
58th Edition

PRESS REVIEW

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1.1. Bloody crackdown follows post-election protests in Mozambique

Since October 21, 2024, Mozambique has been embroiled in post-electoral protests led by opposition figure Venâncio Mondlane. These protests, sparked by a contested election outcome, have been met with severe repression by security forces, including the police. According to Human Rights Watch, at least ten children have been shot dead, while hundreds have been detained under deplorable conditions, many without their families being notified. The crackdown has intensified, with the use of live ammunition, tear gas, and other forms of violence, particularly in the capital, Maputo, and its surrounding areas.



Reports from the United Nations, released on November 15, indicate that the violence has resulted in over 30 fatalities, 200 injuries, and 300 arrests. In response, the international community, especially UN experts, has expressed deep concern over the violation of human rights, particularly the targeting of protesters and children. Authorities have been urged to conduct thorough investigations into abuses such as extrajudicial killings and the unlawful detention of minors.

The protests persist, with symbolic acts of defiance, such as the banging of pots and pans, echoing through the streets. Additionally, teachers have joined the demonstrations, denouncing the excessive use of force and emphasizing its detrimental effect on education. These ongoing tensions have further deepened political and social divisions within the country.

In the medium term, Mozambique's situation could worsen, threatening internal stability and social cohesion. Human rights violations are likely to fuel public discontent and increase pressure from international organizations and foreign partners. Repression, rather than quelling the unrest, risks exacerbating resistance and potentially dragging the country into a prolonged cycle of violence.

Sources:

- Deutsche Welle : "Mozambique: Police use tear gas on protesters in Maputo", 2024 ;
- Human Rights Watch : "Mozambique: Security force crackdown kills, injures children", 2024 ;
- Radio France Internationale : "L'UE maintient son aide financière au contingent rwandais dans le nord du Mozambique malgré la polémique", 2024.



1.2. Chad-France defence agreement breakup: a shift in strategic direction?

On November 28, Chad announced the termination of its defence agreement with France, marking a significant shift in the country's strategic trajectory. Established in 1976, this military cooperation has, particularly since 2019, played a crucial role in addressing the growing terrorist and jihadist threats in the Sahel region. The French military presence was vital to Chad's stability, as evidenced by its interventions against armed rebellions in 2008 and 2019.



In N'Djamena, where one of the last French military bases in the Sahel was located, the withdrawal of troops began on December 10, presenting a considerable logistical challenge. Simultaneously, France is reshaping its military strategy, shifting its focus from the Sahel to regions such as the Gulf of Guinea and the Ivory Coast.

The termination of this agreement is part of a broader trend of strategic ruptures between France and several African countries, including Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Senegal. This reflects a local desire to redefine bilateral relations shaped by colonial history. For Chad, the decision is about pursuing security and stability within a redefined framework. Abderahman Koumallah, Chadian Minister of Foreign Affairs, explained that this choice represents a reassessment of defence relations and signals a desire to diversify the country's strategic alliances, with new partners now being considered. Significant rapprochements have been made with powers such as Turkey, China, and especially Russia. These discussions suggest potential military cooperation between Chad and Russia, following similar partnerships forged between Russia and other African states.

From a defence perspective, Chad remains a crucial player at the crossroads of conflicts in Sudan, Libya, and the Central African Republic, playing a key role in maintaining regional security.

Sources:

- *The Conversation* ; "Rupture entre le Tchad et la France : les causes et les conséquences pour les dynamiques de pouvoir dans le Sahel", 12/12/2024 ;
- *IRIS* : "Fin des accords militaires entre la France et le Tchad : facteurs et enjeux d'une rupture", 03/12/2024 ;
- *Le Monde* : "Le Tchad crée une commission spéciale pour résilier les accords militaires avec Paris", 05/12/2024.



2.1. Arrest of a Chinese national for photographing a US military base with a drone

Yin Piao Zhou, a Chinese citizen residing in Brentwood, California, was recently arrested for allegedly flying a modified drone over Vandenberg Space Force Base and capturing unauthorized images of sensitive infrastructure. Vandenberg is a critical installation for U.S. space operations, including satellite launches and ballistic missile tests. Despite no-fly zone restrictions around the base, Zhou is accused of circumventing these measures with the modified drone, raising significant national security concerns.



This case unfolds amid heightened U.S.-China tensions, driven by trade disputes, allegations of cyber-espionage, and concerns over technological theft. Unauthorized drone activity over a strategic military base only adds to these challenges, highlighting the increasing threat posed by emerging surveillance technologies. Vandenberg's role in managing classified satellite programs and defence initiatives makes it a prime target for intelligence gathering.

The arrest has prompted calls for stricter regulations on drone technology and enhanced security measures around critical infrastructure. As drones become more advanced, their potential for misuse in espionage or sabotage grows, making oversight and preventive measures essential. Zhou's case underscores the evolving security landscape, where modern technologies can challenge traditional safeguards. If espionage links are confirmed, this incident could exacerbate diplomatic tensions and lead to more stringent protective measures around U.S. military and strategic sites.

Sources:

- Hong Kong Free Press : "Chinese national arrested after allegedly flying drone over US military base", 12/12/2024 ;
- CBS News : "Chinese man arrested, accused of flying drone over and taking photos of Vandenberg Space Force Base", 12/12/2024 ;
- ABC News : "Bay Area man arrested for allegedly flying drone over, photographing Vandenberg Space Force Base", 12/12/2024.



2.2. Generative AI takes centre stage in Pentagon's strategic defence push

The Pentagon's launch of the AI Rapid Capabilities Cell (AI RCC), announced on December 11, 2024, underscores the United States' determination to maintain a strategic advantage amidst rapid AI advancements by China, Russia, and other global actors. Managed by the Chief Digital and Artificial Intelligence Office (CDAO), this initiative represents an "all hands on deck" approach to swiftly integrating generative AI tools into critical defence operations.



Building on insights from Task Force Lima, which identified 15 high-priority use cases across combat and enterprise functions, the AI RCC will focus on applications such as operational planning, autonomous systems, cybersecurity, logistics, and human resource management.

With an initial two-year funding of \$100 million, including \$35 million earmarked for four pioneering AI pilot programmes, the AI RCC will adopt an iterative experimentation model. This model prioritises testing and refining technologies before scaling, with the goal of maximising efficiency, lethality, and sustainability. Furthermore, the initiative will develop robust infrastructures, including multi-cloud environments, to support the deployment of these cutting-edge tools.

While the AI RCC demonstrates the U.S.'s resolve to maintain technological superiority, it also raises significant ethical and strategic concerns regarding the widespread use of AI in sensitive military contexts. Over time, the AI RCC has the potential to reshape the global military ecosystem, introducing new geopolitical challenges as the distinction between civilian and military innovation increasingly blurs.

Sources:

- DefenseScoop : "CDAO, Pentagon's generative AI Rapid Capabilities Cell to sunset Task Force Lima", 2024 ;
- Military of Ukraine : "Pentagon launches generative AI Task Force", 2024 ;
- National Defense Magazine : "Pentagon establishes AI Rapid Capabilities Cell to advance generative AI capabilities", 2024 ;
- NextGov : "FY2025 NDAA angles to enhance DOD's AI and quantum sciences capabilities", 2024.



3.1. Myanmar's international isolation and strategic alliances after the coup

Since the February 2021 military coup in Myanmar, which led to the imprisonment of Aung San Suu Kyi, the country has faced increasing international isolation. ASEAN, of which Myanmar is a member, has requested its exclusion from summits unless it sends an "apolitical" representative. This exclusion, coupled with an arrest warrant issued by the International Criminal Court for Min Aung Hlaing, has only deepened Myanmar's international isolation. Despite this, the country continues to maintain strong ties with Russia and China.



Currently, Russia and China are preparing to sign an agreement regarding the deployment of Myanmar migrant workers to Russia. Following the conscription of many of its workers into the war in Ukraine, Russia has experienced significant labour shortages in sectors such as agriculture and manufacturing. Myanmar, which has been embroiled in civil war since the coup, is providing a solution through the export of migrant labour, notably to Vietnam and now to Russia. Migrants are required to send 25% of their earnings to the government, or risk having their passports revoked. This arrangement enables Myanmar to secure funds to purchase weapons and kerosene. Notably, Myanmar is currently Russia's largest arms supplier, surpassing even China.

China remains another crucial ally. An interministerial committee in Myanmar has announced that it is exploring the terms of an agreement with China to establish a joint security company. This would help protect strategic interests, particularly the security of oil and gas pipelines. Through these agreements, all three countries stand to gain significant strategic advantages. These partnerships play a critical role in stabilising the military junta's grip on power in Myanmar, ensuring its survival despite international condemnation.

Sources:

- RFI : "Pouvoir militaire birman et Russie, un partenariat à toute épreuve ?", 12/12/2024 ;
- Le Monde : "La Chine en quête d'un accord sécuritaire avec la junte birmane", 06/12/2024 ;
- Courrier International : "Le 'casse-tête' de la guerre en Birmanie divise toujours au sein de l'Asean", 10/12/2024 ;
- Courrier International : "Birmanie : la CPI émettra-t-elle un mandat d'arrêt contre le chef de la junte ?", 02/12/2024.

3.2. The collapse of Assad's regime: a major setback for Iran's strategic and regional ambitions

On the night of December 7 to 8, the announcement of Bashar al-Assad's regime's collapse, broadcast on Syrian public television by the Islamist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), revived hopes among many displaced Syrians. The lightning offensive launched by HTS, a group previously affiliated with Al-Qaeda and led by Abu Muhammed al-Julani, prompted Bashar al-Assad, the son of Hafez al-Assad, to flee to Moscow.



The Assad family had ruled Syria in an authoritarian manner since 1971. The surprise offensive, which began on November 27, saw HTS rebels gradually seizing Aleppo, Hama, and Homs, before freeing prisoners from Sednaya prison—a symbol of the brutal state repression that had escalated since the Arab Spring of 2011.

The announcement on December 11 of the cessation of Baath Party activities marked the regime's definitive fall, with significant consequences for the geopolitical balance in the region, particularly for Turkey and Iran. On the same day, Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei acknowledged the significant weakening of the "axis of resistance" against Israel and the United States. The construction of a Shiite crescent, which began after the Iran-Iraq war, had allowed Iran to gain the support of numerous armed groups across the region, including in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Palestine. Syria played a central role in this network, facilitating the rearmament of groups such as Hezbollah, for whom the country served as a vital corridor. This "axis of resistance" allowed Iran to counterbalance the influence of the United States and Israel through proxy actors.

Turkey-Iran relations are now particularly sensitive, with Tehran denouncing Turkey's active support for Assad's opponents, motivated by concerns over the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish region.

Sources:

- IRIS : "Chute de Bachar Al-Assad en Syrie : quelles conséquences pour l'Iran ?", 11/12/2024 ;
- Le Monde : "En Syrie, la chute historique du régime Assad", 08/12/2024 ;
- Radio France : "Les gagnants et les perdants de la chute de Bachar al-Assad", 09/12/2024.



4.1. Italian politics: Progress report on support for Ukraine

"Who do you call if you wish to address Europe?" recently asked Politico, ranking Giorgia Meloni, Italy's Prime Minister, at the top of its annual list of the most influential European figures. This recognition highlights Italy's transformation, as it moves away from its image of political and financial instability. Stabilised around the Fratelli d'Italia party (29% in the polls as of 4 December 2024), the governing coalition, also comprising Forza Italia (9%) and Lega (9%), appears resilient to the usual political turbulence.



However, on the issue of Ukraine, public scepticism remains. A February 2024 survey reported by Euractiv revealed that 40% of Italians viewed the European Union's actions in the conflict negatively. A study by Bocconi University (2023) showed that while centrist parties are more supportive of supplying weapons to Ukraine, no clear majority emerges at the national level, favouring a more cautious approach.

Although Giorgia Meloni has positioned herself as a supporter of Ukraine, her commitment is constrained by internal negotiations within the coalition. At the NATO summit in Washington, Italy pledged €1.8 billion in support for 2025, a modest figure compared to France's €3 billion and Germany's €7 billion in 2024.

Nevertheless, Italy does have room for manoeuvre, particularly through its defence industry, led by Leonardo. However, given the current political dynamics, expecting a significant acceleration of Italy's support for Ukraine seems, at this stage, optimistic.

Sources:

- IEP@BU: "What do Italian and European Voters Think of EU Policies Towards Ukraine?";
- CEPA: "Partners in Arms: Italy-Ukraine Defense Co-operation", 16/07/2024 ;
- Le Figaro : "Comment l'Italie est devenue "l'homme fort" de l'Europe", 13/12/2024 ;
- Politico : "POLITICO 28: Class of 2025, Giorgia Meloni".



4.2 Sabotage of a Kosovar water canal rekindles past tensions with Serbia

At the end of November, the Ibar-Lepenac water canal in Kosovo was sabotaged, an act that has raised significant concerns. The canal is crucial to the country's infrastructure, as it supports the cooling systems of two coal-fired power plants that supply Kosovo's electricity network, as well as providing drinking water to the capital, Pristina. The damage occurred due to an explosion near Zubin Potok, a town in the northern part of the country.



Since the incident, Kosovo and Serbia have exchanged accusations of responsibility. Kosovar Prime Minister Albin Kurti quickly blamed Serbia, although he did not present any evidence to support his claim. In response, Serbia denied the accusations and condemned the sabotage, asserting it had no involvement. The Serbian Minister of Foreign Affairs suggested that Kosovar authorities might have been behind the attack, but again, without providing any conclusive evidence. Additionally, Kosovar police apprehended eight suspects and seized significant military equipment, including 200 military uniforms, six grenade launchers, two rifles, a pistol, masks, and knives. However, Serbia later stated that only two men remained in detention.

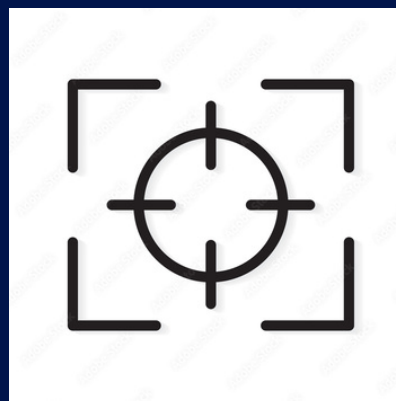
This event highlights the ongoing tensions between Kosovo and Serbia, with Kosovo still unrecognised by Serbia since its unilateral declaration of independence in 2008, which has been recognised by 114 countries. Moreover, the region where the sabotage occurred is predominantly Serb-inhabited, a legacy of the breakup of the former Yugoslavia, making it a continual flashpoint in the strained relations between the two nations. Both France and the United States condemned the sabotage and offered support to Kosovo, yet refrained from directly blaming either of the parties involved.

Sources:

- *Opex 360* : "Le Kosovo dénonce le sabotage d'un canal essentiel à son approvisionnement en eau et à ses centrales électriques", 30/11/2024 ;
- *RFI* : "Serbie et Kosovo s'accusent mutuellement après l'attaque sur un canal d'eau vital au Kosovo", 01/12/2024 ;
- *France Info* : "Regain de tensions entre le Kosovo et la Serbie après l'attaque d'un canal crucial pour l'approvisionnement en eau", 30/11/2024.

5.1. Cancellation of Romanian presidential elections following massive digital interference

A dramatic twist in contemporary European history: Following the annulment of Romania's 2024 presidential election, the country is now facing a major political and institutional crisis. This unprecedented decision was prompted by revelations from Romanian intelligence services about a large-scale online influence operation, primarily orchestrated on TikTok. This interference, aimed at boosting the pro-Russian candidate Călin Georgescu, led Romania's Constitutional Court to annul the November 24th election and temporarily suspend the second round, which was scheduled for the following week.



Georgescu, who had previously been credited with less than 5% of the vote in early polls, shocked authorities by securing 23% in the first round. Investigations revealed that his campaign was primarily conducted on TikTok, a platform popular in Romania with 9 million users. Through a series of videos encouraging voting, many local influencers supported Georgescu, often without directly naming or identifying him, which further amplified the viral spread of his popularity. Intelligence services identified 25,000 TikTok accounts linked to his campaign, which were likely automated accounts or bots that became particularly active as the election approached.

Concerns grew as signs of Russian interference emerged. Many of the accounts involved in Georgescu's campaign had previously been linked to pro-Russian, anti-NATO, and anti-Ukraine content. At the same time, Romania detected over 85,000 cyberattacks, displaying a modus operandi similar to tactics used by Russia in other political contexts (e.g., Estonia 2008, Georgia 2024).

In response to this situation, the European Union expressed serious concerns, calling for urgent answers from TikTok and initiating data collection on the platform. After reviewing the evidence, the Constitutional Court annulled the election, and the entire electoral process will now restart. This definitive decision highlights the scale of the suspected foreign influence.

Sources:

- Le Monde : "En raison de l'influence de TikTok, les juges roumains annulent la présidentielle", 07/12/2024 ;
- Le Monde : "Roumanie : influenceurs, comptes automatisés et publicités illégales au service d'une campagne d'ingérence hors normes", 13/12/2024 ;
- Le Figaro : "Roumanie : la Cour constitutionnelle annule l'élection présidentielle sur fond de suspicion d'ingérence russe",
- Le Parisien : "Roumanie : l'élection présidentielle annulée pour des soupçons d'ingérence russe sur TikTok", 09/12/2024 ;
- Toute l'Europe : "Roumanie : l'élection présidentielle annulée par la Cour constitutionnelle", 06/12/2024.

