
59th Edition

PRESS REVIEW

Security & Defence



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Authors:

Amzina DAOUSSA DEBY,
Bastien POULIQUEN,
Elina RIBEIRO DA COSTA,
Matéo GRADGIRARD and Pauline ALOS



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1.1. UAE cease arms supplies to Sudan's RSF amid US pressure

On 15th December 2024, the United Arab Emirates announced they would stop supplying arms to Sudan's Rapid Support Forces (RSF) following considerable diplomatic pressure from the United States. This decision, confirmed by the White House, follows allegations that the UAE had provided drones, armoured vehicles, and other military supplies to the RSF, thus exacerbating Sudan's internal conflict.



The RSF, a paramilitary group led by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (also known as Hemedti), has played a key role in the civil war that has ravaged the country since April 2023.

Although the UAE has consistently denied these claims, insisting that their support was limited to humanitarian operations and investments in the agricultural and mining sectors, mounting evidence points to their involvement in supplying arms via logistical networks in Libya and Chad. These transfers, often disguised as humanitarian aid, have contributed to escalating fighting and prolonging the conflict, plunging Sudan into a brutal war for power and resources, particularly gold.

In response, the Sudanese government has expressed growing concerns over the UAE's involvement and has demanded reparations for the human and material losses caused by these illegal arms transfers. The UAE's military support for the RSF could have serious consequences for Sudan's political future, intensifying both the civil war and regional rivalries over resources. This announcement comes amidst a complex geopolitical landscape, where competition for gold and other mineral resources plays a central role.

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- Sudan Tribune : "UAE halted arms supply to Sudan's RSF, White House tells senators", 19/12/2024.



1.2. Turkey begins construction of a rocket launch base in Somalia

Turkey has officially embarked on constructing a rocket launch base in Somalia, marking a significant milestone in its bid to emerge as a prominent player in the global space race. Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud announced the project during a ceremony in Mogadishu, highlighting its economic benefits for the host nation, including job creation and revenue generation.



Positioned at Africa's easternmost point, Somalia offers a strategically ideal location for launching rockets over the Indian Ocean, minimizing risks to populated areas.

This initiative aligns with Turkey's space roadmap unveiled in 2021, which includes lunar missions, the development of advanced satellites, and the construction of spaceports. Simultaneously, Turkey has deepened its presence in Somalia over the past decade, establishing its largest overseas military base and training Somali special forces, known as the Gorgor. This multifaceted partnership has strengthened defense collaboration and infrastructure development, fostering robust bilateral ties.

Nevertheless, the establishment of such a facility raises geopolitical concerns, particularly among global powers. By collaborating with Somalia, Turkey not only cements its foothold in the Horn of Africa but also positions itself as a formidable contender in the space sector, historically dominated by superpowers.

Ultimately, this initiative could transform Somalia into a space hub for Africa, providing Turkey with a strategic platform to project its technological and diplomatic influence on a global scale. This dual focus on innovation and geopolitics underscores Ankara's ambition to redefine power dynamics both regionally and internationally.

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- Daily Sabah : "Türkiye starts building rocket launching facility in Somalia", 2024 ;
- La Gazette : "La Turquie entame la construction d'une base de lancement en Somalie", 2024 ;
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- Türkiye Today : "Türkiye to build rocket launch facility in Somalia: President Mohamud", 2024.

2.1. One month before Donald Trump's return, tensions in the Panama Canal escalate

In a recent statement, President-elect Donald Trump shocked the international community by suggesting that the United States should reclaim control of the Panama Canal, citing high customs duties and China's growing influence in managing this strategic passage. This remark has provoked anger among Panamanian citizens and raised numerous questions regarding the accuracy of his claims.



Regarding customs duties, these are set by the Panamanian government based on recommendations from the Panama Canal Authority (ACP), an autonomous public entity. The tariffs vary according to the size of the vessels, not their country of origin. Therefore, American vessels are not subjected to discriminatory customs duties, contrary to what President-elect Trump implied. This clarification highlights the inaccuracy of his statements.

As for China's influence, available data on canal traffic shows that Chinese cargo accounts for only 21% of total flows, far behind the 74% generated by the United States. Thus, the notion that China holds decisive influence over this passage seems greatly exaggerated.

It is likely that Donald Trump is fully aware of these facts. In reality, the prospect of reclaiming control of the canal seems highly improbable. Although the canal was under American control until its handover to Panama in 1999, initiating a conflict to regain control would be a risky move and contrary to the geopolitical interests of the United States. Therefore, it seems more likely that these statements are intended to make a political point rather than to pursue any concrete action.

Sources:

- L'Écho : "Pourquoi Donald Trump menace le Panama, le Canada et le Groenland", 26/12/2024 ;
- Le Point : "Groenland, Panama, Canada... les rêves de conquêtes de Donald Trump", 26/12/2024.



2.2. Cartels at the heart of U.S.-Mexico diplomacy

The threat of President-elect Donald Trump to consider the Mexican cartels as “terrorist organizations” (meaning de facto possible future interventions on Mexican soil) recalled the first place of the subject in US-Mexican relations. Indeed, strongly linked with the migration issue (border crossing being one of the main business of the cartels), the arrival of Donald Trump in power on January 20th should push the Mexican executive to review its positions.



Andrés Manuel Lopez Obrador (president from 2018 to 2024), “political godfather” of current Mexican president Claudia Sheinbaum, had demonstrated the possibility (or necessity) to cooperate in depth on migration issues while maintaining a political line of independence vis-à-vis Washington. In fact, the threats of increasing tariffs (by 25% according to Mr. Trump) formulated at the end of November 2024 should push the president to be cautious. She nevertheless reminded us at the end of December that: “We collaborate, we coordinate, we work together, but we will never subordinate ourselves”. In addition, the recent extradition of Osiel Cárdenas (former leader of the Cartel del Golfo, and held responsible for the extreme “violence” of the cartels by recruiting former special forces through the creation of “Los Zetas”), could mean a willingness to relax on the part of the US administration.

Finally, it may be that the main issue is not so much in migration as in fentanyl. In fact, from less than 5,000 in 2012, the number of fatal overdoses resulting from the consumption of synthetic opioids (mostly Fentanyl) exceeded 70,000 cases in 2022. According to the latest report of the DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration), this phenomenon has stabilized in 2023, and it seems to start declining in 2024. Coming mostly from Mexico, US diplomacy should largely depend on the future place of Fentanyl in health and public debate.

Sources:

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- Le Figaro : “Les Cartels au cœur de tractations entre les Etats-Unis et le Mexique”, 30/12/2024 ;
- DEA : “DEA’s Third Annual National Family Summit on Fentanyl Highlights Progress in Fight to Save Lives”, 15/10/2024 ;
- France Info : “Droits de douane : Donald Trump lance l’offensive contre la Chine, le Canada et le Mexique”, 26/11/2024.



3.1. Pakistan renews its strikes on Afghanistan

On 25th December 2024, Afghanistan reported the death of 46 people following airstrikes carried out by Pakistan, mainly in the Barmal district in the eastern Paktika province. Pakistan, on the other hand, downplayed the scale of the strikes, claiming to have targeted only around twenty terrorists. This discrepancy in figures highlights the growing tensions between the two countries, which have escalated since the Taliban took power in Afghanistan in 2021.



The Afghan government condemned the attack, while the UN announced on 26th December that it had launched an investigation, confirming Afghanistan's allegations.

Relations between Pakistan and the Taliban have severely deteriorated, with Pakistan accusing the Taliban regime of supporting the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a terrorist group operating along the border. The TTP, responsible for numerous violent attacks in Pakistan, notably struck on 22nd December, killing 16 soldiers near the Afghan border. Over the past ten months, TTP attacks have resulted in 900 deaths, both civilian and military. A UN report from July 2024 estimated that 6,500 TTP fighters are stationed near the Afghan-Pakistani border.

The situation is particularly tense in the border regions, especially in Waziristan, where attacks and incursions from both sides are frequent. This area, formerly a tribal zone in northeastern Pakistan, has been the site of numerous military operations against insurgents linked to al-Qaeda and the Taliban since 2001. In response to the Pakistani airstrikes, the Afghan government has threatened to retaliate, labelling the attack as "cowardly" and "barbaric." The situation continues to fuel geopolitical tensions in the region.

Sources:

- RFI : "Le Pakistan frappe à nouveau l'Afghanistan, Kaboul déplore 46 morts", 25/12/2024 ;
- CNN : "Pakistani airstrikes on Afghanistan kill 46 people, Taliban official says", 25/12/2024 ;
- Courrier International : "Pakistan et Afghanistan : quand l'allié taliban devient l'ennemi", 25/12/2024 ;
- Le Monde : "L'ONU appelle à une enquête après les raids pakistanais en Afghanistan", 26/12/2024.

3.2. Russia reportedly transferring military equipment from Syria to Libya

The military rapprochement between Russia and Syria dates back to 1971, when the USSR secured strategic access to the Mediterranean through a base at Tartous. From 1991 onwards, this base evolved into a key naval foothold, further consolidated by the establishment of an airbase at Hmeimim under the regime of Bashar al-Assad. These two facilities, located on the Syrian coast, provided Russia with a permanent military presence in the Mediterranean and logistical support for its operations, particularly in Africa.



However, the regional geopolitical landscape has shifted with the instability of the Syrian regime, threatening Russian military interests. Indeed, the potential fall of Assad's government could mean the loss of these bases. Satellite imagery already reveals the withdrawal of Russian forces from the port of Tartous, and a similar evacuation may be imminent at the Hmeimim base.

In response to this, Russia is now pivoting towards Libya. In recent months, relations between Moscow and Marshal Haftar have grown increasingly close. While military cooperation officially focuses on training and maintaining Russian-supplied weapons for the Libyan National Army (LNA), discussions have also circulated about the establishment of a Russian naval base in Tobruk. Italian Defence Minister Guido Crosetto recently confirmed that military resources, including S-300 and S-400 air defence systems, are being transferred from Tartous to Libya, notably via cargo flights.

Thus, Russia appears to be strengthening its influence in Libya, with the strategic port of Tobruk offering a commanding position over the central and eastern Mediterranean, a significant military asset for Moscow in the region.

Sources:

- Opex 360 : "La Russie aurait commencé à transférer des équipements militaires de la Syrie vers la Libye", 20/12/2024 ;
- Courrier International : "Après la chute d'Assad en Syrie, la Russie va-t-elle se replier en Libye ?", 17/12/2024 ;
- Le Figaro : "La Russie se tourne vers la Libye pour garder un pied en Méditerranée", 26/12/2024.

4.1. Submarine cables severed in the Gulf of Finland

The incident on December 25, 2024, in which the Estlink 2 interconnector linking Finland and Estonia was severed, has once again highlighted the vulnerabilities of critical underwater infrastructure. This disruption immediately raised suspicions regarding the involvement of the vessel Eagle S, flying the Cook Islands flag and suspected of being part of the Russian "ghost fleet". On December 26, the ship was seized by the Finnish navy, prompting an investigation. The Deputy Head of the Finnish Coast Guard revealed that a patrol vessel, after inspecting the area, had noticed the absence of the ship's anchors, which further strengthened suspicions of suspicious activity.



This attack is not an isolated case. Indeed, four other submarine telecommunications cables have recently been damaged, heightening concerns over the security of sensitive infrastructure in the Baltic Sea. Estonian Defence Minister Hanno Pevkur has already announced the deployment of naval forces to protect the still-operational Estlink 1 interconnector. Meanwhile, his counterpart in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed concern, highlighting that the frequent incidents affecting underwater infrastructure make it increasingly difficult to classify them as accidents or simple navigation errors.

A similar incident on November 17 and 18, 2024, in Swedish territorial waters revealed that the Chinese vessel Yi Peng 3 was suspected of being behind the rupture of two telecommunications cables. Following this incident, the Yi Peng 3 left Swedish waters without allowing local investigators to conduct a proper investigation, with their role limited to observing a search carried out by Chinese authorities. This episode once again raises the crucial question of protecting European interests, particularly those related to energy supply, against actions by competing global powers in a strategic "grey zone".

These successive events thus call for a reassessment of the security of critical infrastructure and how European states are preparing to counter threats to their strategic resources, while ensuring a coordinated and effective response to these growing risks.

Sources:

- Opex 360 : "La Finlande a arraisonné un pétrolier soupçonné d'avoir sciemment endommagé un câble sous-marin", 26/12/2024 ;
- Politico : "As Finland seizes Russian ship, Estonia launches naval patrols", 27/12/2024 ;
- L'opinion : "Câbles rompus en Baltique: la Chine n'a pas autorisé le parquet suédois à mener son enquête à bord du Yi Peng 3", 23/12/2024 ;
- BBC : "Finland investigates Russia 'shadow fleet' ship after cable damage", 27/12/2024 ;
- Euronews : "Finland investigates Russian 'shadow fleet' ship over Baltic Sea cable damage", 26/12/2024.

4.2 Japan, Italy, and the UK to modernise their aviation through a joint venture

On 13 December 2024, Japan signed a partnership with Italy and the United Kingdom to establish a joint venture. This collaboration aims to develop new combat aircraft through the combined efforts of three companies from the participating countries: BAE Systems for the United Kingdom, Leonardo for Italy, and JAIEC for Japan.



This alliance, announced in 2022 and named the GCAP (Global Combat Air Programme), will facilitate the construction of supersonic combat aircraft. A prototype was unveiled at the Farnborough Air Show in July 2024. The joint venture merges two earlier initiatives: the UK's "Tempest" programme and Japan's F-X project. The goal is to have the aircraft operational within a decade, with deliveries expected in 2035 to replace Japan's F-2 jets and the Eurofighters used by the UK and Italy. The aircraft will be sixth-generation stealth fighters, ultra-connected, equipped with a radar capable of processing 10,000 times more data than current systems, and powered by Rolls-Royce engines. However, the project faces a significant challenge: ensuring interoperability with American F-35 jets, which are widely used by all three countries.

This alliance creates competition for the SCAF (Future Combat Air System), a similar project involving France, Germany, and Spain. While the SCAF and GCAP initiatives share similarities, the GCAP has announced tighter deadlines, with its Italo-British-Japanese aircraft expected to be ready before the Franco-German-Spanish models. Nevertheless, Leonardo's CEO, Roberto Cingolani, has stated that competition is not the primary focus. He indicated that collaboration between the two projects could be possible due to their similarities, though a merger is not being considered.

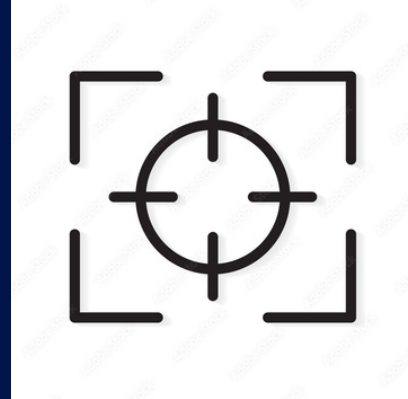
Sources:

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- Le Monde : "Avion militaire du futur : Royaume-Uni, Italie et Japon lancent leur société commune", 16/12/2024 ;
- Leonardo : "Global Combat Air Programme industry partners reach landmark agreement to deliver next generation combat aircraft", 13/12/2024.



5.1. The combat capabilities of the Chengdu J-36 Stealth fighter unveiled

The Chengdu J-36 represents a significant technological leap for China, which aims to assert its air dominance in the Indo-Pacific region. The aircraft's tailless configuration with delta wings minimizes radar signature while optimising flight performance. This innovative design replaces traditional vertical stabilisers with computer-assisted electronic flight control systems, enhancing manoeuvrability while reducing drag.



These features enable the J-36 to undertake long-range, high-speed missions, with an estimated maximum range of 3,000 km, positioning it as a key player in geopolitically sensitive areas.

The integration of a tri-turbofan engine, the WS-10C, provides the J-36 with a speed capability exceeding Mach 2.5, coupled with exceptional reliability for extended operations, even without aerial refuelling. This architecture also allows it to carry a significant payload while maintaining high-performance levels. The fighter features internal compartments to reduce its radar footprint, enabling it to carry long-range air-to-air missiles and precision-guided munitions for targeting both ground and naval assets.

Its advanced avionics include AESA radar and electro-optical sensors, enabling precise, multi-target detection, complemented by electronic warfare systems to counter potential threats. China has presented this project with considerable media attention during the Mao Zedong commemoration events, signalling a clear strategic intent to demonstrate its ever-expanding military capabilities.

In terms of armament, the J-36 can carry YJ-12 missiles for maritime strikes and PL-15 missiles for long-range aerial engagements. Its versatile payload, combined with its stealth features, makes the J-36 an exceptionally adaptable platform capable of undertaking a broad range of missions.

Sources:

- 1. *Army Recognition*. (2024). *Breaking news: Exclusive secret combat capabilities of China's new Chengdu J-36 stealth fighter jet unveiled*.
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- 3. *Reuters*. (2024). *Images show new, novel Chinese military aircraft designs, experts say*.

