatening nuclear war. Putin anticipated the threat would expose the Europeans' fear and divide NATO. Without NATO, the American president – particularly in an election year – would not unilaterally risk American lives for remote European soil.

Over the past decade and a half, Putin had signed strategies, reorganized his forces, and proclaimed his intent for Russia to dominate the Arctic as the planet warmed and the ice retreated. Since 2014, Russia's Northern Fleet Joint Strategic Command was elevated from a naval fleet-level command to a joint strategic command. One of Russia's five senior-most strategic commands with geographic responsibility spanning northwest Russia across the Arctic, the Northern Fleet Joint Strategic Command controls assigned operational units.² Some of these units tasted combat in Ukraine with mixed results.³ In a February 2023 decree, Putin revised Russia's 2020 Arctic Strategy signalling a more belligerent and expansive policy across the Arctic focused on national interests vice international cooperation.⁴

NATO failed to deter Putin from seizing the islands. While Norway is committed to defending the Svalbards, it possesses limited capability (frigate and air patrols)⁵ and is restrained by the 1920 Treaty of Spitsbergen from placing ground forces on the islands. NATO re-established its presence in the North Atlantic and the Arctic with joint NATO maritime deployments and flying rotating joint NATO air patrols out of its Nordic and Baltic member states. Yet these efforts neither constituted a *permanent* presence nor 24/7 patrols over and around the Svalbards and across the Norwegian, Greenland, and Barents Seas. With the "High North" meriting only one mention in NATO's "Strategic Concept 2022"⁶ and a fleeting reference in the 2023 Vilnius Summit Communiqué,⁷ Putin found an opening to both occupy the islands and exploit a political seam in NATO.

2 Jonas Kjellén, "The Russian Northern Fleet and the (Re)militarization of the Arctic," *Arctic Review on Law and Politics*, No. 13 (2022): 34-52, <https://arcticreview.no/index.php/arctic/article/view/3338/6317>.

3 Colin Wall and Njord Wegge, "The Russian Arctic Threat: Consequences of the Ukraine War," CSIS, 25 January 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-arctic-threat-consequences-ukraine-war>

4 Malte Humpert, "Russia Amends Arctic Policy Prioritizing 'National Interest' and Removing Cooperation Within Arctic Council," *High North News*, published 23 February 2023 and updated 15 March 2023, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/russia-amends-arctic-policy-prioritizing-national-interest-and-removing-cooperation-within-arctic#:~:text=Announced%20by%20the%20Kremlin%20Tuesday,for%20its%20Arctic%20industrial%20projects.&text=The%20hopes%20for%20cooperation%20with%20Russia%20in%20the%20Arctic%20continue%20to%20cool>

5 Norway has four frigates (Fridtjof Nansen-class), six submarines (Ula-class), and will have 52 F-35 Lightning II fighter aircraft to patrol its territory (including the Svalbard islands) and participate in NATO missions and exercises. Critically, Norway does not possess amphibious landing craft to land ground forces on the Svalbard islands, if necessary. Norway's very capable special forces can conduct airborne and amphibious insertions but are relatively small in numbers. Information from the Norwegian Armed Forces webpage: <https://www.forsvaret.no/en>

6 "NATO Strategic Concept 2022," adopted by Heads of State and Government at the NATO Summit in Madrid, 29 June 2022, www.nato.int/strategic-concept/

7 2023 NATO Vilnius Summit Communiqué, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_217320.htm

A person with a dragon head, wearing a white lab coat and sneakers, stands in a server room holding a tablet. The room is filled with server racks on both sides, and the floor is highly reflective. The scene is dimly lit with blue and green tones from the server lights. White geometric lines frame the image.

**International
relations shaken,
not stirred**

What if...

China and Latin America become allies?

Andrea Gilli

The event

Early December 2028. The US is in the transition period and preparing for the holiday season. The presidential election has just taken place and the outgoing administration is handing over responsibilities to its incoming counterpart. Several thousand miles to the south, Latin America is preparing for the visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping, accompanied by both his Foreign and Defence Ministers. After a few stops across the continent, Xi Jinping and his delegation head towards La Paz, Bolivia, where several heads of state are due to convene. In an unexpected and unprecedented turn of events, the initially ordinary multilateral meeting gives way to a major diplomatic realignment: the invited countries agree to create SAPTO, the South Atlantic and Pacific Treaty Organization, a South American version of NATO (*OTASP: Organización del Tratado del Atlántico Sur y del Pacífico*). This move spells the end of the Monroe Doctrine, the 19th century US foreign policy paradigm conceived by then US Secretary of State John Quincy Adams and attributed to then US President James Monroe, aiming to prevent European powers from interfering with political developments in the Americas. Through SAPTO, China, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Venezuela and Cuba become brothers (*hermanos*). The treaty is based on two pillars:

a common defence and security clause, whereby all *hermanos* agree to support each other in the event of a foreign attack or threat to their sovereignty;

joint military, defence and security planning, training, exercises and procurement as well as collective early warning and intelligence sharing in support of common defence and security.

In accordance with the Treaty, SAPTO *hermanos* set up three different structures.

1. First, a political structure ensuring that all members are represented and can start consultations rapidly and effectively in the event of a crisis. At the top of this structure sits the South Atlantic and Pacific Council (SAPC).
2. Second, a military structure, with a Military Committee composed of military representatives from each member state; a strategic headquarters on the outskirts of La Paz, overseeing operations in the Latin American Area of Operations (AOR); a SAPTO Pacific Command within the People's Liberation Army's Yulin Naval Base, aimed at protecting the strategic lines of communications running across the ocean; operational-level commands in Cuba and Venezuela; and tactical commands in Bolivia, Guatemala, and Nicaragua.
3. Finally, SAPTO *hermanos* establish a security structure including a multinational strategic headquarters serving as an early-warning and intelligence-sharing clearing house, responsible for focusing on the internal threats faced by SAPTO members, from terrorism to foreign interference and regime change. Tactical level commands in all member states gather information and intelligence in support of the member states' security. For its activities, the security structure critically depends on the SAPTO Communication and Information Agency, SCIA, whose work is made possible by a generous Chinese donation of high-speed communication systems, sensing technology, computing power, as well as algorithms for facial recognition and online surveillance – along with the human capital to operate such infrastructure.

South Atlantic and Pacific Treaty Organization (SAPTO)

China's 'NATO' in Latin America



Source: European Commission, GISCO, 2023

The consequences

The creation of SAPTO has major consequences, in particular for Latin America, the United States and China.

Latin America. In Latin America, two main dynamics are set in motion as a result. Emboldened by the new alliance with China, SAPTO members become more aggressive. After the signing of the Treaty, SAPTO members expel US diplomats whom they accuse of being undeclared intelligence operatives, arrest *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Times* journalists under charges of national security law violations, seize shipments of US goods and confiscate US companies' assets for alleged tax fraud. SAPTO training and exercises recurrently force re-routing of both international seaborne and air traffic. SAPTO anti-air and anti-ship radars often lock on commercial vehicles and vessels, increasing the risk of accidents. Air policing missions in Guatemala, Venezuela and Ecuador recurrently lead to violation of Mexican, Colombian and Peruvian airspace. SAPTO naval groups seem to cover illegal fishing into Colombian and Peruvian waters. At the same time, the SAPTO security structure helps its members identify alleged terrorists and plotters: several individuals are incriminated and arrested. As a result, domestic opposition is further marginalized and weakened.

In the other countries of Latin America, the new situation is met with strategic ambivalence. SAPTO provocations primarily target Colombia, Mexico and Paraguay.

These countries ask for diplomatic and military support from both the US and other Latin American countries, as well as for improved resources to counter alleged SAPTO disinformation and covert actions. Conversely, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay are starting to question US global power and its commitment to the region. Specifically, while they do not want to join SAPTO for fear of alienating the United States, they sense that there may be a new sheriff in town and are therefore ready to find compromise with China. When in doubt, these governments tend to leverage the competition between China and the US in their favour, asking for more generous trade agreements, foreign direct investments, development aid, and weapons sales.

United States. In the US, domestic polarization constrains and undermines the conceptualization and execution of a coherent foreign policy. Some groups call for a more assertive foreign policy to reassert the Monroe Doctrine – essentially its 1823 policy position opposing any foreign involvement in Latin America. Others denounce decades of US imperialism and warn against any intervention. The US government is paralysed by infighting between different bureaucracies, such as the CIA, the Pentagon, the State Department and the White House. As a result, after months of deliberations, many proposals are taken off the table, including a new wave of trade liberalization, revision of immigration policies towards Latin America, more generous development

aid and deeper military cooperation. Ultimately, without much fanfare, the US government acts on two fronts: diplomacy and defence.

At the diplomatic level, the US adopts two main initiatives. One aims to subsidize US foreign direct investment in Latin America in order to support local economies and employment while also strengthening bilateral relations. The other initiative funds the establishment of an American University in Bogota, granting generous scholarships to Latin American students, and supporting deeper academic cooperation between US and regional universities.

At the defence level, the US government reallocates more signals (SIGINT) and human (HUMINT) intelligence to Latin America and redeploys personnel, resources and capabilities from Europe, the Middle East and Africa (EUCOM, CENTCOM and AFRICOM) to the area (SOUTHCOM). The twin goal consists of acquiring superior situation awareness and enhancing reassurance, deterrence and defence. However, the US government does not significantly increase its defence cooperation, nor does it significantly increase weapons transfers in the region, fearing they could lead to escalation.

China. After SAPTO is signed, the Chinese government adopts a three-front cross-theatre strategy: the good in Latin America, the ugly in Europe, Middle East and Africa, and the bad in Asia. In Latin America, China presents itself as the voice of reason and reassurance. While SAPTO formally asks China to deploy tactical nuclear weapons in the region, Beijing publicly signals its disapproval, suggesting that nuclear weapons would risk fuelling escalation. At the same time, however, China spreads disinformation against the US and cultivates third columns in non-SAPTO countries in the hope of attracting new countries to the Organization. In Europe, Middle East and Africa, China tries to exploit US military and diplomatic retrenchment to gain diplomatic, political and economic influence. In Asia, China adopts a more assertive policy towards Taiwan, seeking to provoke an escalation. This cross-theatre strategy aims, in sum, at 1) imposing *fait accompli* in Asia, 2) responding to US reactions in Asia through military build-ups in Latin America, and 3) gaining influence in Europe, the Middle East and Africa by exploiting the US retrenchment driven by developments in Latin America.

How did we get there?

The creation of SAPTO represents a diplomatic, intelligence and strategic failure. Although several variables have contributed to this outcome, three deserve particular attention.

First, the creation of SAPTO highlights a fundamental failure in terms of early-warning and situation awareness.¹ Two decades of out-of-area counterinsurgency operations followed by the return of technology-intensive great power competition with Russia and China have weakened human intelligence in general and signals intelligence, especially in Latin America.² The adoption of Chinese electronic equipment, encryption systems and software platforms in Latin American countries and the growing reliance on artificial intelligence in US intelligence agencies have arguably further undermined US signals intelligence collection: on the one hand, it is harder to collect specific data and, on the other, it has become harder to process and analyse them.³

Second, China has been expanding its influence around the world for the past three decades, including in Latin America.⁴ And China has recurrently used this economic and technological prowess as a coercion instrument to advance its foreign and domestic policy and goals.⁵ Following the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Western countries attempted to reduce their dependence on China's production. This decoupling and near-shoring process was intended to benefit, first, the US manufacturing base and, next, geographically proximate or politically aligned countries: Latin America was part of the equation.⁶ Eyeing the risk of losing an instrument of influence and coercion, China moved to further strengthen its economic presence in Latin America in order to be able to undermine global supply-chains if necessary and, in turn, the US economy. Similarly, concerns about the independence of Taiwan have, in recent years, led to a revision of the US defence posture and force structure in Asia, as well as those of its allies. Despite recurrent worries about the potential weakness of such a posture and doctrine, the Chinese government decided to adopt a competitive strategy.⁷ Rather than trying to undermine US defence posture and structure in Asia *militarily*, it opted to weaken them *politically*, by forcing the US to spread its focus, resources, and capabilities over multiple regions.

¹ Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011).

² Calder Walton, *Spies: The Epic Intelligence War Between East and West* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2023).

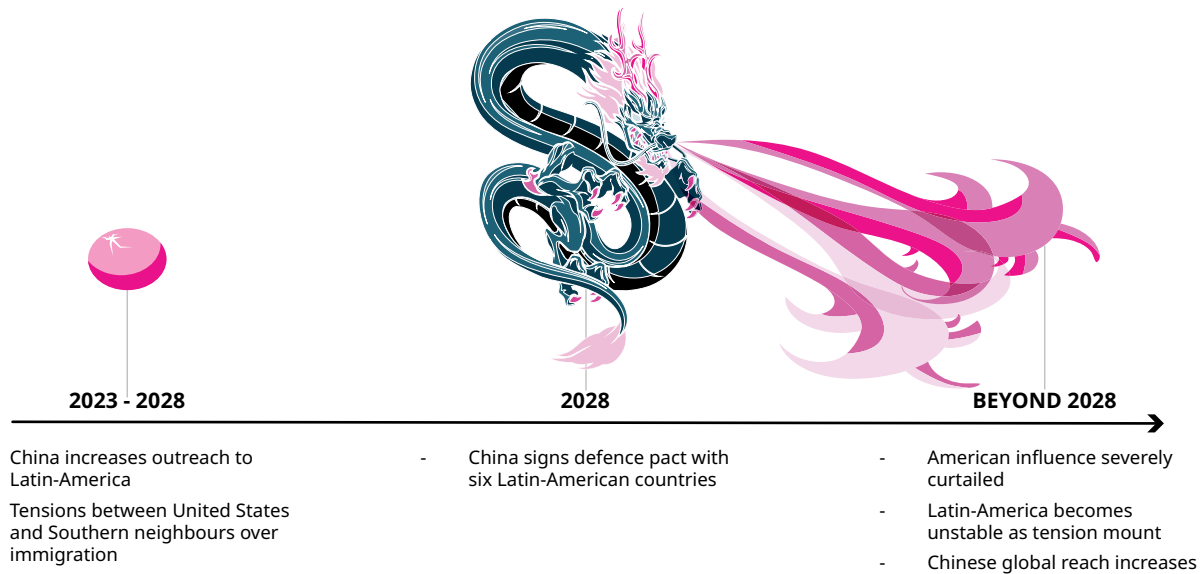
³ Amy B. Zegart, *Spies, Lies, and Algorithms: The History and Future of American Intelligence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022).

⁴ Ted Piccone, *The Geopolitics of China's Rise in Latin America* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2016).

⁵ Victor D. Cha, "Collective Resilience: Deterring China's Weaponization of Economic Interdependence," *International Security*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (2023): 91–124.

⁶ Tristan Bove, "Years of Global Supply Chain Chaos Could Mean a Nearshoring Jackpot for the Americas in 2023," *Fortune*, 23 December 2022.

⁷ For the recurrent worries, see Elbridge A. Colby, *The Strategy of Denial American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022). For the competitive strategy, see Evan Braden Montgomery, "Competitive Strategies against Continental Powers: The Geopolitics of Sino-Indian-American Relations," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (2013): pp. 76–100.



Last but not least, US domestic political trends have indirectly favoured the emergence of SAPTO. Stricter limits to legal and illegal immigration from Latin America to the US, along with a lower cap on remittances, have affected the public standing of the US in the region, thus opening newer opportunities for Chinese influence. The return of industrial policy in the US, together with the reshoring of manufacturing activities, has weakened manufacturing in Latin America, leading in turn to economic and political malaise. Similarly, the energy transition has undermined both the automotive industry in Latin America and the oil- and gas-dependent segments of its economies and societies (through a mix of higher prices and lack of components). Economic dislocation and depression have further fuelled anti-American sentiments and favoured political leaderships with more pro-China positions. Along the same lines, in order to address growing domestic socio-economic inequality and wider societal problems, several US administrations have reduced transfers to Latin America, including United States Agency for International Developments (USAID) assistance and Department of State grants.⁸ As a result, the US was not able to address some of the economic costs of the energy transition it contributed to create, nor could it tackle China's and Russia's disinformation in Latin America. Finally, budgetary pressures and attention to the strategic competition with China progressively forced the US military to reduce its humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) activities in the region, thus opening the door further to China's presence.⁹

This brings us to two final considerations for the transatlantic alliance and NATO. On the one hand, this crisis highlights the consequences of non-military dynam-

ics for Allies' security: specifically, political, social and economic developments in Latin America can seriously affect NATO and the transatlantic relationship, much beyond what many can currently foresee. On the other, the creation of SAPTO shows the apparent conceptual weakness of NATO's regional and functional posture: in a competitive and globalized world, Allies' security cannot be ensured only through a deterrence and defence posture tailored solely for the Euro-Atlantic region. Allies are revisiting their defence planning construct to include East Asia, but SAPTO shows that other countries may be adjusting as well.¹⁰

⁸ Anne Case and Angus Deaton, *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020); Matthew Desmond, *Poverty, by America* (New York, NY: Crown, 2023).
⁹ *The Nation's Fiscal Health: Road Map Needed to Address Projected Unsustainable Debt Levels* (Washington, DC: Government Accounting Office, 2023).
¹⁰ Eric S. Edelman and Franklin C. Miller, "We Must Return to and Maintain the Two Theater Defense Planning Construct," *RealClearDefense*, 17 August 2023.

What if...

the Arctic Council dissolves?

Torill Settemsdal Hansen

The event

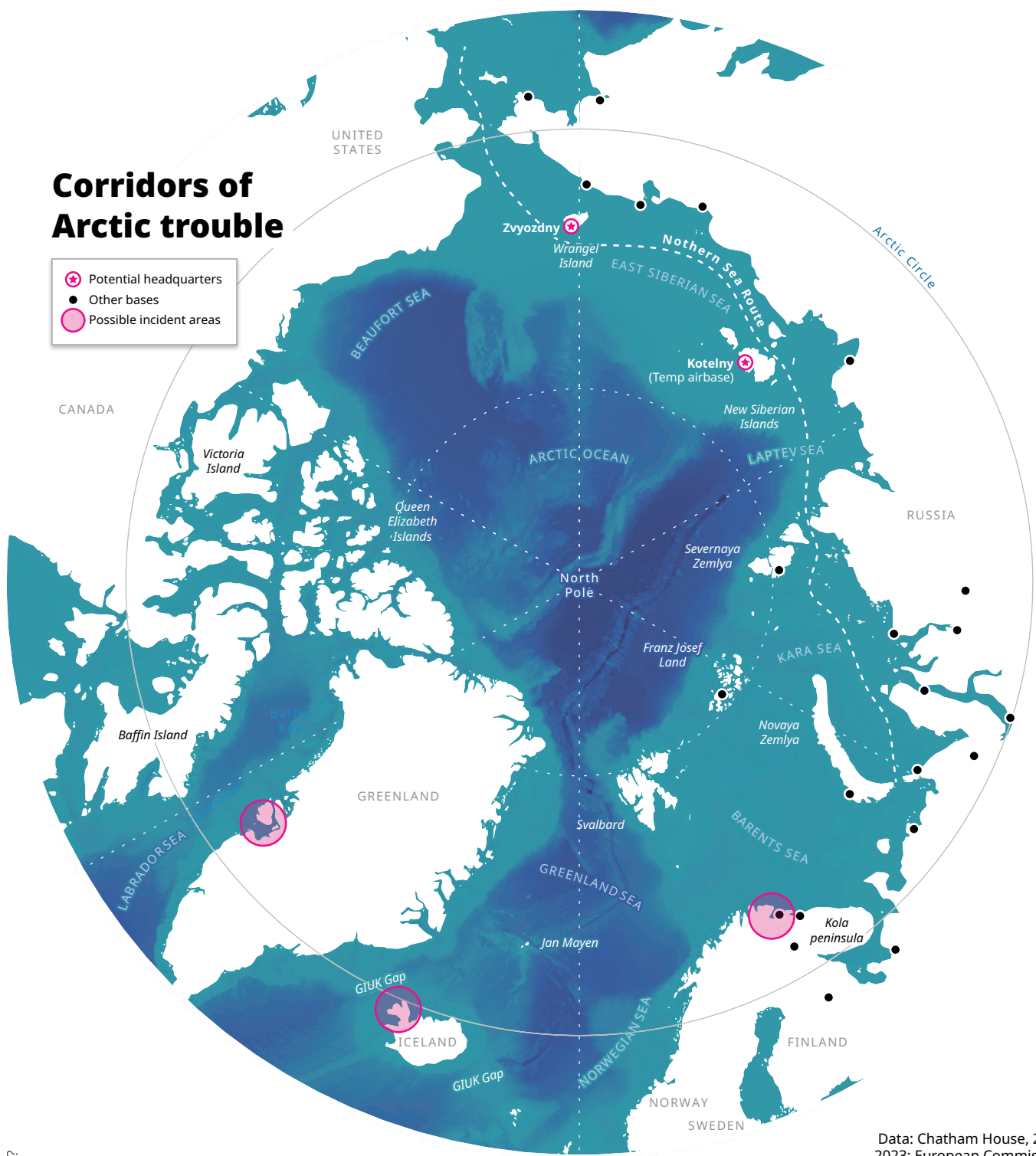
On 17-18 September 2028, high-level officials from the Arctic states, indigenous peoples' organizations and observer nations gathered in Iqaluit, Canada, to attend the 30th anniversary of the first Ministerial Meeting under the Arctic Council. All eight member states were represented: Canada, the Kingdom of Denmark, Sweden, Iceland, Finland, the United States, Norway, and the Russian Federation. Following a traditional opening ceremony by a group of native residents, the Iqalummiuq, the next two days included intense discussions about pressing issues on the Arctic agenda. Leading up to the event, expectations were particularly high for the participation of the Russian Federation, which had been excluded from most of the Council's activities following the war on Ukraine. Since then, the relations between the Arctic neighbours had grown even more tense amid claims of hidden militarization and increased military exercises along maritime borders. This Arctic Council meeting, however, finally offered a unique opportunity for direct talks between the actors. In an interview with a national news outlet, the Danish Foreign Minister even described this much anticipated meeting as a last resort to foster dialogue and facilitate negotiation, potentially lowering the geopolitical temperature. On the other hand, the global news agency Reuters had reported the previous week indications from two diplomatic sources that the irreconcilable differences following Russia's

latest actions would hinder any progress, and that "the Arctic States are now clearly moving towards competition and away from cooperation."

At the concluding press conference for the Ministerial Meeting, the Canadian Foreign Minister, speaking on behalf of the Canadian Chairmanship, listed the significant achievements of the Council throughout the years before adding that "...despite the Arctic Council's longstanding institutional robustness, there has been a lack of cooperation, trust and productivity for a prolonged period." The Minister went on to address the current relations and controversies between the Arctic States, saying that "considering recent events and the changes in the region's environmental, political, and socio-economic circumstances over the last decade, the discussion of military and security issues has become unavoidable... explicitly contravening the 1996 Ottawa Declaration and the Arctic Council's mandate." She announced that the members of the Arctic Council would issue a joint statement to end Council activities, dissolving the forum officially. She underlined that this termination was not an easy decision, nor was it attributable to one cause. The discussions and progress on Arctic issues, such as climate change and the rights of indigenous peoples in the region, would still be a priority for all former member states. This work, however, would now have to be taken forward through alternative platforms for bilateral and multilateral cooperation rather than through the Arctic Council.

The consequences

Shortly after the final Arctic Council meeting, the NATO Arctic countries met in Reykjavik in November 2028 to discuss the future of Arctic cooperation. A clear priority for seven of the former Arctic Council member states was to continue the information exchange and scientific collaboration. The main discussion, however, centred around establishing NATO's Allied Arctic Command Group (ARCCOM). The Arctic Command Group was to be placed under the Allied Command Operations (ACO),



Data: Chatham House, 2022; CSIS, 2023; European Commission, 2023

with a dedicated headquarters in Nuuk, Greenland, where NATO had already been strengthening its operational coordination with Denmark since 2020.¹ The agreement became final by the end of 2028, and the member states also decided to establish Liaison Units in Reykjavík, Iceland and Vadsø, Norway. The tactical-level command for Arctic operations aimed to enhance NATO's defence

and deterrence in the region, adopting a common threat assessment to enable the swift military responses required to defend the Arctic territory of the Alliance against any aggression.

Already by February 2029, more Arctic frigates, submarines, and aircraft were patrolling allied territory in response to the tense geopolitical situation. Conversely,

¹ Public Affairs Office, MARCOM (Allied Maritime Command), "NATO begins cooperation with Danish Joint Arctic Command in Greenland", October 1, 2020, <https://mc.nato.int/media-centre/news/2020/nato-begins-cooperation-with-danish-joint-arctic-command-in-greenland.aspx>

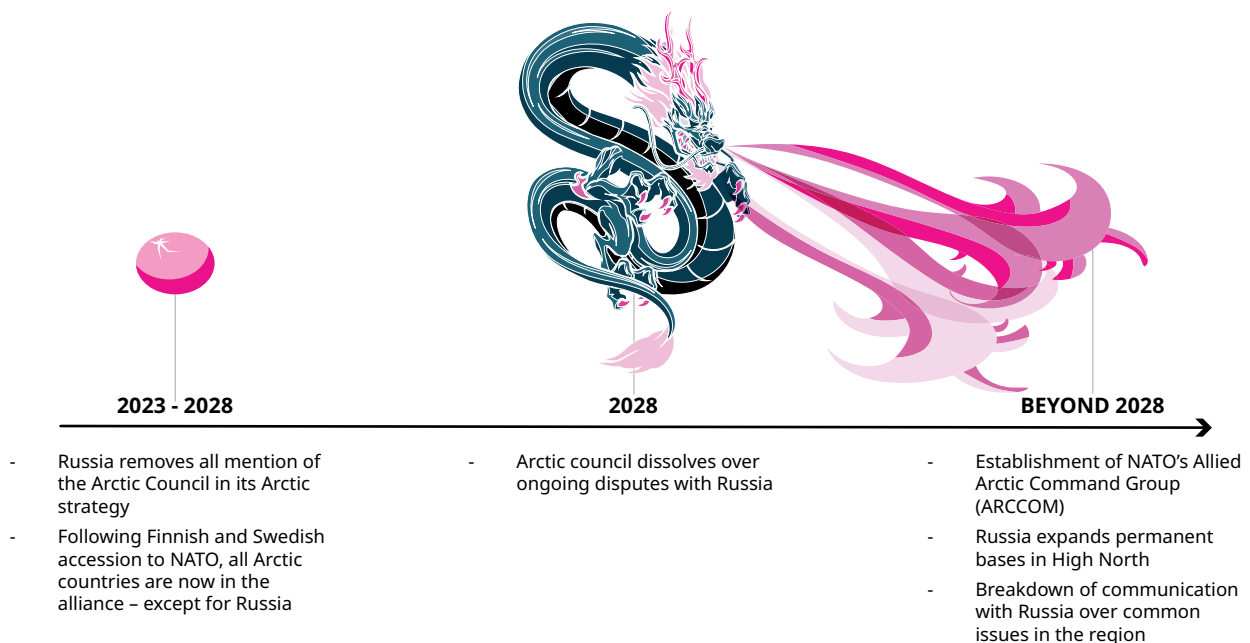
Russia responded to this NATO military presence by expanding its permanent bases in the High North. In addition, the Kremlin sought to engage in closer cooperation with former Arctic Council observer states, such as China. Although the two states had previously expressed their shared bilateral and economic interests in the Arctic,² Russia had long been wary of China's ambitions in the region. At the 2029 China-Russia Dialogue on Arctic Affairs, however, Russia encouraged further strategic cooperation with and involvement by China. To underline this commitment, the Chinese were even granted permission to establish both a submarine base and an airbase within Russian Arctic territories, on the islands of Temp and Zvyozdny respectively. The official flagship of the partnership remained economic integration, with both partners heavily investing in the Northern Sea Route. This passage, set to open in 2031, would cut thousands of kilometres off commercial shipping routes. With Russia's claim to 53 percent of the Arctic coastline, the focus had been on developing oil and gas fields in newly accessible areas. The economic potential and investment in the region also attracted the interest of non-Western countries, such as India, Brazil, Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan, which started to engage in serious discussions with Russia about establishing a separate Arctic economic forum.

With increased competition and militarization in the region, and in the absence of the Arctic Council, there was a clear need for more transparency between the Arctic stakeholders. As the polar ice caps melted, there

was also a lack of clarity about the precise delineation of certain land and maritime borders. Nations now had the opportunity to claim more land and compete for new resources. Hence, many Arctic states aimed to strengthen their territorial and sovereignty claims, increasing the risk of heightened escalation and miscalculation. Although Russia was leading in the level of expansionist interests, operating as the largest actor in terms of Arctic territory, the other Arctic states did not wish to overlook opportunities for sovereignty. The claim over the sea borders increasingly became a security issue, especially with the accessibility of the new trans-polar shipping routes. The uncertainty about Russia's willingness to use force to assert its claims on territory resulted in an escalation of military exercises and NATO's presence in the border areas.

How did we get there?

Russia's two-year term as Chair of the Arctic Council ended in May 2023, leaving a question mark about the future of the Council's role as a forum for international collaboration. Earlier that year, Russia removed all mention of the Arctic Council in its Arctic strategy, replacing it with greater emphasis on bilateral cooperation in the areas of science and business.³ With the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, cooperation with Russia was formally



² Cordelia Buchanan Ponczek, "Arctic Ambitions: The Role of Russia in China's Polar Strategy," Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), July 17, 2023, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/arctic-ambitions-the-role-of-russia-in-chinas-polar-strategy-135859>
³ Astri Edvardsen, "Russia's Top Arctic Diplomat: Long-Term Cooperation in the Arctic Requires Conditions Now Lost", *High North News*, May 3, 2023, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/russias-top-arctic-diplomat-long-term-cooperation-arctic-requires-conditions-now-lost>

suspended, bringing a sudden stop to most of the work carried out by the Arctic Council.⁴ As a consensus-based forum, removing Russia from the Council was impossible. Despite being “frozen out,” Russia did not intend to leave the intergovernmental forum. In the next years, with Sweden eventually becoming a NATO member, all the Arctic countries, except for Russia, were part of the same collective defence alliance. Geopolitical tensions escalated with the 2027 Arctic Report Card, determining that 2030 would likely be the year when the sea ice area drops below 1 million square kilometres. In effect, there would soon be open water at the North Pole. The Arctic holds up to a quarter of the Earth’s undiscovered oil and gas, thus becoming an area of strategic importance and intense competition over natural resources.⁵ Gradually, this shifted the focus away from progressing on regional environmental issues and Arctic ecosystem conservation, which had long been a vital issue on the Arctic Council’s agenda. Following Norway’s and Denmark’s chairmanships of the Arctic Council in 2023-2025 and 2025-2027 respectively, Canada took over the chair in 2028. As the previous chairmanships had failed to progress in the aftermath of the war on Ukraine, it became more evident that changing the internal dynamics would be complicated. With the Council being a relatively young international organization, the risk of dissolution was already high. Tensions increased when the Russians confronted Norway and the US about hidden militarization, further fanned by Russia’s military rearmament and exercises spotted on satellite pictures on the borders of its Arctic territories, and by the discovery of an espionage case on Svalbard in July 2028. Leading up to the final Arctic Council meeting, there had also been conflicting perspectives among the NATO Arctic states about the future of the forum. The larger member states were pushing for dissolution, arguing that progress on Arctic issues would be more effective outside the Council. After the first day of discussions in Canada, it soon became apparent that dissolution was inevitable and that this meeting would be the final gathering of the Arctic Council.

⁴ John Last, “Future of Arctic Council in doubt after end of Russian chairmanship”, *CBC News*, May 11, 2023, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/arctic-council-handover-russia-1.6836000>

⁵ Sandrine Amiel, “What Is the Arctic Council and What Does It Want?”, *Euronews*, May 25, 2021, <https://www.euronews.com/2021/05/20/what-is-the-arctic-council-and-what-does-it-want>

What if...

Taiwan tries to reclaim its historic seat on the United Nations Security Council?

James Lee

The event

The year is 2028. Contrary to the predictions of many analysts in the policy community, 2027 has come and gone without a Chinese invasion. But Taiwan cannot rest easy. China has continued to harass Taiwan. PLA warplanes have been crossing the median line in the Taiwan Strait every day for the last year, and the PLA Rocket Force fired seven ballistic missiles over Taipei after the President rejected the One-China principle in her inaugural address. The missiles landed in the waters between Yilan County and Japan's Yonaguni Island. One of them narrowly missed a ferry that was sailing on the new route between Yonaguni and the Taiwan's Port of Keelung, endangering the lives of almost a hundred civilians.¹

For years, China has been launching a diplomatic offensive to constrict Taiwan's international space. There was outrage last year when a small meeting organized by the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in New York on

the sidelines of the UN General Assembly was disrupted by pro-Beijing protesters. UN officials said nothing, not even in private, to express their regret about the incident. When asked to comment at a press conference, a UN spokesperson blankly stared at the camera for thirty seconds and then tried to change the topic.² When reporters pressed him to comment on Taiwan, he said that the United Nations only recognizes one China which is the People's Republic of China, and that Taiwan is not a member state of the UN.

Now there's even worse news. At an emergency meeting of the National Security Council, the Minister of Defence informs the President that Beijing has decided to punish Taiwan for rejecting the One-China principle by seizing control of Pratas 東沙, one of Taiwan's outlying islands in the South China Sea. Taiwan's coast guard evacuated from Pratas, choosing not to defend the island from the PLA's maritime militia to avoid escalation. Itu Aba 太平 might be next. The US government has condemned Beijing's aggression and asserted its right to conduct freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea. But Washington has informed Taipei that it will not try to expel the PLA from Pratas, nor will it assist Taiwan in doing so. Facing high unemployment and inflation, the US and the EU do not want to create even more economic turmoil by imposing sanctions on Beijing. Critics within Taiwan at one end of the political spectrum are accusing the government of being weak in the face of PRC aggression; critics at the other end of the spectrum are accusing the government of "provoking" China by rejecting the One-China principle. The Defence Minister says that there are no viable military options for trying to retake Pratas, especially in the absence of US support. Even so, says the President, the government has to take a stand against Beijing.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs weighs in. Every year, Taiwan has been making the same diplomatic effort to join the UN General Assembly under the name "Repub-

¹ On the proposed creation of this ferry service, see "You Leads Delegation to Japan's Yonaguni Island", *Taipei Times*, 6 July 2023, <https://www.taipetimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2023/07/06/2003802768>

² Something similar has happened before. See Helen Davidson, "Senior WHO Adviser Appears to Dodge Question on Taiwan's Covid-19 Response", *The Guardian*, 30 March 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/30/senior-who-adviser-appears-to-dodge-question-on-taiwans-covid-19-response>

lic of China,” and every year the other member states have rejected Taiwan’s appeals by saying that UN Resolution 2758 decided that China could only be represented by the People’s Republic of China.³ They have to do something more this time. But if they try to join the UN General Assembly as the “Republic of Taiwan,” it could trigger China to attack and jeopardize Taiwan’s relationship with the United States, which has asked for assurances that Taipei will not try to change the status quo unilaterally.

The Foreign Minister (who, like the President, is a lawyer by training) suggests a different strategy. He cites the finding of a recent task force on the history of Taiwan’s relationship with the United Nations.⁴ The task force found that Article 23 of the UN Charter listed the “Republic of China” rather than “China” as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, and that the ROC government chose this specific phrasing in 1945 to prevent the Chinese Communist Party from claiming the ROC’s seat in the Security Council. The ROC is now in Taiwan, but Beijing has taken its seat. On the basis of Article 23, the Foreign Minister believes that Taiwan can build a legal argument that the People’s Republic of China should be expelled from the UN Security Council and replaced by the Republic of China (Taiwan). He does not expect that Taiwan will succeed, but does believe that this action will build support for Taiwan in the international community by showing that Taiwan’s exclusion from the UN system is both unjust and illegal. The President decides to try.

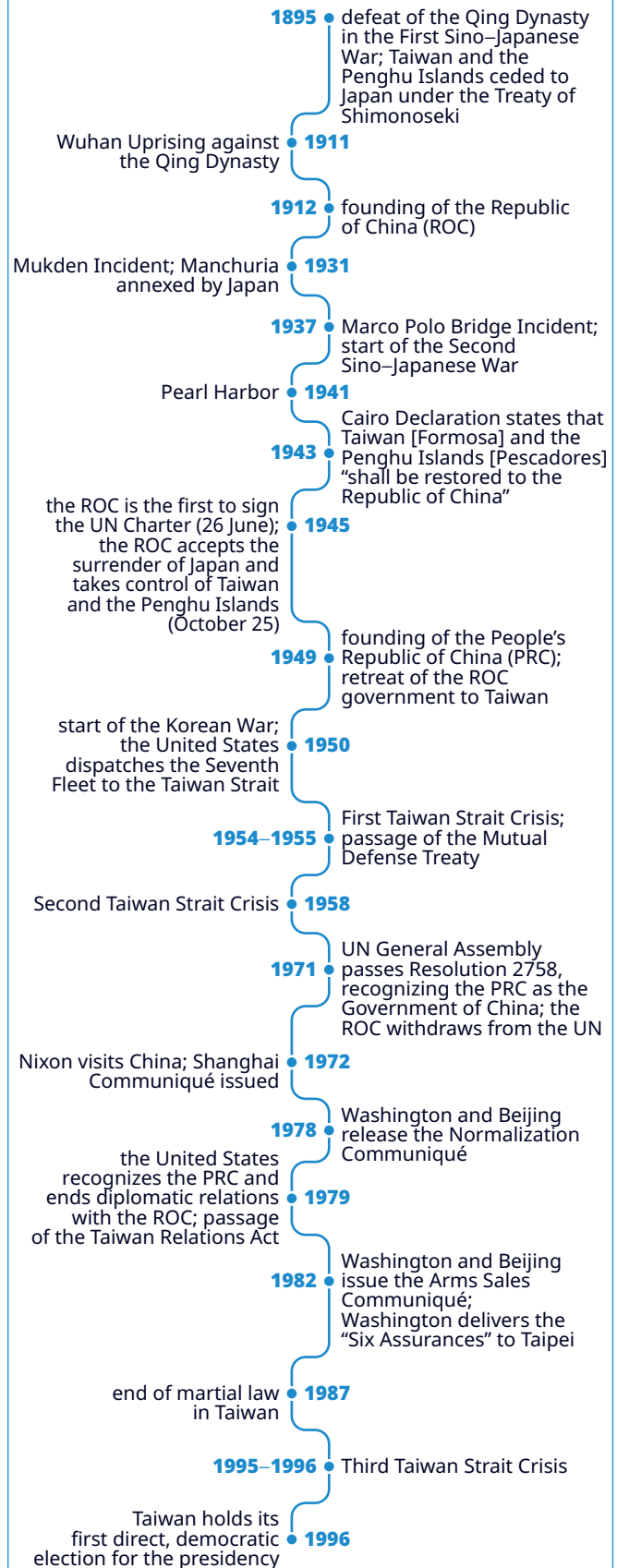
But first, the President decides that Taiwan should communicate its plans to the United States so there are no surprises once her administration goes public with this argument. In Washington, Taiwan’s Representative holds a meeting with the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs. The Representative explains that the government of Taiwan is not declaring independence, but needs to take assertive action in response to Beijing’s aggression in the South China Sea. She stresses that Taiwan is not changing the status quo, because it is still trying to join the United Nations as the Republic of China. What Taiwan is changing is the UN body it seeks to join.

The Assistant Secretary says that the United States will neither endorse nor oppose Taipei’s campaign. He assures the Representative that the United States will not contradict Taiwan in public, but he also states four points about the US position.

³ On the current use of UN Resolution 2758 to restrict Taiwan’s international space, see Jessica Drun and Bonnie Glaser, “The Distortion of UN Resolution 2758 to Limit Taiwan’s Access to the United Nations”, *German Marshall Fund of the United States*, March 2022, https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/Drun%26Glaser-distortion-un-resolution-2758-limit-taiwans-access_1.pdf

⁴ This task force and its findings are fictional.

Taiwan timeline



1. The United States will not change its position that Taiwan's sovereignty is undetermined.⁵
2. The United States will not publicly affirm or deny the continuing existence of the Republic of China.
3. The United States will not establish formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan.
4. If pressed to respond to Taiwan's claims in public, US officials will say that the United States takes no position on sovereignty; the United States will maintain its One-China policy.

The Representative conveys these points back to Taipei, where they become known as “America's Four Denials 美國四項否認” and are understood to have the same importance as the Six Assurances.

The next day, Taiwan's President holds a press conference for Taiwanese and international media, interpreted simultaneously in English, Mandarin, and Taiwanese. She asserts the ROC's claim to a permanent seat on the UN Security Council by emphasizing Article 23. Shortly afterward, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs publishes a white paper outlining Taiwan's position:

1. The Republic of China was founded as an independent and sovereign state, and still is one now: it may have moved to Taiwan in 1949, but it has never ceased to exist.
2. Article 23 of the United Nations Charter listed the Republic of China as one of the permanent members of the UN Security Council, and never reserved that seat for the legally recognized Government of China.
3. UN Resolution 2758 falsely claimed that the People's Republic of China was a permanent member of the UN Security Council. That assertion plainly contradicts Article 23 of the UN Charter, which takes precedence over any resolution of the General Assembly.
4. UN Resolution 2758 ruled that the People's Republic of China would henceforth represent China in the United Nations, but it did not decide that Taiwan was a part of China.⁶
5. In 1971, the Republic of China withdrew from the United Nations because it would not accept any other status than that of the legally recognized Government of China.⁷ The Republic of China today no longer maintains that position, and its sovereignty over Taiwan and its independence are indisputable.

Article 23 of the UN Charter⁸

The Security Council shall consist of fifteen Members of the United Nations. The Republic of China, France, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the United States of America shall be permanent members of the Security Council.

Memorandum of Conversation, 23 October 1958⁹

During one interlude the Secretary asked Ambassador Yeh about the origin of the use of the name “The Republic of China” in Article 23 of the United Nations Charter. Mr. Yeh said that this had originated in the Chinese Delegation at San Francisco. He explained that there had been two Communist members of the Delegation who had tried to have reference to China worded so that the Communist Government, which even at that time had already been formed, could claim that it was entitled to “China's” seat in the United Nations. The National Government's Delegation had devised the phrase “Republic of China” as a means of forestalling this move and the Communist members of the Delegation had accepted it.

Consequences

The statement from the President of Taiwan makes international headlines. When asked to comment on the statement, a State Department spokesperson says that the United States takes no position on Taiwan's sovereignty. Beijing accuses Taiwan of pursuing independence and says that the Republic of China no longer exists. When asked to comment on Beijing's remarks, a spokesperson for Taiwan's Presidential Office says that the Republic of China (Taiwan) “existed before, exists now, and will exist in the future.” Scholars, policy analysts, and commentators fail to find an international legal ruling that the Republic of China ceased to exist at any point in history. At a press conference in Taipei, a foreign correspondent says: “But UN Resolution 2758 says that the Republic

⁵ A detailed elaboration of this position can be found in Harry S. Truman, “Letter to Ambassador Warren Austin Restating the U.S. Position on Formosa [27 August 1950],” *Harry S. Truman Library and Museum*, accessed 6 October 2023, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/public-papers/223/letter-ambassador-warren-austin-restating-us-position-formosa>

⁶ UN General Assembly, “Restoration of the Lawful Rights of the People's Republic of China in the United Nations [25 October 1972],” *United Nations*, accessed 26 September 2023, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/192054>. See also Chien-Huei Wu and Ching-Fu Lin, “Taiwan and the Myth of UN General Assembly Resolution 2758,” *Verfassungsblog*, 14 April 2023, <https://verfassungsblog.de/taiwan-and-the-myth-of-un-general-assembly-resolution-2758/>; and Jessica Drun and Bonnie Glaser, “The Distortion of UN Resolution 2758 and Limits on Taiwan's Access to the United Nations,” 24 March 2022, *German Marshall Fund of the United States*, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/distortion-un-resolution-2758-and-limits-taiwans-access-united-nations>

⁷ Jay Taylor, *Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-shek and the Struggle for Modern China* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 571-572.

⁸ “United Nations Charter (Full Text),” *United Nations*, 26 September 2023, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text>

⁹ “Memorandum of Conversation [23 October 1958, Document 206]” in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-1960*, ed. Harriet Dashiell Schwar (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976), <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v19/d206>

of China can no longer represent China.” The President answers: “We don’t claim to represent China. We represent Taiwan.”

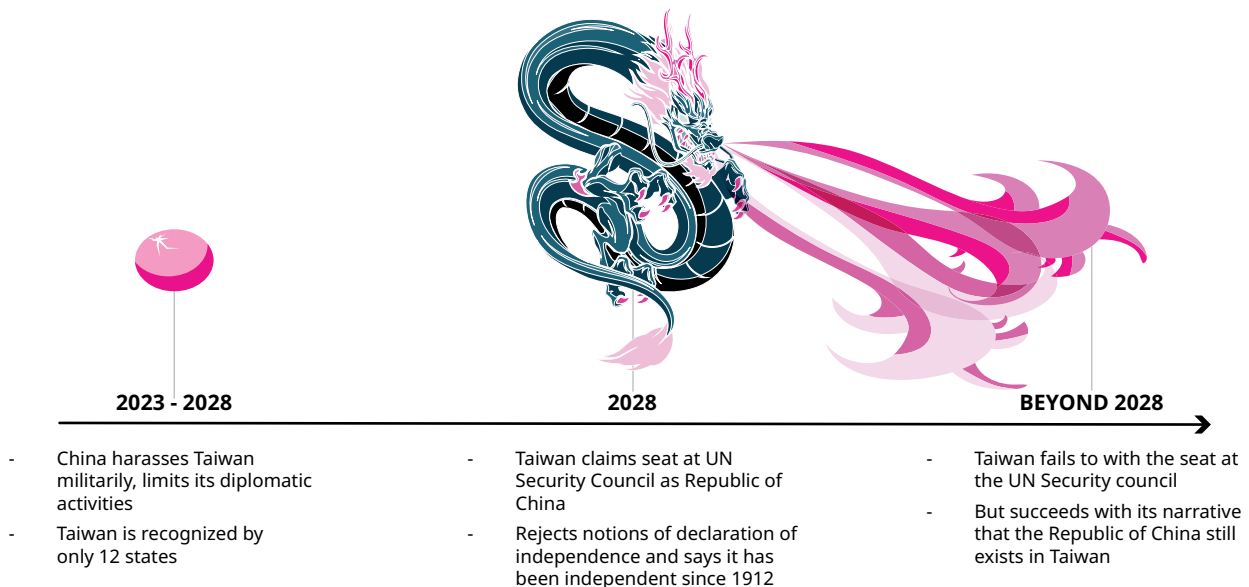
In the following year, the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in New York organizes another meeting on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly. Once again, pro-Beijing protesters try to disrupt the meeting. But this time they fail, because there’s an enormous gathering of diplomats from around the world who have arrived to support Taiwan. Although Taiwan never succeeds in its campaign to replace Beijing on the UN Security Council, the controversy surrounding this claim makes it clear that the People’s Republic of China did not succeed the Republic of China in the way that Russia succeeded the Soviet Union. The Republic of China still exists in Taiwan, even though very few countries recognize it. In 2029, more and more countries join meetings organized by Taiwan to mirror meetings of the United Nations, creating an informal, parallel system of global governance.

How did we get there?

The scenario described above is fictional, but plausible. Beijing has considered launching an attack on Pratas.¹⁰ Taiwan has been engaging in diplomatic campaigns to join the UN.¹¹ The United States has called for Taiwan’s “meaningful participation in the UN system,” though

not formal membership as an independent state.¹² In the scenario, the US response to Taiwan’s campaign to replace the PRC in the Security Council is consistent with the United States’ approach to disputes over Taiwan’s sovereignty, as well as the United States’ One-China policy in general.¹³ Taiwan’s decision not to campaign to join the UN General Assembly as “the Republic of Taiwan” is grounded in the history of US-Taiwan relations: in the 2000s, there were considerable tensions between Washington and Taipei over a proposed referendum in Taiwan to join the UN as “Taiwan” rather than the Republic of China, which was seen as close to being a unilateral declaration of independence.¹⁴ The legal argument in the scenario is also based on historical evidence, which has been cited in the notes.

What could happen between 2023 and 2028 that could plausibly lead to this scenario unfolding? Not only an attack on Pratas (or another of Taiwan’s outlying islands), but also other significant instances in which Beijing decides to escalate its coercion and isolation of Taiwan, such as by poaching more of Taiwan’s diplomatic partners. Given a situation in which Taipei feels pressured to take a particularly strong stand against Beijing, but wants to avoid escalating tensions or jeopardizing the strength of its ties with the United States, it might launch the kind of diplomatic campaign outlined in this scenario.



¹⁰ Sarah Wu, “China Has Debated Attacking Taiwan-Controlled Islands, Taiwan Official Says,” *Reuters*, 4 November 2021, www.reuters.com/world/china/china-has-debated-attacking-taiwan-controlled-islands-taiwan-official-says-2021-11-04/

¹¹ Chris Horton, “As U.N. Gathers, Taiwan, Frozen Out, Struggles to Get Noticed,” *The New York Times*, 21 September 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/21/world/asia/taiwan-joined-united-nations-joseph-wu.html>

¹² Antony Blinken, “Supporting Taiwan’s Participation in the UN System,” *U.S. Department of State*, 26 October 2021, <https://www.state.gov/supporting-taiwans-participation-in-the-un-system/>

¹³ For a previous U.S. statement on taking no position on Taiwan’s sovereignty and maintaining the One-China policy, see “‘No Position’ on Sovereignty: Ned Price,” *Taipei Times*, 28 September 2022, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2022/09/28/2003786045>

¹⁴ For an example of U.S. criticism of Taiwan’s previous attempt to join the UN under the name “Taiwan”, see Thomas J. Christensen, “A Strong and Moderate Taiwan,” *U.S. Department of State Archive*, 11 September 2007, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2007/91979.htm>

Internal disruption



What if...

there is a coup in Nigeria?

Giacomo Andolfatto

The event

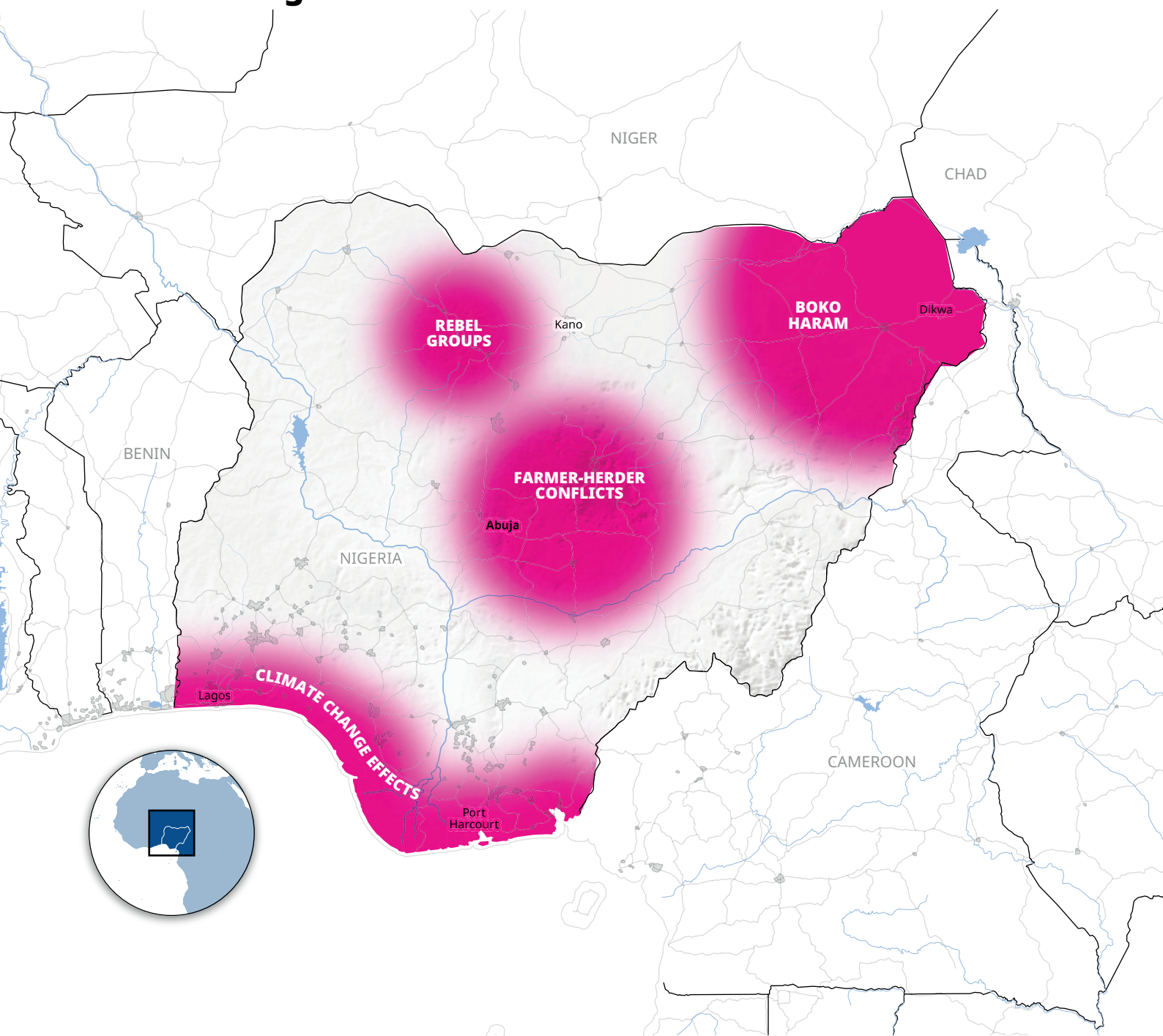
It should have been a day of national celebration like any other from previous years. On Sunday, 1 October 2028, Nigeria was set to start its main parade in Abuja to celebrate its 68 years of independence. But the night before, Nigerian armed forces did the unthinkable: they arrested the President at gun-point and formed a new military junta. The plan was executed smoothly. In the weeks leading up to the coup, plotters orchestrated to strike simultaneously in several regional capitals. First, coup plotters managed to infiltrate some of their men among the guards posted at the mansions of the regional governors, located in Ikeja, Port Harcourt, and Kaduna. With the putschists were already inside the mansions, it was relatively easy to kidnap or kill the governors. As for the major military leaders, despite some gunfights between troops, the coup plotters managed to overpower them, taking control of the military commands in Lagos, Lekki, Ibadan, Kano, and Onitsha. The second part required much more discretion: to prevent any troop movement, blockades in some strategic outposts were needed. In the week before the coup, the putschists managed to block the main routes connected to Abuja, erecting blockades between the Niger and Benue rivers, two of the most vital commercial routes. Only one thing was missing: storm the President's office to arrest him and his entourage.

"We cannot continue to be ruled by this corrupt government, we represent the anger of the Nigerian people," was the message, broadcasted from the largest national stations (Channels Television, Arise TV, and TVC News). Minutes after, crowds gathering in Eagle square in Abuja and Tinubu square, in Lagos, waving the Nigerian flag, praised the change. Some were waving the Russian flag in support of Moscow's efforts on behalf of Nigeria. "Russia is not ending its relationships with Nigeria, in the aftermath of the coup", stated Jerry Smith, a freelance reporter. "Rather, Moscow immediately threw its support behind the new military junta, first by convening official meetings and telephone calls between the new government and Moscow's Ministry of Foreign Affairs; then by imposing its veto against UN sanctions proposed by the Security Council, and by brokering an exemption to embargos on supplying arms to Nigeria." "This decision," he continued, "has been highly welcomed, not only by the interim government, but also by the Nigerian people."

The consequences

As often the case after coups, promises remained just that: empty promises. Instead of stability, the junta caused instability. This situation turned Nigeria into a boiling pot: under enough pressure, it was waiting to implode, sooner or later. In the northern part of the country, Boko Haram cells intensified their activities in Kano and Katsina, and in neighbouring towns such as Daura, Gumel, Dutse, Dutsin Wai, and Hadejia. Overall, violence attributed to Boko Haram spread significantly, encompassing 4000 km² of Nigerian territory. The damages caused by Boko Haram ranged from violence against the civilian population, to ambushes and attacks on military and public institutions. During the three months since the military coup, the number of civilians killed by terrorist cells increased by 70 per cent, compared to the period prior to the junta's rise to power. In Maiduguri, presumed Boko Haram militants attacked a military base,

Main challenges



Data: European Commission, 2023; GADM, 2023; Natural Earth, 2023

in which 15 soldiers were killed, wounding 50 more. Closer to the border with Niger, in Babura, terrorists entered the village with pick-up trucks, rounded up around 150 residents, and shot them to death, including women and children. The variety of violence, along with the porosity of borders of the vast desert land that covers the northern part of Nigeria, allowed them to widen their activities, opening new channels of illegal activity such

as weapons smuggling, human trafficking, kidnapping, blackmail and drug sales. Such criminal activity generated just enough revenues to survive. This strategy clearly had one objective: to dislodge governmental forces, to substitute the state's authority, and to capitalize on marginalized communities by drawing new recruits to join their networks. In response, the new junta attempted to contest Boko Haram's cells by deploying troops in major

cities such as Kano and Gombe. Along with deployment, the army began a recruitment campaign among civilians, managing to rapidly enrol hundreds of militia members as volunteers. However, despite the increased presence of the Nigerian military in the territory, the growing trend of violence and abuses by the armed forces against the population led to growing mistrust of the junta. Following the massacre of 50 civilians by auxiliary forces in the village of Zadawa, protests over the Kano state began to spread, leading to clashes between the population and police forces, all throughout the most populated areas (Kano municipal, Dala, Fagge, and Rimi).

In the Middle Belt in central Nigeria (between the Kaduna, Plateau, Nasarawa, and Benue states), farmers' and herders' clashes over access to water and land resources further destabilized the area. High population growth, Boko Haram's insurgencies, and cattle rustling forced more people in the north to move towards the grasslands in central Nigeria, heightening competition with the farmers already settled there. Further inflamed by ethnic diversities among locals, Fulani pastoralists and semi-nomadic groups led several attacks against Tiv farming communities in the Nasarawa and Benue states, resulting in hundreds of casualties, destruction of farms and settlements.¹ In response to the crisis, governments in Nasarawa and Benue adopted anti-open grazing laws and policies. However, these were perceived by pastoralist communities as a way to outlaw nomadism. Such measures spurred further frustration from semi-nomadic herders, increasing resentment over local governments and the junta. As the junta tried to reply to local governments' policies, the lack of proper measures to mitigate disputes between farmers and herders turned violent episodes into an endemic occurrence in the Nigerian Middle Belt. Ultimately, conflicts between locals did not end, causing a general decrease in food supplies, and an increase in prices. Nigerian states that were highly dependent on crops' revenues struggled to meet the public demand for goods. The agricultural contribution to Nigeria's GDP dropped by 30 per cent in the months after the coup, giving way to increased hunger within the population.

Even though the military junta seemed to have the situation under control, the variety of problems flaring up from different parts of the country proved that the breadth and scale of the challenge was far greater than expected. Boko Haram, exploiting the instability created by the coup, managed to reinforce its cells in the north-western part of the country. Criminal gangs took the chance to strengthen their outposts in the north as well, with militias governing over rural areas. In the grasslands in central Nigeria, violence involving pastoralist herders and farmers led to growing pressure over land and resources access, widening social inequalities, violent extremism, and an increased number of casualties.² Jihadists, rebel groups, and violence over resources also led to increased migration flows towards neighbouring countries. In the southern part of the country, the effects of climate change exacerbated the instability: rising sea levels caused by greenhouse emissions and global warming (that meant a 0.63 °C increase in average ocean temperatures) triggered coastal flooding and erosion, leading to the loss of coastal habitats that once served as shields from storm surges. As Nigeria experienced an increased number of people living in low-elevation coastal zones, cities like Lagos or Port Harcourt grew, with millions of people moving towards the shore.³ However, due to higher exposure to coastal hazards, this led to more people suffering from floods.⁴ In other areas, climate change worsened hostilities between farmers and herders: as extensive cultivation had been affected by a drastic decline of vegetation (91.7 per cent) and water resources (71.9 per cent), the loss of potential crops posed a serious food security challenge, forcing communities to move in other areas, multiplying clashes with groups already settled in the area.⁵

Because of the inability to address the various problems simultaneously, or the lack of proper coordination with neighbouring countries in tackling those issues, the new military junta in power viewed the Russian PMCs as an alternative to providing security and training: the Russians were not only free of a colonial past, but also had previously supported Nigeria's neighbours to strengthen the relationship between the two countries.⁶ However, nothing comes for free: at the cost of a monthly fee and access to Nigerian resources, Russian PMCs increased

- 1 Ulrich J. Eberle, Dominic Rohner, and Mathias Thoenig, "Heat and Hate: Climate Security and Farmer-Herder Conflicts in Africa," ESOC (Empirical Studies of Conflict), *ESOC Working Papers Series*, 2020; See also Ulrich J. Eberle, "The Climate Factor in Nigeria's Farmer-Herder Violence," International Crisis Group, <https://nigeriacrisisgroup.org/>
- 2 Leif Brottem, "The Growing Complexity of Farmer-Herder Conflict in West and Central Africa," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, July 12, 2021, <https://africacenter.org/publication/growing-complexity-farmer-herder-conflict-west-central-africa/>
- 3 Cooley, S. R., Schoeman, D. S., et al. (2022) "Oceans and Coastal Ecosystems and Their Services," in Pörtner, H. O., Roberts, D. C., Tignor, M., Poloczanska, E., Mintenbeck, K., Alegria, A., Craig, M., Langsdorf, S., Löschke, S., Möller, V., Okem, A., and Rama, B. (eds.) *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK and New York, NY, USA, pp. 379-550.
- 4 Trisos, C. H., Adelekan, I. O., Totin, E., et al. (2022), "Africa," in Pörtner, H. O., Roberts, D. C., Tignor, M., Poloczanska, E., Mintenbeck, K., Alegria, A., Craig, M., Langsdorf, S., Löschke, S., Möller, V., Okem, A., and Rama, B. (eds.) *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK and New York, NY, USA, pp. 1285-1455. See also Carrington, D. (2022). 'Devastating floods in Nigeria were 80 times more likely because of climate crisis', *The Guardian*, November 16, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/nov/16/devastating-floods-in-nigeria-were-80-times-more-likely-because-of-climate-crisis>.
- 5 Kunle Adebajo and Murtala Abdullahi (2022), "As The Desert Stretches, So Does Nigeria's Farmer-Herder Crisis," *Human Angle*, April 11, <https://humanglemedia.com/as-the-desert-stretches-so-does-nigerias-farmer-herder-crisis/>
- 6 Ahmed Elbassoussy (2020), "The growing Russian role in sub-Saharan Africa: interests, opportunities and limitations," *Journal of Humanities and Applied Social Sciences*, Emerald Publishing Limited, 2632-279X.

their presence in the territory. First, a team of Russian security personnel was sent to Abuja to provide security to the junta. Secondly, military trainers were commissioned, aiming to establish a training camp in Dikwa (close to the lake Chad basin), to provide training in locations where jihadists operated. Then, mercenary officers were dispatched across the north, to fight jihadists or intervene in clashes between farmers and herders. Shortly after, high-level meetings between the junta and Russian authorities occurred, confirming shipments of weapons to reinforce the Nigerian security apparatus.

In exchange for security and training, PMCs gained much more access to important resources held in Nigeria, proving an economic advantage for Moscow as one of the main clients for gold, niobium (a mineral used for nuclear reactors and missiles), and oil in the Nigerian market.⁷ Not only did it create important leverage for Russia, but at the same time, it accelerated Moscow's economic recovery from the damages incurred by its war in Ukraine.

The presence of Russian PMCs in the territory did not mean that Nigerian security could be fully achieved. Indeed, many human rights violations and episodes of violence against civilians had been reported. For example, there were accounts of Russian mercenaries and Nigerian troops violently expelling local miners from deposits and carrying out executions. Such trends, along with episodes of rape, robbery, and violence against civilians, led to a further lack of confidence and legitimacy from the local population, creating opportunities for jihadists to increase their influence in the peripheral region. In the end, Nigeria became another hub for Russian PMCs to exploit

natural resources and strengthen Moscow's interests, even if the corollary was increasing violence at the cost of security and stability.

How did we get there?

After the elections in February 2023, Nigeria sought to finally introduce many security reforms. Despite President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's willingness to change the security environment, the situation had severely deteriorated: the presence of Boko Haram in the North East, which led to the growing isolation of the region; the formation of criminal gangs in the North West that carried out lootings and civilian kidnappings; clashes between farmers and herders over land; and secessionist movements and pirates in the southern part of the country.⁸ The mix of threats overwhelmed the Nigerian government, pointing to a flagrant need for security. The broken relationship between the political élite and the local population was further evidenced by several episodes of corruption and illicit activities carried out by national forces, creating an opportunity for criminal groups to become security providers for the local populations.

Among the countries that Nigeria could rely on, the Russian Federation stood as one of the main strategic partners. Not only did relations between Moscow and Abuja play a pivotal role during the Cold War, but their cooperation became even more solid, economically, politically, and militarily. The 2021 agreement between Nigeria and the Russian Federation for the provision of military



⁷ OPEC, "Nigeria facts and figures," Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), https://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/about_us/167.htm
⁸ Mark Duerksen (2021), "Nigeria's Diverse Security Threats," *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, Spotlight, March 30, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/nigeria-diverse-security-threats/>

equipment and training underscores the importance of Moscow as an important partner for Nigeria.⁹ Even in 2022, to preserve their relationship, Nigeria only ever stated that Moscow's attacks during the war in Ukraine targeted military infrastructures, thereby insinuating that any position taken by Nigeria in the crisis would comply with the principles of international law.¹⁰ In February 2023, Nigeria took a stance by voting in favour of a call by the UN General Assembly for an immediate end to the war.¹¹

With the war in Ukraine, Russia lost a significant part of its combat power, suffering concurrently from the long-term effects of the economic sanctions. Moscow needed to find other ways to recover, and a resource-rich Nigeria became an important partner to consider. Being part of Moscow's strategy to keep strong ties with African countries, PMCs are leveraged as tools to spread Moscow's influence, replacing other countries' efforts.¹² And even with the war in Ukraine, and the internal crisis with the Wagner Group in June 2023, Moscow confirmed that operations in Africa would not be affected.¹³ Clearly, even if some mercenaries were sent back to Europe to fight against Ukrainians, Africa remained an important theatre for Moscow.

From political support and advice to leaders, disinformation campaigns to quell protests, and military support in fighting insurgencies, PMCs gained further support from the local population, diminishing the role of western operations in providing security.

- 9 Eboh, Camillus, Shirbon, Estelle, and Male, Sandra (2021), "Nigeria signs military cooperation agreement with Russia," *Reuters*, August 26, <https://www.reuters.com/world/nigeria-signs-military-cooperation-agreement-with-russia-2021-08-25/>
- 10 Agbelusi, Oluwafemi S. (2022), "Russia-Ukraine conflict: What it means for Africa," *The Guardian*, July 14, <https://guardian.ng/opinion/russia-ukraine-conflict-what-it-means-for-africa/>. See also Channels Television (2022), "Ukraine war: Nigeria's Position Conforms With International Law – Fmr Envoy, Isoh," *Channels Television*, April 24, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LwyTC4Ttvj4>
- 11 United Nations (2023), "UN General Assembly calls for immediate end to war in Ukraine," *UN News*, February 23, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/02/1133847>
- 12 Heinemann-Grüder, Andreas (2023), "Dogs of War: Russia's Corporate Warriors in Armed Conflicts," *European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS)*, 14 June, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/dogs-war-russias-corporate-warriors-armed-conflicts>
- 13 Armstrong, M. (2023), "Russian FM Sergei Lavrov says Wagner mercenaries will continue to operate in Africa," *Euronews*, June 26, <https://www.euronews.com/2023/06/26/russian-fm-sergei-lavrov-says-wagner-mercenaries-will-continue-to-operate-in-africa>

What if...

Muqtada al-Sadr takes control of Iraq?

Silvia Colombo

The event

He knew that moment would arrive, the moment of his comeback. It was just a question of timing – and therefore one of strategic patience. Muqtada al-Sadr, the powerful Shia cleric, was once again in the driver's seat of Iraqi politics, a stew of sustained violence and chaos. Tensions between al-Sadr and his Shia opponents had been simmering over the previous five years and flared again just as the next round of parliamentary elections were to take place during the first half of 2028. At dawn on 10 December 2027, a national public holiday commemorating the country's victory over the Islamic State (ISIS), just as the parliament was going to hold its last session of the legislature, Sadrist forces stormed the building that houses the Council of Representatives of Iraq in the Green Zone, occupied it and arrested Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani. The lights were down, as had become commonplace in Iraq since the summer of 2027, rightly called the “summer of discontent” echoing the 2019-2022 period of violence and unrest.

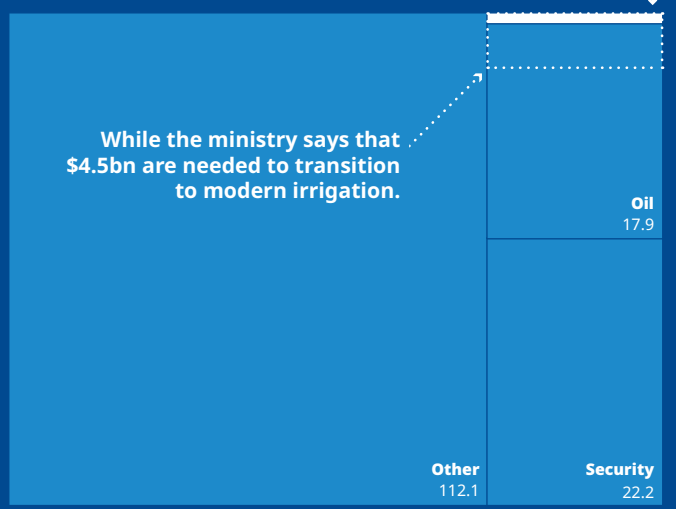
When the sun rose, it became clear that a page had been turned in Iraq's history. This actually took a while to manifest itself. The first hours of the day went by quietly. Both politicians and the population were holding their collective breath, the former well aware that any hasty moves could unleash unrest and violence; the latter in a

sort of heightened passivity, as if what was happening did not concern them. As the sun peaked in the sky, in a show of boldness, the ministers of al-Sudani's government poured onto the official media to reassure the people that nothing had changed, and that the government was firmly in control of the situation. As they were still on the screens though, things started to become clearer. The contours of the new reality were unveiled. Al-Sadr spoke, his words ushering in a new era. He did so privately, from his apartment in Sadr City, east of Baghdad, where the base of his supporters live, and surrounded by a small group of non-militant friends. He spoke calmly, but firmly. Gone were the days when he used to ratchet up contention and tension through his captivating and inflammatory populist speeches. “We are back to redress old wrongdoings and to restore our honour,” proclaimed Muqtada al-Sadr.

These words tipped the balance. Al-Sadr's supporters heard them as the signal they had been long waiting for: the all-powerful clerical leader was ready to take their fate back into his hands. Hundreds and then thousands of people started to pour into the streets, first in the neighbourhood, and then in other parts of the city, moving

Not betting on water

Iraq's 2023 budget allocated \$0.8bn to the Ministry of Water Resources

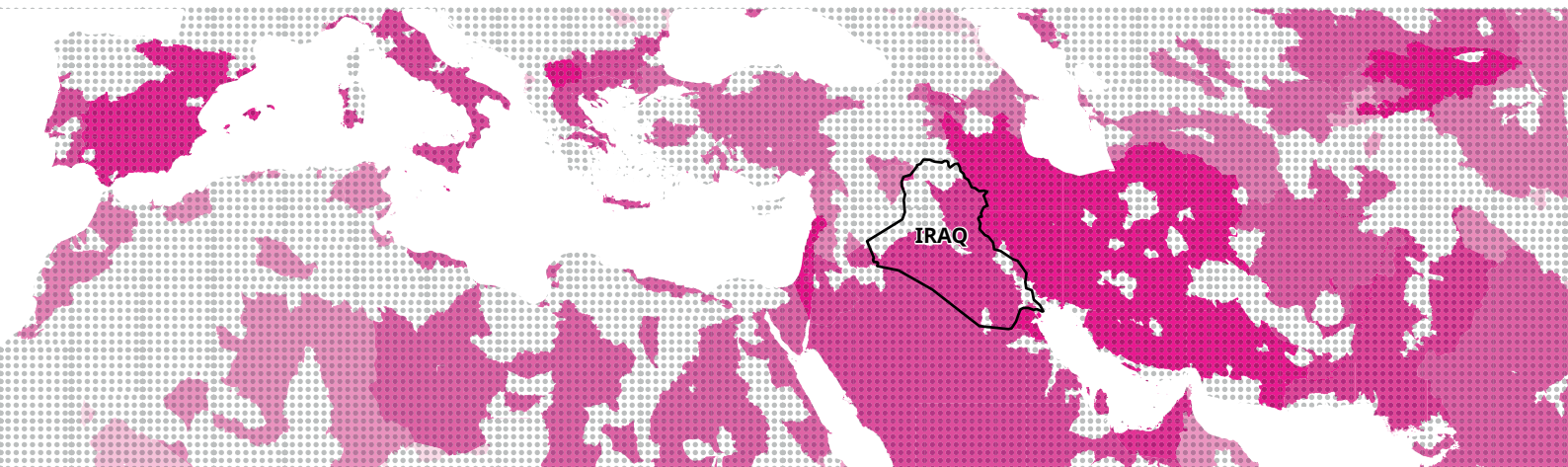


Data: Al Jazeera, 2023

Water stress

Low

High



Data: World Atlas of Desertification, JRC, European Commission, 2019

in circles as far as the occupied parliament and other governmental buildings that became surrounded. This orderly and silent popular wave had only two slogans: “he is back, so we are back” and “honour” (*sharaf*, in Arabic), repeated as a drum beat. This was all that was needed to signal the beginning of the revenge. During the days between 11 and 15 December, events precipitated and outbursts of intra-sectarian violence were once again sparked within the Shia camp, with pockets of the pro-Iran elements of the *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* (Popular Mobilization) paramilitary coalition battling al-Sadr’s supporters in the streets in a last-ditch attempt to save the al-Sudani government, while political figures remained silent at the margins. Only al-Sadr dared to speak on 15 December. This time he did so publicly and more forcefully, declaring the parliament dissolved, accusing all the other politicians of corruption and ineptitude, and claiming responsibility and pride for the new course of events. In his shadow, the Mahdi Army, the powerful militia that had battled the occupying forces between 2003 and 2008, nodded with satisfaction and started preparations to enter the fray. Some statistics put their number at 10,000 units, much lower than the swelling figures of the past, but still able and keen on attracting a large number of recruits, if need be.¹

The consequences

Now back at the centre of the Iraqi political scene, al-Sadr sought to accomplish several goals. As in the past, and despite the theatrical occupation of the parliament – aimed at embarrassing the government, which was considered as responsible of having forged good relations with the United States, as well as an already weakened Iran – al-Sadr’s moves were not meant to unleash a revolution and to overturn the political system, but rather to consolidate his power. Domestically, he wanted to send a clear signal to his life-long enemy and contender, former prime minister Nuri al-Maliki and his backers, who had dared to move state forces against the Mahdi Army in 2008 with Operation Charge of the Knights.² The message went against past successful attempts to settle intra-Shia differences and ease tensions through politics,³ asserting al-Sadr’s clear-cut superiority derived from his ability to mobilize his popular base and push them onto the streets. Some political figures protested and tried to react against the events of 10 December. But with the ensuing unrest, waking up from the initial numbness and breaking the political stalemate, it was to no avail. On 16 December, two of al-Sadr’s most prominent opponents, Hadi al-Ameri, the leader of the Badr Organization, and Faleh al-Fayadh, the head of the *Hashd* Commission, part of the Coordination Framework, declared that they would stand up to the challenge posed by al-Sadr to Iraq’s security and future. The immediate response by

¹ Renad Mansour and Benedict Robin-D’Cruz, “Understanding Iraq’s Muqtada al-Sadr: Inside Baghdad’s Sadr City,” Chatham House, 8 August 2022, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/08/understanding-iraqs-muqtada-al-sadr-inside-baghdads-sadr-city>
² Richard Iron (2013) *The Charge of the Knights*, The RUSI Journal, 158:1, 54-62, DOI: 10.1080/03071847.2013.774640
³ Edgar Göll, Silvia Colombo and Eduard Soler i Lecha, “Imagining Future(s) for the Middle East and North Africa,” *MENARA (Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture) Final Reports* (March 2019): 28-29. https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication_series/project_papers/menara_papers/final_report/imagining_future_s_for_the_middle_east_and_north_africa

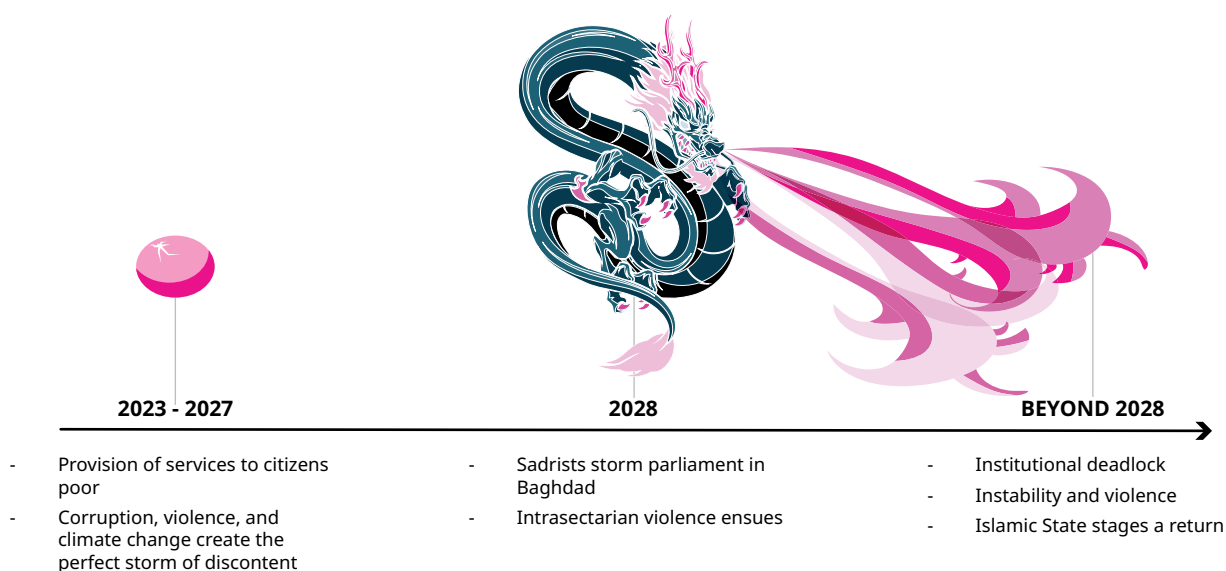
al-Sadr made it clear who was calling the shots, burying any possibility of agreement. Not only did he declare the electoral timetable null, but he also claimed all the powers upon himself. He was cheered on by his ever emboldened supporters and encouraged by the show of support by his Kurdish ally, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). This increased the parties' appetite to pursue politics through other means.

In the weeks and months between mid-December 2027 and August 2028, the institutional deadlock, growing chaos and renewed violence between the two camps made the prospects of state collapse and the country's relapse into civil strife increasingly real. Contrary to the past, violence and unrest had less to do with general societal ills, such as corruption, socio-economic malaise and the lack of accountability of state institutions, than with growing problems induced by climate change. During the spring and summer of 2028, periods of drought and wildfires alternated with severe floods, rendering Iraq into a climate change-driven battleground. Hundreds of people died, and the sheer lack of a system of governance to manage or at least mitigate such shocks became ever more apparent. Al-Sadr blamed it entirely on his opponents and on the former government, exploiting the situation to advance his agenda. He turned the Mahdi Army into a civic brigade of rescue operators sent to the areas struck by harsh climate change-driven phenomena, on the one hand, and used strong measures, including arrests and killings, to quell the unrest and protests by his opponents, on the other. Amid the violence and chaos, the first signs of the resurgence of ISIS could be detected in the western part of the country bordering Syria, spurred by the deep divisions within Syria since normalisation with Bashar al-Asad. Disaffected Iraqi Sunni

militants, the local population as well as Syrian displaced radical opponents to al-Asad began to swell its ranks, once again.

As a result, what had started as an Iraqi domestic crisis quickly turned into a major regional and international challenge. The country became once again a hotbed of jihadi terrorism, instability and security risks. This compelled Baghdad's regional partners to rush in and stem the fire. Gone were the times when they preferred an unstable Iraq. Regional heavyweights voiced their concerns, and took steps to protect their interests. On the one hand, Tehran, Iraq's main exporter of gas, tried to muster its leverage over anti-Sadrists Shia factions and threatened to withdraw its support to the new governing authorities, should they not respect its interests and call for new elections within 2028. On the other hand, Riyadh voiced its support to its Sunni Iraqi allies in a clear sign of return of sectarian politics. As a result, Iran and Saudi Arabia came to loggerheads and stopped talking to one another due to the Iraqi crisis. Quite the paradox, given the fact that it was Iraq that had paved the way to their rapprochement in 2023.⁴ Baghdad's mediating power had been squandered.

Last but not least, international players such as the United States, the European Union (EU) with its Security Sector Reform Mission (EUAM Iraq) and NATO Mission Iraq (NMI) were all caught in the Iraqi trap once again. The fact that they had reduced their footprint in the country in previous years – being busy with the reconstruction of Ukraine – had jeopardised their ability to manage the crisis and the associated security risks. Furthermore, in recent years, both Russia and China had made substantial inroads into Iraq through the rehabilitation of Soviet-era relations as well as new investments, cooperation and narratives.



⁴ Nussaibah Younis, "Mediation Nation: Iraq's New Role in Iranian-Saudi Talks," Commentary, European Council on Foreign Relations, 14 May 2021, <https://ecfr.eu/article/mediation-nation-iraqs-new-role-in-iranian-saudi-talks/>

How did we get there?

Iraq had been going through a rocky and unstable period since the government of Mohammed Shia al-Sudani was formed following the approval by the Council of Representatives on 27 October 2022. The al-Sudani government had tried to insulate Iraqi politics from disputes within the Shi'ite house (as commonly referred to the amalgam of parties making up both the Sadrist camp and its Shia opponents). However, disputes had continued to fester amidst mounting unrest. The gap between citizens and elites grew wider and wider as a result of the government's inability to tackle the country's looming crises: lack of accountability, foreign interests and penetration, gender violence, the lack and low quality of public jobs, the devaluation of the dinar, rising poverty and unemployment, corruption and the failures of public services.⁵ During the summer and autumn of 2022, the provision of public services to the Iraqi population came to a halt due to rampant corruption and to growing demographic pressure, compounded by the manifestation of the first signs of climate change-related shocks. Iraq's population almost doubled from 25 million people in 2003 to 50 million in 2022.⁶ Water supply worryingly dwindled despite the presence of two rivers such as the Tigris and Euphrates. Rising temperatures, droughts and dams upstream in Türkiye and Syria reduced the availability of potable water, disrupting livelihoods, particularly in the South and the West where water scarcity led to internal displacement, health-related problems and unrest, also caused by the flaring of gas. The country's dependency on oil rents aggravated the situation as, during times of low global oil prices – like the period that started in 2023 on the twentieth anniversary of the US-led invasion and continued for the subsequent five years – the government was unable to fund basic services and even pay public-sector salaries and pensions. On the eve of al-Sadr's move, public debt had reached 90 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) and GDP itself had fallen 19 percent, igniting anger at the government and much turbulence.

With the country teetering on collapse, memories of the 2019–2022 years of discontent, repression and chaos resurfaced. Since 2011, mass protests in Iraq have been a constant. While until 2015 grievances often had a basis in identity politics as was the case with the mass mobiliza-

tions in Sunni-majority provinces in 2012–2013, starting from 2015 onwards, the culture of protest had become ubiquitous in Iraq, often as a means of intra-sectarian and intra-elite competition.⁷ In October 2019, exactly one year after the establishment of the NMI, Iraq witnessed what was likely the largest popular protest in its modern history. Two relatively minor events, to which western audiences and policymakers paid little attention, prompted tens of thousands of Iraqis to take to the streets in Baghdad and across the provinces of the South. During the so called *Tishreen* protests, 600–800 young Iraqis – mostly working-class Shia men – lost their lives due to the crackdown by the government and the militias, first and foremost by the *al-Hashd*, which had become an entrenched political and military force under a separate chain of command and with a budget almost as large as those of the Interior and Defence ministries since helping defeat ISIS in 2017.⁸ During the 2019 protests, Muqtada al-Sadr remained silent. His Sadrist forces had been part of the government since 2003, but al-Sadr himself was hoping to be able to gain from the situation of unrest by hiding himself in the shadows. He was watching and learning, and learning and waiting. The whole Middle Eastern region was changing rapidly and regional and international players were distracted by other crises, among them, the rising tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia and the United States' new posture to the region under Donald Trump were the most important ones.

Politically, popular protests led to the toppling of the government of Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi in early 2020 and to early elections on the basis of a new electoral law. During the general elections of October 2021, voter turnout fell to a record low of 44 percent, a palpable sign of ongoing disillusionment and frustration with the political system.⁹ Intra-elite competition remained paramount with very modest participation by candidates affiliated with the protest movement. The formation of the new government of al-Sudani twelve months after the elections represented a breakthrough in the prolonged stalemate. As was often the case in the past, it was the decision of Muqtada al-Sadr, the winning figure of the 2021 elections, to withdraw his representatives from parliament that allowed the formation of the government. Previously, and most prominently in late August 2022, loyalists of al-Sadr had actively and successfully prevented rival parties from forming a government

⁵ Hafsa Halawa, Iraq's Tishreen Movement: A Decade of Protests and Mobilisation, *IAI Papers* 21/26, June 2021, <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaip2126.pdf>

⁶ Azzam Alwash, "From Threat to Opportunity: Harnessing Climate Change to Build a Prosperous Future for Iraq and the Region," *IAI Papers* 23/14, June 2023, <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaip2314.pdf>

⁷ Fanar Haddad, "Perpetual Protest and the Failure of the post-2003 Iraqi State," 22 March 2023, MERIP, https://merip.org/2023/03/perpetual-protest-and-the-failure-of-the-post-2003-iraqi-state/#_edn1

⁸ In addition to the usual grievances, the 2019 *Tishreen* protests embodied an explicit rejection of the system of governance, and particularly of ethno-sectarian politics, represented by the *Muhasasa Ta'ifia*, a form of consociationalist elite bargain, similar to the Lebanese system, that was adopted after 2005 to share government positions among the Kurdish, Shia and Sunni political elites after an election. See <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/25/world/middleeast/iraq-protest-murder-iran.html> and <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/iraq-staving-instability-near-and-distant-futures>

⁹ Shawn Yuan, "Iraq announces final results of October parliament election," Al Jazeera, 30 November 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/30/iraq-announces-final-results-of-the-october-legislative-election>

by staging protests inside Baghdad's Green Zone, during which they came to loggerheads with *al-Hashd*.¹⁰ These protests were reminiscent of the *Tishreen* unrest in terms of demands¹¹ and were a clear display of al-Sadr's populist attitude and yet, unexpectedly, even to his own close supporters, the clerical leader decided to withdraw from politics as a way to preserve and regenerate his legitimacy. Years of political dealings within a corrupt government had tainted his image as the only Iraqi politician who had challenged both Iran and the United States, thus straining the relationship to his social base. He knew, however, that his withdrawal would be temporary: a pragmatic move to come back stronger than ever.

¹⁰ Sarhang Hamasaheed, "A Year After Elections, Iraq May Finally Be Set to Form a Government," 20 October 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/10/year-after-elections-iraq-may-finally-be-set-form-government>

¹¹ Hellen Sallon, "Iraq's Sadrist 'revolution' has a bitter taste for 2019 protestors," 11 August 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/08/11/iraq-s-sadrist-revolution-has-a-bitter-taste-for-2019-protestors_5993235_4.html

What if...

a devastating earthquake strikes Taiwan?

Pierre de Dreuzy

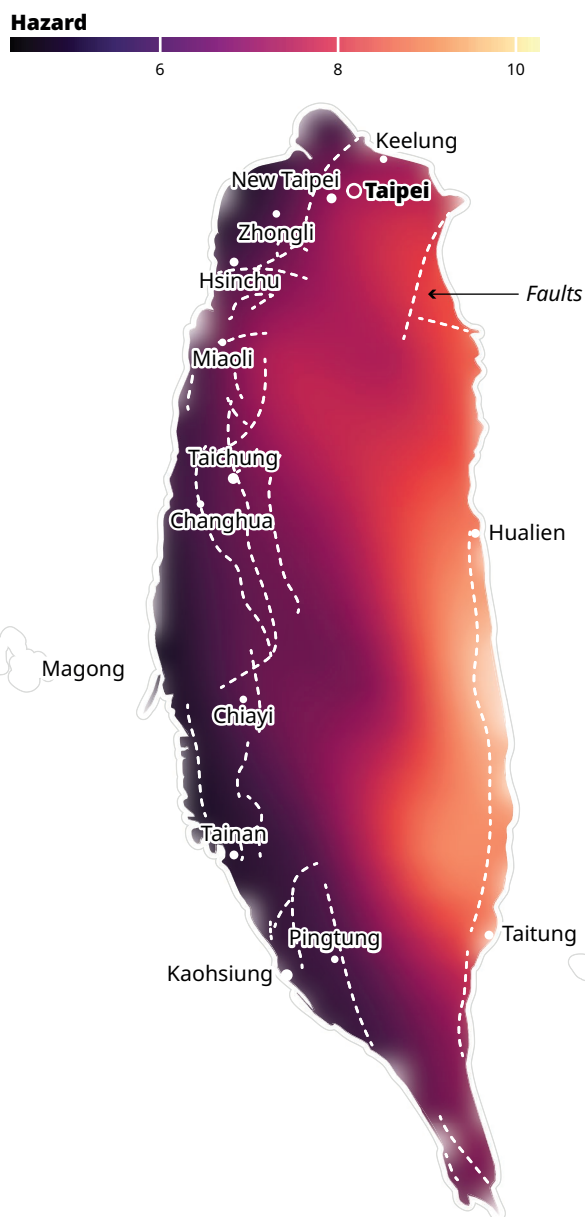
The event

The evening of 14 July 2028 began as a normal one in Tainan City, Taiwan. Commuters headed home from work, shoppers filled local stores, and others headed out for Friday night festivities. Suddenly, mobile phones across the island began to ring and vibrate, flashing an emergency message from Taiwan's Public Warning System: "Warning: earthquake imminent. Duck, cover, hold on."¹ Within minutes, the ground began to heave and tremble. The soft rattling of loose items gave way to the deafening sound of wrenching metal and shattering glass. As citizens across the island scrambled for shelter, buildings collapsed and the city was plunged into darkness. To those emerging from the rubble, it was clear that the damage was catastrophic.

In Taipei, in the offices of the President of Taiwan, senior officials rushed to assess the damage. Their task was made significantly more difficult by the twin challenge of damaged communications infrastructure and

Seismic hazard

10% chance of exceedance (or a 90% chance of non-exceedance) of a ground motion parameter for an exposure time of 50 years



Data: Deutsches GeoForschungsZentrum GFZ, 2023

¹ Keoni Everington, "Taiwan's CWB To Send Test Tsunami, Earthquake Alerts to Mobile Phones on Friday," *Taiwan News* (September 2018), <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/3533465>

a massive surge in mobile traffic.² Using a specially designed communication system to connect the government to emergency services, officials worked hard to obtain a clear picture of the situation.³ According to seismographers at the Taiwan Central Weather Bureau's Seismological Center, the earthquake occurred at shallow depth and in the southern part of the island, between Tainan City and Kaohsiung City.⁴ Initial readings indicated a devastating 9.3 magnitude (Mw) earthquake, the largest ever recorded.⁵ Power failures across the southern portion of the island suggested that power stations had been disrupted. There were also reports of explosions. With gas pipes ruptured, falling power lines had showered sparks down, igniting fires in both cities.⁶ Water mains had also been damaged or destroyed, worsening the fire situation.⁷ Finally, initial reports from emergency services suggested over 1,000 dead and many more missing. The death toll, they said, could rise to over 20,000.⁸

The consequences

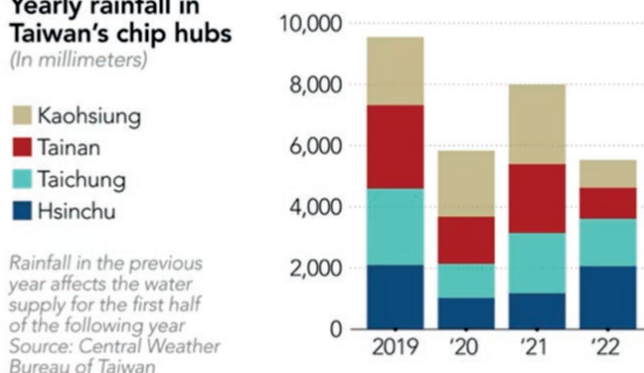
In Tainan and Kaohsiung City, home to several of Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company's (TSMC) most advanced semiconductor foundries, foremen on-site were performing their own damage assessment. At these foundries (or "fabs"), delicate machinery annually churned out a significant portion of the world's microchips and the vast majority of advanced chips.⁹ Without this key node in the global semiconductor supply chain, production of everything from iPhones and automobiles to Artificial Intelligence (AI) programmes and military platforms would grind to a halt – a disaster not only for TSMC and Taiwan but also for the global economy.

Many of Taiwan's reservoirs are less than half full

Reservoir	Areas supplied	Effective storage capacity (In millions of cubic meters)	Storage level (As of March 17)
Nanhua Reservoir	Tainan, Kaohsiung	36.80	41%
Hushan Reservoir	Yunlin, Changhua, Chiayi	20.40	40%
Agongdian Reservoir	Kaohsiung	5.76	38%
Renyitan Reservoir	Chiayi	6.97	28%
Tsengwen Reservoir	Chiayi, Tainan	57.00	11%

Source: Water Resources Agency of Taiwan

Yearly rainfall in Taiwan's chip hubs (In millimeters)



Source: <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Business-Spotlight/Taiwan-braces-for-drought-in-key-chip-hubs-again>

The foundries' physical structures survived the earthquake relatively intact – the result of TSMC's relentless efforts to earthquake-proof their facilities via damping mechanisms, strong building codes, and well-drilled staff.¹⁰ Foremen estimated that the on-site damage was non-negligible but not catastrophic: operations could re-

² This is based on Japan's experience with the 2011 Tohoku Earthquake: Yu Tsu-Chu, "Japan Looks to Taiwan to Disaster-Proof Telecom," 5 (February 2013), <https://spectrum.ieee.org/japan-looks-to-taiwan-to-disasterproof-telecom>

³ Shira Levine, "Taiwan Taps Private 5G for Disaster Recovery," SES Blog (September 2022), <https://www.ses.com/blog/taiwan-taps-private-5g-disaster-recovery>

⁴ Central Weather Bureau Seismological Center, <https://scweb.cwb.gov.tw/en-us/earthquake/data>.

⁵ This would be slightly larger than the 9.1 magnitude Tohoku Earthquake that struck Japan in 2011. "On this day: 2011 Tohoku Earthquake and Tsunami," National Centers for Environmental Information (March 2021, updated March 2023), <https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/news/day-2011-japan-earthquake-and-tsunami>; All magnitudes are described using the moment magnitude scale (Mw) rather than Richter scale, as these are deemed superior for measuring large earthquakes. [http://www.earthquakes.bgs.ac.uk/education/faqs/faq15.html#:~:text=Moment%20magnitude%20\(Mw\)%20is%20considered,the%20other%20magnitude%20scales%20use](http://www.earthquakes.bgs.ac.uk/education/faqs/faq15.html#:~:text=Moment%20magnitude%20(Mw)%20is%20considered,the%20other%20magnitude%20scales%20use)

⁶ Fires are a common and deadly secondary effect of earthquakes. See, for example, the fires that broke out in Japan in 2011: "An Earthquake in Japan – When the Earth Wobbled," *The Economist* (March 2011), https://www.economist.com/blogs/asiaview/2011/03/earthquake_japan_0 and, more recently, in Turkey after the earthquake there: Tiffany Wertheimer and Kathryn Armstrong, "Turkey-Syria Earthquake: Fire at Iskenderum Port Extinguished," BBC News (February 2023), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-64570458>

⁷ <https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/abstract/document/6766080>

⁸ These numbers are based on the death toll following the 2011 Tohoku Earthquake in Japan three days after the earthquake struck. Andrew Higgins, "Nuclear Plant Worker Fears for Colleagues, future," *The Washington Post*, (March 13, 2011), https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/nuclear-plant-worker-worries-about-colleagues-future/2011/03/13/ABxIOsT_story.html

⁹ In particular, chips below the 10nm range. "Taiwan's Dominance of the Chip Industry Makes it More Important," *The Economist*, (March 6, 2023), <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2023/03/06/taiwans-dominance-of-the-chip-industry-makes-it-more-important>

¹⁰ "Earthquake Continuity Plans Surpassing Legal Requirements," TSMC, Case Study available at <https://esg.tsmc.com/en/update/governance/caseStudy/1/index.html>; "TSMC Implements Emergency Response and Crisis Management System for Compound Disaster," TSMC, Case Study available at <https://esg.tsmc.com/en/update/inclusiveWorkplace/caseStudy/13/index.html>

sume within three to six weeks.¹¹ However, TSMC foremen recognized that damage to the local electrical and water grids was a much more serious concern. Back-up generators could only satisfy the foundries' enormous energy consumption requirements for so long, and without water deliveries, TSMC's foundries cannot function.¹² To make matters worse, it was already scorching hot by that point in July and, with climate change making droughts more prevalent and intense over the past half-decade, water reservoirs were already at record low levels.¹³ With neither stable power nor water, TSMC's production could not be resumed.

Meanwhile, it was 8:54 in the morning in New York City when Wall Street traders heard the news, only 36 minutes before the trading floor opened. The floor was abuzz with a flurry of activity as the global financial system gathered what information it could on the earthquake. As images of the catastrophe appeared on news networks and social media, the Nasdaq index opened over 1500 points down, one of the largest single-day drops in its history.¹⁴ Heavyweight chip designers reliant on TSMC's advanced semiconductor fabrication capabilities including NVIDIA, Apple, and AMD opened with comparable share price drops. Soon, major news channels ran stories describing how the impending chip shortage would negatively impact everything from automobile and iPhone manufacturing to development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) programmes.

In Washington, intelligence officials briefed the President of the United States within the hour. Although damage to the island's chip fabs remained unclear, significant damage had been sustained in local critical infrastructure and at Kaohsiung City's port, the largest export facility in Taiwan.¹⁵ A fire had broken out there, meaning that the export of semiconductors and the import of emergency supplies would be negatively affected.¹⁶ Overall, top US intelligence officials suggested that a major halt to Taiwan's semiconductor industry could cost the global economy between USD 600 billion and USD 1 trillion for that year.¹⁷ At the request of the Taiwanese

President, the US President ordered a disaster response team to Taiwan in coordination with Japan. Having jointly delivered aid to Taiwan after a previous earthquake on the island in 1999, the US-Japan response team was rapid and well-organized.¹⁸ Unfortunately, it would not take long before they encountered difficulties.

In 2028, relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC) were strained. Over the past half-decade, repeated visits to the island by senior political figures from the US and its regional allies had enraged Beijing; conversely, frequent and massive violations of Taiwanese airspace by the Chinese military worried Washington. Now, the notion that the US and Japan would provide humanitarian assistance to an island that China considered its own sovereign territory was considered humiliating. To senior Chinese officials, such aid was not only unnecessary but also an attempt to undermine China's global image. The US-Japan response teams were nearing Taiwanese airspace when Chinese aircraft appeared on their radar screens, warning that they were unauthorized to enter Chinese airspace. To make matters worse, satellite images were soon on the US President's desk showing cargo ships departing Chinese ports for Taiwan. US intelligence officials could not confirm the contents of the cargo on board.

In Washington, alarm soon turned to hostility. US officials accused their Chinese counterparts of provoking a crisis. Beijing responded that China could provide aid to its own people without external support. US intelligence agencies estimated that the ships would cross the Taiwan Strait in two hours. To prevent accidental escalation, the US President ordered the emergency response team to land on a nearby Japanese island. As open-source analysts on social media identified the Chinese cargo ships, the crisis could no longer be kept from the public. Taiwan's President held a press conference denouncing China's action while declaring that Taiwan would not allow the Chinese ships to dock in Taiwanese ports. With Chinese cargo ships anchored off the coast of Taiwan and the

¹¹ Cheng Ting-Fang, "Earthquake Has Limited Impact on Operations," *Nikkei Asia*, (February 6, 2016) <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Earthquake-has-limited-impact-on-operations>

¹² TSMC's foundries in its southern foundry park alone consume roughly 100,000 tons of water per day: see Lauly Li, "Taiwan Braces for Drought in Key Chip Hubs Again," *Nikkei Asia*, (March 24, 2023), <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Business-Spotlight/Taiwan-braces-for-drought-in-key-chip-hubs-again>; and TSMC's total consumption is more than 156,000 tons daily (2021 number): see Cheng Ting-Fang, "TSMC Tackles Taiwan Drought With Plant to Reuse Water for Chips," *Nikkei Asia*, (April 22, 2021) <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Tech/Semiconductors/TSMC-tackles-taiwan-drought-with-plant-to-reuse-water-for-chips>; and Emanuela Barbiroglio, "No Water No Microchips: What Is Happening in Taiwan?" (May 31, 2021), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/emanuelabarbiroglio/2021/05/31/no-water-no-microchips-what-is-happening-in-taiwan/>. See also, damage to the electric grid and reservoir system during the 1999 Ji-Ji Earthquake in Taiwan, Cybil Chou, "Infrastructure Dealt a Crippling Blow," *Taipei Times*, (September 22, 2023), <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/quake/archives/1999/09/22/3506>

¹³ See for example Yu Nakamura, "Taiwan Drought at 'Most Critical' Phase for Chip Sector," *Nikkei Asia*, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Tech/Semiconductors/Taiwan-drought-at-most-critical-phase-for-chip-sector>.

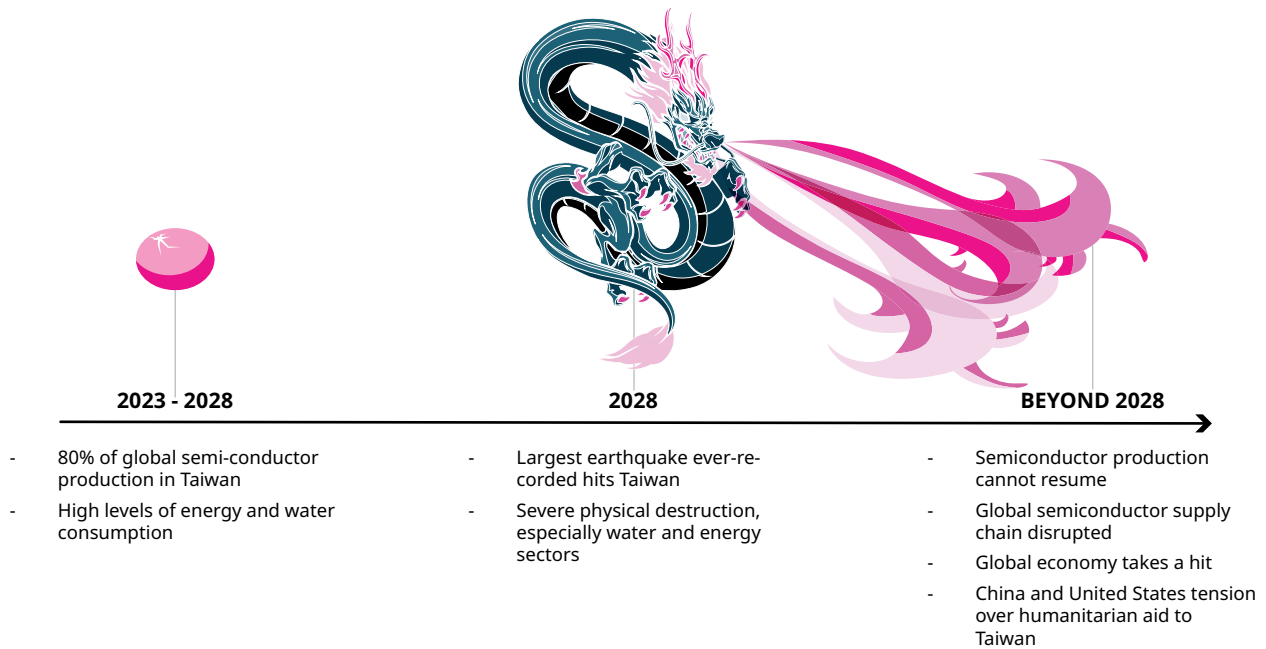
¹⁴ Bob Pisani, "One year ago stocks dropped 12% in a single day. What investors have learned since then," CNBC, (March 16, 2021), <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/03/16/one-year-ago-stocks-dropped-12percent-in-a-single-day-what-investors-have-learned-since-then.html>

¹⁵ "Volume of Container Throughput in Taiwan in 2020, By Port," Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1045096/taiwanese-container-throughput-volume-by-port/>

¹⁶ Anthony Paone, "Fire at Turkey's Iskenderun Port Extinguished Defence Ministry," Reuters, (February 7, 2023), <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/shipping-containers-ablaze-turkeys-iskenderun-port-operations-halted-2023-02-07/>

¹⁷ "Top US Spy Says Chinese Invasion Halting Taiwan Chip Production Would Be 'Enormous' Global Economic Blow," Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/technology/top-us-spy-says-chinese-invasion-halting-taiwan-chip-production-would-be-2023-05-04/>

¹⁸ Lauren Chen, "World Leaders Express Their Condolences," *Taipei Times*, (September 22, 1999), <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/react/archives/1999/09/22/3512>



emergency response teams grounded, Taiwan found itself partially blockaded, all while the people of Taiwan desperately needed material aid and support.

How did we get there?

The story of the July 14 earthquake was one of ripple effects. In 2023, five years earlier, Taiwan stood relatively well-placed to both withstand and respond to such a disaster. Its people were well-drilled in emergency protocols, its building codes were some of the most robust in the world¹⁹, and its communications systems were highly resilient. Still, several worrying negative trends were identified a half-decade earlier that had not been sufficiently remedied by 2028 and each magnified the effects of the earthquake.

In 2023 and 2024, both the Taiwanese government and major chip fabricators were already aware that their energy and water consumption levels were unsustainable; in the five years following, though, too little was done to improve the island's energy resilience, making the impact of the earthquake particularly devastating for the Taiwanese economy.²⁰ By 2028, consumption forecasts had not

only held true but had been exacerbated by the worsening effects of climate change, which in addition to reducing water reservoir levels also significantly increased energy consumption for the whole power grid as a result of higher air-conditioning needs. Despite government plans for island-wide carbon neutrality by 2050²¹ as well as well-laid plans by major semiconductor firms like TSMC to reduce their consumption, water usage rose by 75 percent between 2023 and 2028, while electricity consumption increased by an astounding 250 percent.²² In short, while some steps were taken to improve the supply of water and energy in Taiwan, those changes could not keep up with rapidly increasing demand.

Likewise, already five years before the earthquake experts were publicly discussing how the global semiconductor supply chain hinged too much on Taiwan and its dominant position in chip fabrication, enabling the earthquake to have devastating global ramifications. Throughout the 2020s, the Taiwanese government understandably incentivized companies like TSMC to keep its most advanced foundries in Taiwan, thereby maintaining Taiwan's so-called "silicon shield", but this also lessened the resilience of the entire global supply chain. The US, Japan, and the European Union did not do enough to diversify their consumption of semiconductors away from Taiwan. Although subsidization efforts like the

¹⁹ Ralph Jennings, "It Took a Deadly Earthquake to Get Taiwan's Attention, But Now It's Demanding Safer Buildings," *Los Angeles Times*, (March 9, 2018), <https://www.latimes.com/world/asia/la-fg-taiwan-earthquake-preparedness-2018-htmlstory.html>

²⁰ Cheng Ting-Fang and Lauly Li, "TSMC Struggles To Keep New Hires, Warns of Power Supply Risks," *Nikkei Asia*, (June 30, 2022), <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Tech/Semiconductors/TSMC-struggles-to-keep-new-hires-warns-of-power-supply-risks>; Cheng Ting-Fang and Lauly Li, "Taiwan hit by triple blow of drought, blackouts and COVID surge," *Nikkei Asia*, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Economy/Taiwan-hit-by-triple-blow-of-drought-blackouts-and-COVID-surge>

²¹ Cheng Ting-Fang and Lauly Li, "Taiwan struggles to balance high-tech and low-carbon ambitions," *Nikkei Asia*, (November 1, 2021), <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Environment/Climate-Change/Asia-s-climate-crisis/Taiwan-struggles-to-balance-high-tech-and-low-carbon-ambitions>

²² These numbers are based on figures from 2015 to 2019. Since energy and water consumption are actually increasing exponentially as semiconductor fabs increase in complexity, 75 percent is probably a conservative figure. Frederik Kelter, "The Battle Over Semiconductors Is Endangering Taiwan," *Foreign Policy*, (November 9, 2022), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/11/09/tsmc-taiwan-battle-semiconductors-water-resource-scarcity/>; "Semiconductor industry electricity consumption to more than double by 2030: study," *Greenpeace*, Press Release, (April 20, 2023), <https://www.greenpeace.org/eastasia/press/7930/semiconductor-industry-electricity-consumption-to-more-than-double-by-2030-study/>

US CHIPS Act did bring much needed cash infusion into domestic chip production in the US, the USD 52.7 billion was spread too thinly to achieve the scale needed to improve global supply chain resilience.²³ Similarly, the higher costs of workers and of running advanced foundries in the US meant that even with the CHIPS subsidies, large manufacturers remained hesitant to move production to the US.²⁴ All told, by 2028 the US market share in global semiconductor manufacturing had not even broken 15 percent, with more than 25 percent of total manufacturing and more than 80 percent of advanced chip-making still in Taiwan.²⁵

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- ²³ Yuka Hayashi, "Chips Act Will Test Whether U.S. Can Reverse Semiconductor Exodus," *The Wall Street Journal*, (February 22, 2023), https://www.wsj.com/articles/chips-act-will-test-whether-u-s-can-reverse-semiconductor-exodus-f7c5a324?mod=article_inline.
- ²⁴ Ana Swanson, "The Chips Act Is About More Than Chips: Here's What's in It," *New York Times*, (February 28, 2023), <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/28/business/economy/chips-act-childcare.html>
- ²⁵ Don Clark and Ana Swanson, "U.S. Pours Money Into Chips, but Even Soaring Spending the Limits," *New York Times*, (January 1, 2023), <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/01/technology/us-chip-making-china-invest.html>

What if...

there is a coup in Tunisia?

Eya Jrad

The event

On the evening of 15 September 2028, Tunisians and foreign observers were watching the live broadcasting of the press conference of the Independent High Authority for Elections (*Instance Supérieure Indépendante pour les Élections*) (ISIE) taking place in the capital of Tunis, the Palace of Conferences, as it announced the long-awaited results of the presidential elections. The national television channel interrupted the live-stream to broadcast the national anthem with the emblem of the Tunisian Armed Forces branded at the top left of the screen. Unaccustomed to tell-tale signs of a coup, Tunisians were on pins and needles as they awaited the resumption of the conference.

Shortly thereafter, an army general, thus far unknown to the public, appeared on the screen, standing upright and assertively behind a desk, calmly declared in mixture of classical Arabic and Tunisian dialect that, *“given the political deadlock and economic collapse, and the widespread accusations of election fraud, we cannot ignore that it has become necessary for the Armed Forces to take control of the country. I appeal to you, my fellow countrymen and women, to refrain from any escalation. A dusk to dawn curfew is hereby in effect throughout all the country until further notice. The Armed Forces will ensure effective maintenance of law and order. Further announcements will be made in due course. We Sacrifice Our Souls for You, Tunisia (Fidaki ya Tounes).”*

The next day, martial law was declared throughout Tunisia; the 2022 constitution was suspended as an emergency measure, and was then followed by the forced resignations of members of the government, along with prosecution of military officers and soldiers who refused to be involved in the events. Military and police forces were deployed in the streets and took control of key government headquarters (the Central Bank, the Ministry of Defence, The Ministry of Interior, the Presidential Palace, and more).

Protests erupted in parts of the country, and were violently suppressed. The events recalled the once-forgotten scenes of military repression: the general strike of 1978, the bread riots of 1984, and the protests in the Gafsa Mining Basin in 2008.

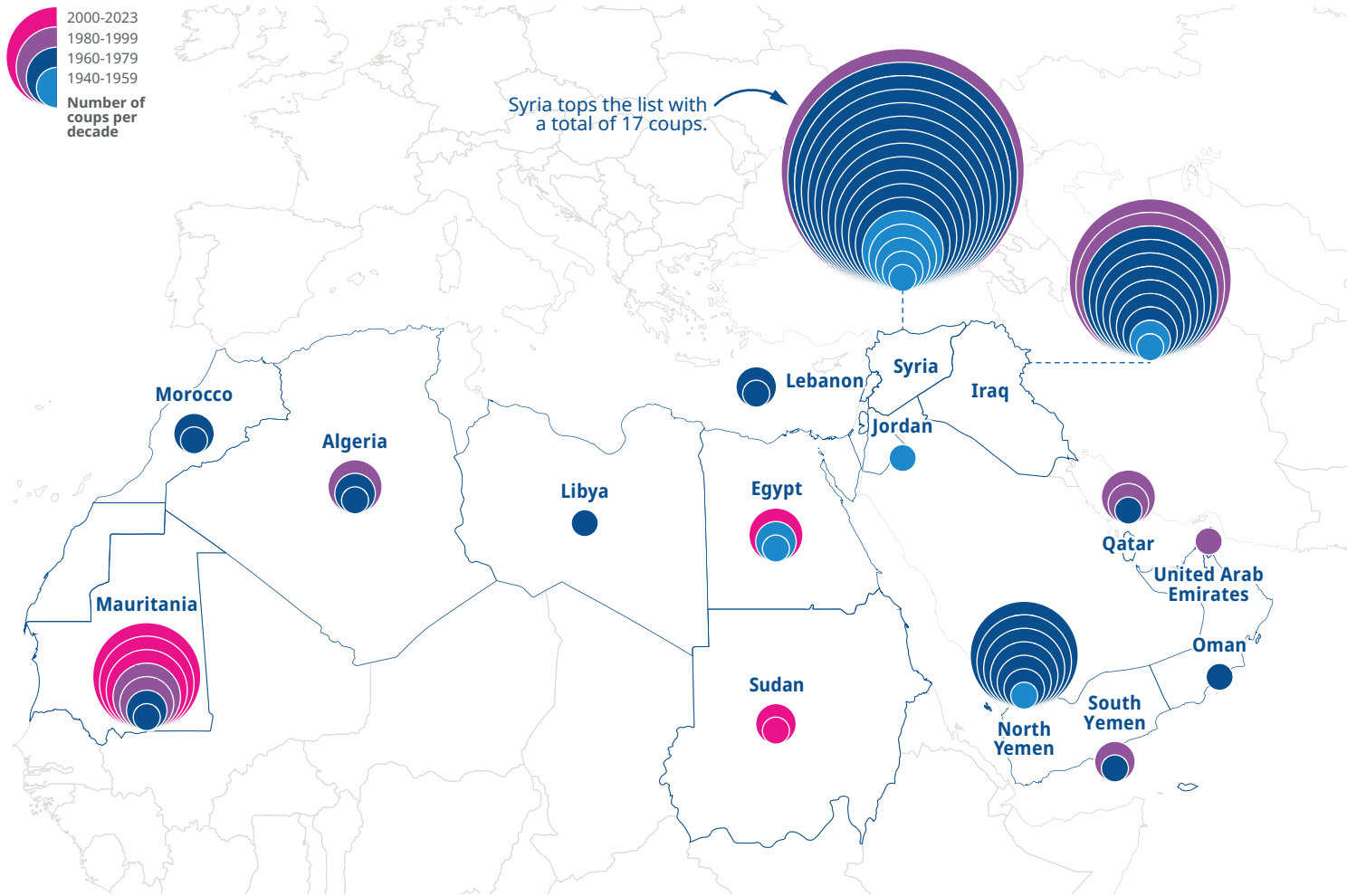
The consequences

Following the intervention, the military’s budget increased by 15% to cover new recruitment and equipment acquisition, often with disregard to the country’s actual security needs and challenges (large naval vessels, air-to-air combat). More importantly, military officers were appointed as heads of public banks (STB, BH) and public companies, including the State Lands Office, and the General Equipment and Works Company, effectively granting the military control over vast lands, as well as the potential management of large-scale construction projects.

Unsurprisingly, the situation led to a confrontation with the Interior Ministry. Three different units of the ministry were in open rebellion, while others were asked to hand their weapons over to the army. Under an overarching climate of suspicion and conspiracy, the military took over major policing functions in the country, diverting much needed human and financial resources from their primary role to counterterrorism and border security.

Arab military coups

1948-2023



Source: EUISS, 2014

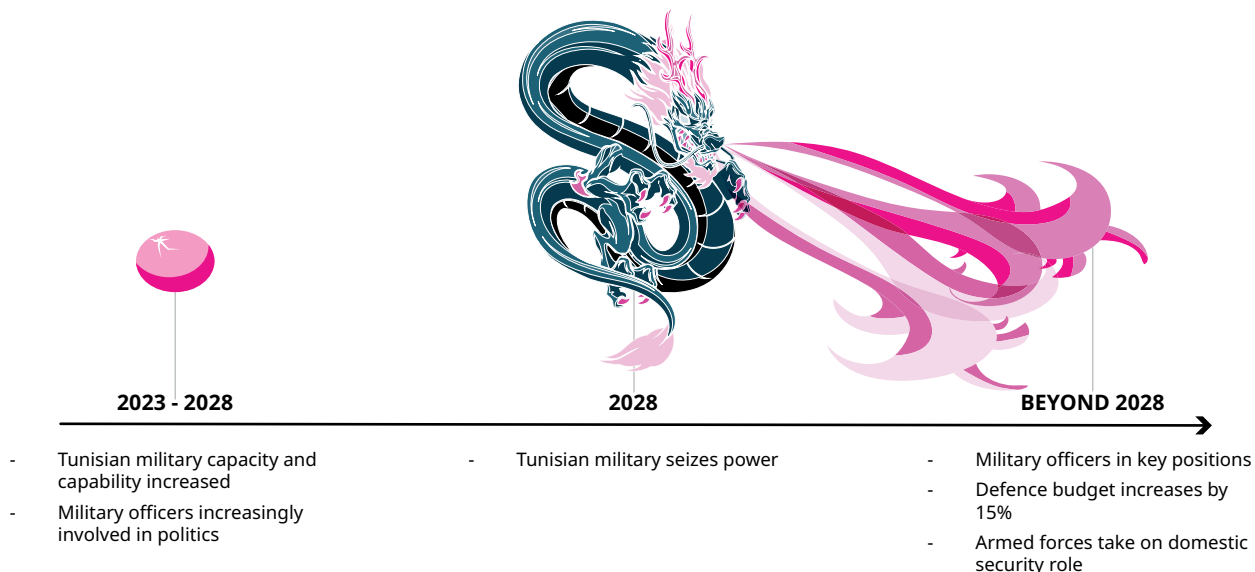
The coup plunged the country into a deep security crisis, as extremist groups tapped into the anger of young people, as well as those who were excluded from the political system. It was not until January 2029, when the number of attacks against security forces as well as civilians rose to 200 (exceeding the record of the years from 2011 to 2015), that people finally realized that political instability causes youth to fall prey to violent extremist groups.

Moreover, during the first four months after the events, arrivals to the northern part of the Mediterranean shores increased by 200% from the previous year. Tunisia became an alternative to Libya and Egypt as the departure point towards Italy.

Consequently, reactions had shifted. While the USA and some European countries initially oscillated between silence and open condemnation, these countries called for the immediate cutoff of military aid. For Europe, the

need to ensure stability trumped democratic concerns. Europe eventually established a well-functioning relationship with the new regime demonstrated by an increase in arms sales and financial grants to counter terrorism and to stop migration flows. According to TASS, Patrushev even dispatched a cable of congratulations to Tunisia's general.

In the distant future, Tunisia would attempt to revert to democracy multiple times; but as had been seen previously, it could never undo the effects of 2028.



How did we get there?

Even though the Tunisian armed forces were often depicted as apolitical and “the most professional forces in the region,”¹ there were telltale signs of slippage.

The first was the fact that Tunisia’s military was now much more capable – not just in military terms, but also in political ones. While the Tunisian military had been sidelined prior to 2011, its budget, weapons and capabilities increased over the last decade. Its annual budget increased by over 200% from 1233,727 MTnD in 2013, to 3750,000 MTnD in 2023. Furthermore, since 2012, the military enjoyed an influx of international support and military aid (through the sale of defence equipment and the training and professional development of military personnel), as well as the status of a “major non-NATO ally” in July 2015. The USA provided Tunisia with USD 20,554,000 in Foreign Military Financing (FMF) in 2013. In 2022, FMF rose to USD 60,000,000, accompanied by an allocation of USD 1,487,349 in 2022² for International Military Education and Training (a decrease from USD 2,155,000 in 2013).

The support continued in the following years, as a preventive measure to counter the growing Russian footprint, and its interest in Tunisian politics, manifest through the various diplomatic channels and delegations,³ as well through indirect diplomacy (culture and tourism). Yet, the support provided never came with conditions to respect human rights or monitor the use of military equipment – nor was the support predicated on transparency and democratic control of the armed forces.

Indeed, enforcing parliamentary control, which lacked rigour and expertise to assess and address governance in the defence sectors was blatantly missing. There was no mention of the limited defence budget and financial transparency, and little focus on personnel ethical frameworks (whistleblower protection). Military education and training also completely overlooked the paramount importance of neutrality and political-military relations (appointments to senior positions were made solely by the president).

Furthermore, dangerous precedents were being established: there was an attempted plot against Habib Bourguiba led by former resistance fighters and soldiers in 1962. Accounts of small scale yet informative, military defections⁴, were circulating, such as the one in 2017 in Tatatouine, when the military disobeyed direct orders from President Essebsi and allowed protesters to storm and shut down an oil valve, signaling the dissociation of military interests from the regime.

Secondly, Tunisia was no longer the “*Grande Muette*,” the silent neutral agent it once was. Indeed, military figures were increasingly visible post-2011 in the national political debate. This was facilitated by former military officers’ involvement in civil society. They have been either indirectly involved in politics (retired generals have launched political initiatives over the past years (“the Last Hope” in 2021), or directly formulating policies (taking up advisory roles, head of ministries, governorates). Tunisia’s military, in spite of the increase in the military budget, did not catch up to the budget of the Ministry of Interior. This fueled an ongoing inter-ministerial competition between the two, and stoked “institutional

¹ Frederic Wehrey, “Tunisia’s Wake-Up Call: How Security Challenges From Libya Are Shaping Defense Reforms,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 18, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/03/18/tunisia-s-wake-up-call-how-security-challenges-from-libya-are-shaping-defense-reforms-pub-81312>

² U.S. Foreign Assistance By Country, Tunisia, <https://www.foreignassistance.gov/cd/tunisia/>

³ For example, in December 2021, a Russian delegation of the the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation visited the Independent High Authority for Elections, and were warmly welcomed by the Authority.

⁴ It is important to note that during the 2011 uprisings, military defection turned out to be just a rumor.

revenge.” Furthermore, dissatisfaction was voiced among military leadership (retired officers expressed “regrets” that they were not involved in managing independent commissions and institutions).⁵

Thirdly, the military managed to garner support, both internationally—especially through its rapprochement with Egypt—and nationally where the armed forces enjoyed local support and trust. This was heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic and the role played by the military in setting up field hospitals, distributing vaccines, and engaging with security patrols in monitoring curfews. Moreover, there were regular calls for the military to intervene in 2013, 2019 and 2021.⁶

Last but not least, it was the political context that paved the way for Tunisia’s coup, ushered in by a succession of failing governments, imprisoned party leaders, a rift between the political elites, and the transformation of political polarization into an identity schism that tore apart Tunisian social peace. The institutional landscape was imbalanced and dysfunctional. As the Assembly of People’s Representatives became a forum to legitimize the regime and for elite bargaining, the “the revocation of the mandate” enshrined in the 2022 constitution (Art. 61)⁷ became a tool to blackmail and threaten parliamentarians.

Popular disillusionment over politics translated into absenteeism during elections since 2021, even up until the October 2023 elections of local councils⁸ (held later than the legal timeframe of June-July would call for. Elections to the second chamber (The National Council of Regions and Districts) was conducted in haste and amid widespread rumors of election fraud that have tainted the 2028 presidential elections.

⁵ Boubaker Ben Kraiem, “Quelles réformes pour notre pays, cette démocratie naissante?,” Leaders, November 11, 2017, <https://www.leaders.com.tn/article/23501-boubaker-ben-kraiem-queelles-reformes-pour-notre-pays-cette-democratie-naissante>

⁶ See (<http://www.radiotunisienne.tn/2017/12/24/%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B6%D9%8A%D8%AD-%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%B6-%D8%B5%D9%81%D8%AD%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B0%D8%A7-%D8%B9%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D8%B7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%B9%D9%84/>)

⁷ And Sub-section 8 (new) of the Decree-Law No. 2022-55 of September 15, 2022, amending Organic Law No. 2014-16 of May 26, 2014, on elections and referendums.

⁸ In 2018, the participation rate in the municipal elections was 33.7%.

What if...

a bioweapons attack is launched in central London?

Mark Webber

The event

Kelvin's trip home on the London Underground had improved immeasurably over the last few years. Moving to the suburbs still meant a 45-minute journey on the busy Piccadilly Line. But the line's upgrade meant the carriages were quieter, cleaner and had decent Wi-Fi. The problem was Covent Garden, his first station – always crowded at peak times (the hordes of tourists didn't help). Today was no different, but one thing did catch Kelvin's eye – the several black plastic bags left laying on the platform. Kelvin passed one bag as he got on his carriage. Not his business to remove or report it he thought.

Two weeks later, Kelvin felt terribly ill. He had had what he thought was flu for about a week. He soldiered on by working from home and thought the symptoms would soon pass. However, Kelvin was now having trouble breathing and could barely walk. A doctor had visited earlier in the day and said Kelvin might have COVID-25 although the test results would take a couple of days to come back.

Kelvin turned on the TV in his bedroom. The last item he saw before he passed out was a report of a “mysterious” illness spreading among Londoners. A certain Dr

Beckett from Imperial College London said blood tests of hospital admissions indicated that inhalational anthrax was the culprit. Dr Beckett struck an ominous tone: inhalational anthrax had a mortality rate of up to 90 per cent if left untreated. Effective treatment was possible only if the illness was caught early. Exposure to anthrax spores typically led to mild symptoms (like a cold or flu) within a week of exposure with severe illness setting in after about nine days. At that point, even with treatment, half of those infected would die – usually from septic shock.¹

What Dr Beckett did not know was that the anthrax outbreak was the consequence of a bioweapon. Three weeks prior, the Metropolitan Police had received a warning from the so-called “Pale Man” that an attack would imminently occur on the Underground. No date was given; no demands were made. The only clue was a reference to taking the “black pill” – a phrase often used by Incels, misogynistic individuals with no coherent political platform but occasionally prone to random, unpredictable acts of violence.² The Metropolitan Police receive many such threats. If regarded seriously, they are examined and acted upon through the UK Counter-Terrorism Policing network, a vaguely-defined construct that includes the UK intelligence community (including MI5) and regional police forces. The Pale Man warning was not regarded as actionable.

Within a month after Kelvin died, 759 inhalation anthrax deaths had been confirmed across London. Fifty-eight deaths were reported in other locations in the UK (those who had contracted the illness *en route* to railway stations out of the capital). There were even deaths overseas. Two Nigerians who had travelled on the Underground to Heathrow airport later died in Lagos.

The anthrax outbreak was traced back to Covent Garden station. But the offending black bags were never found. Some poor soul had disposed of them, and no doubt paid the price (at least seven cleaners working on the Underground were admitted to hospital; five of whom died). The “Pale Man”, Stephen Morby, was arrested following examination of CCTV footage and a sweep of online Incel chatrooms. Morby was prosecuted

¹ Ajay Kumar Goel, “Anthrax: A Disease of Biowarfare and Public Health Importance,” *World Journal of Clinical Cases* 3, No.1 (2015).

² Jia Tolentino, “The Rage of the Incels,” *The New Yorker*, May 15, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-rage-of-the-incels>

Critical biological warfare agents

Non-exhaustive list

Category A

○ Weaponized in the past



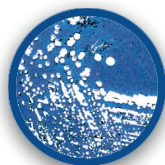
Bacillus anthracis
Anthrax



Variola major
Smallpox



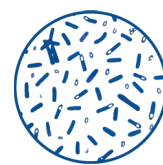
Yersinia pestis
Plague



Francisella tularensis
Tularemia



Viral hemorrhagic fever
Ebola, Lassa, Marburg, Argentinine



Clostridium botulinum
Botulism

Category B



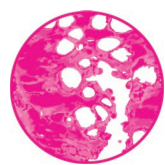
Coxiella burnetii
Q fever



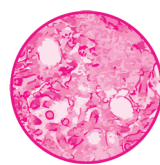
Vibrio cholerae
Cholera



Burkholderia mallei
Glanders



Water safety threats
Cholera, Cryptosporidium



Various encephalitic viruses

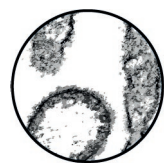


Food safety threats
various enteric pathogens, E. coli O157:H7, Salmonella, Shigella



Various biologic toxins
Staph aureus enterotoxin B, Ricin toxin

Category C



Emerging threats
Various equine encephalitic viruses, Nipah virus, Hantavirus

Source: APSF, 2002

and sentenced to a full-life term in prison. In court testimony, he outlined the motives for his action – a weird potpourri of grievance and resentment.

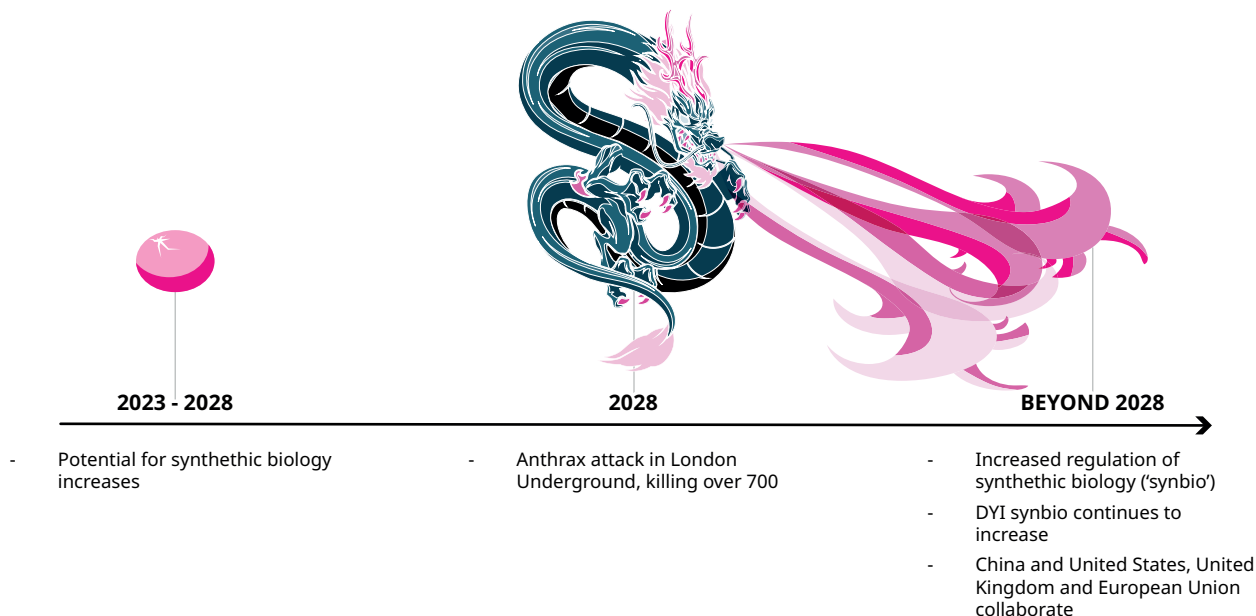
More alarming was his method. Morby was a post-doctoral student working at a designated Synthetic Biology Research Centre (six of these exist in the UK). Studies have shown that lab researchers are predisposed toward mental health problems owing to the peculiar pressures of obtaining the right (i.e. commercially-viable) results in research.³ Morby had felt these pressures keenly having participated in a number of failed projects that resulted in inconclusive data and no publications. These pressures tipped him over a psychological threshold and

created a desire to exact revenge. Morby used his expertise and access to specialist equipment to cultivate a strain of *Bacillus anthracis* with highly infectious properties. It was this that had been left to do its fatal work on the Underground. Morby had deliberately left one innocuous-looking bag at the top of the Covent Garden spiral staircase. The draught in the station had blown the anthrax spores downwards to be breathed in by those who took the stairs as a healthy alternative to the lift (Covent Garden station has no escalator). Spores in bags on the platform had been dispersed by the rush of air from oncoming trains. The polluted air was also recirculated by being trapped and then released in train carriages travelling across the Underground network.⁴

The consequences

The UK already had in place an exacting set of laws and regulations (overseen by the National Counter Terrorism and Security Office) designed to prevent the abuse of

³ Carmen McLeod, Stevienna de Saille, and Brigitte Nerlich, "Risk in Synthetic Biology – Views From the Lab," *EMBO Reports*, 19, 2018.
⁴ For how this might occur, see Prashant Kumar et al., "Characteristics of Fine and Ultrafine Aerosols in the London Underground," *Science of the Total Environment* 858, No. 1, 2023.



pathogens and toxins.⁵ It was also an early adopter of commercial strategies to promote and regulate “synbio.”⁶ The UK liked to see itself as an international role model here (its regulatory structures were, for instance, more coherent than the patchwork of laws in the United States).⁷ The Pale Man incident duly resulted in new legislation (the 2029 Safety and Security of Scientific Facilities Act) that imposed more stringent regulations on the use of so-called “Schedule 5” materials⁸ and laid down new protocols for working in research laboratories.

The British experience also kick-started a process of international collaboration. The Labour government elected in 2024 had spent much of its term in office re-establishing the UK’s regulatory alignment with the European Union. Re-elected in 2029 with the manifesto commitment to “engage with Europe for Britain,” it obtained associated access to the provisions of the EU’s 2028 Synbio Directive. Once written off as “ill equipped to accommodate concerns around synbio,”⁹ the EU had since the mid-2020s adopted a raft of measures aimed at regulating the nascent synbio sector.

Of even greater significance, China and the United States put aside their many differences to promote a Synbio Framework Convention. Little-noticed work during the 2020s on synbio governance under the auspices of the Convention on Biological Diversity, the World Organization for Animal Health, and the Biological Weapons Convention¹⁰ was leveraged to produce a

UN agreement. Opened for signature at the New York “Synbio Summit” in October 2030, the Convention garnered 150 signatures within a year (with Russia a notable absentee). A secretariat to support its work was set up in Beijing in 2031.

These measures did have their limits. They were not intended to deal with the commercial application of synbio. The “DIY bio” movement, meanwhile, claimed that new regulations stifled innovation and intellectual freedom. But in promoting laboratory safety, the transportation of proscribed materials, and restrictions on dual use, they were a great success. As of this writing (September 2032), there has been no repetition of the Pale Man episode anywhere in the world, even if police and intelligence agencies continued to warn that the danger had not gone away.

How did we get there?

By the early 2020s, the promise of synbio was obvious – with beneficial applications in medicine, energy, environmental restoration and food production. But the potential dangers had also become clear. A NATO-sponsored report of 2021 had noted that synbio “techniques could [...] be adapted for malicious purposes and used by

⁵ Virology Research Services, “A Guide to UK Biosecurity and Biosafety Regulations,” May 21, 2023, <https://virologyresearchservices.com/2023/05/21/a-guide-to-uk-biosecurity-and-biosafety-regulations/>

⁶ UK Government, “Synthetic Biology Leadership Council,” <https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/synthetic-biology-leadership-council>

⁷ Julia Watson, “Synthetic Biology: State Regulation in the Biomedical Context,” *American Journal of Law and Medicine* 48, no.4 (2022).

⁸ Pathogens and toxins as defined by the 2001 Anti-Terrorism Crime and Security Act.

⁹ Olivia Hamlyn, “Synthesize This: Integrating Innovation Governance and EU Regulation of Synthetic Biology,” *Journal of Law and Society* 49, no.3 (2022), 593.

¹⁰ Tao Sun et al., “Challenges and Recent Progress in the Governance of Biosecurity Risks in the Era of Synthetic Biology,” *Journal of Biosafety and Biosecurity* 4 (2022), 63.

terrorist organizations, rogue actors, or hostile nations.”¹¹ The United States 2023 *Threat Assessment* suggested that “[r]apid advances in dual-use technology, including bioinformatics, synthetic biology, nanotechnology, and genomic editing, could enable [the] development of novel biological weapons.”¹²

Synbio had led to a revision of earlier assumptions on the dangers of bioweapons. It had previously been assumed that the technical knowledge and specialist equipment necessary to weaponize biological compounds placed such a resource beyond the reach of bad actors. Indeed, the use of biological agents as weapons was extremely rare – the Sarin attack by the Aum Shinrikyo cult in Tokyo in 1995 being seen as a one-off.¹³

That said, new warnings on the dangers of synbio were initially of little consequence. Any signal of danger in what was dubbed the era of “polycrisis” had to be loud, otherwise it would not be heard against the calls for action on the climate emergency, the wars in Ukraine and East Africa, and the ever-present danger of another global pandemic (which duly arrived in 2020 in the shape of a new novel coronavirus – dubbed COVID-19). Biological terrorism, as the UK’s 2027 *National Risk Register* pointed out, could have catastrophic consequences, but the likelihood of such an occurrence remained remote.

The Pale Man attack was thus a wake-up call. The malign application of synbio had only been hypothetical up until that point. Thereafter it was a reality.

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- ¹¹ Benjamin D. Trump et al., “Biosecurity for Synthetic Biology and Emerging Biotechnologies: Critical Challenges for Governance,” in Benjamin D. Trump et al (eds.), *Emergent Threats of Synthetic Biology and Biotechnology*, (Springer: NATO Science for Peace and Security Series, 2021), 1.
- ¹² Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community* (February 2023), 25.
- ¹³ Paul Cornish, *The CBRN System: Assessing the Threat of Terrorist Use of Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Weapons in the United Kingdom* (London: Chatham House, 2007), 10-15.





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