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In This Issue

CHINA: Non-Military Actions Likely Intended to Increase Positive Perception of Country

Summary: Recent anti-China rhetoric in the Pacific, Beijing's non-military responses, and its diplomatic missions worldwide likely suggest that Beijing is seeking to project an image of a peaceful country globally through diplomatic efforts. This likely represents Beijing's attempt to counter its national image of aggression.

Background: In 2013, the Chinese People's Republic (PRC) President Xi Jinping assumed power. Following the election, the PRC has experienced rapid economic growth and a rapid expansion in its military might. From 2013 to 2024, the PRC's defense spending increased by $146.6 billion, according to the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Since then, China has increased its military aggression in the South China Sea through the creation and militarization of disputed islands, running threatening military exercises, and harassing local powers, according to the Council on Foreign Relations. Beijing directs much of its aggression towards ~~Taiwan and~~ the Republic of China (ROC), viewing Taiwan as a breakaway territory that rightfully belongs to the PRC, according to the Council on Foreign Relations. As a result, the PRC has developed a reputation as a highly aggressive nation in the West and globally.

Regional Resistance to Chinese Aggression: Tokyo's recent rhetoric supporting Taiwan and denouncing Beijing's military assertiveness in the South China Sea likely represents increasing regional pushback to Chinese aggression. On 7 November, Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi stated that any military action against Taiwan by China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) would trigger a Japanese military response, according to *Time*. This represents a sharp departure from past statements from Tokyo, which had previously failed to comment on how Tokyo would respond to Beijing's aggression, according to AP News. This likely indicates that Tokyo, along with other island nations in the Pacific, perceives Chinese aggression as a serious threat. This likely also suggests that nations are taking notice of Beijing's military aggression.

Beijing's Response to Tokyo: Beijing likely responded to Tokyo's threats of military action against the PLA using nonmilitary means, rather than military ones, to contrast its peaceful image against Tokyo's military image. Rather than responding with displays of military force, Beijing responded to Takiachi's threats using peaceful yet impactful means, including issuing a travel advisory to all citizens to avoid traveling to Japan, according to *Al Jazeera*. Beijing has also ordered airline companies to reduce flights to Japan, slashing 900 flights in response to Takiachi's statement, according to *Arab News*. By using these non-military means to respond to Takiachi's remarks, Beijing likely looks to separate itself from Tokyo's militarized comment. Beijing likely aims to create the image of China as a peaceful nation to the rest of the world, despite facing military threats from neighboring nations.

Beijing's Diplomatic Footprint Worldwide: Beijing likely seeks to expand its diplomatic presence globally to foster the perception of a nation committed to solving international issues through peaceful means. In 2019, Beijing reported having 276 diplomatic posts, including embassies, consulates, and other missions, worldwide, according to the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations. In 2024, Beijing claimed the world's largest diplomatic network, surpassing the United States in the number of permanent missions, according to the Lowy Institute. These diplomatic missions have effectively enhanced trade relations, cooperation, and, most importantly, promoted worldwide peace, according to the *China Daily.* This likely indicates that Beijing seeks to replace its image of being militarily aggressive with a more peaceful and diplomatic one by establishing diplomatic missions worldwide. This may also represent an attempt by Beijing to turn attention away from its military power and toward its nation-building and peace-brokering activities.

Figure 1: A breakdown of the 11 largest diplomatic networks in the world. China runs the largest network. (Source: Statista)

Outlook and Implications: Beijing's nonmilitary response to regional pushback against its military aggression and growing diplomatic footprint globally likely aims to shift Beijing's national image from an aggressive regional power to a globalized, peaceful nation. Beijing likely responded to Tokyo's military rhetoric with non-military methods to contrast the two nations, with Beijing in a positive light. Beijing will almost certainly continue this approach to ensure it maintains pressure on its opposition while enhancing its national image as a country committed to maintaining peace. Beijing almost certainly maintains this image to draw attention away from its ever-expanding military might. Beijing also likely aims to continue expanding its diplomatic presence worldwide to ensure other nations view China as a nation committed to global peace, growth, and development. This likely represents another attempt by Beijing to shift its image from that of an aggressive regional power to one of a nation interested in global betterment. Through the use of nonmilitary methods against opposition in the Pacific and international diplomacy, China will likely continue to work on shifting its national image.

[Cade Cunningham]

IRAN: Almost Certain to Continue Military Threat Despite Economic, Political Struggles

Summary: Despite an ongoing economic crisis, which will likely continue, and probable domestic dissatisfaction, Tehran will almost certainly remain a threat, especially to regional stability, in 2026. There is a roughly even chance that the regime will make some small reforms, but these reforms would almost certainly serve to further consolidate regime power, not democratize or liberalize. Tehran will almost certainly seek to rebuild its military power, both in terms of its conventional military and its proxy network, and expand its political influence.

Background: In June 2025, the 12 Day War resulted in 627 Iranians killed, including at least 41 high-ranking military officials and nuclear scientists, according to Reuters. The war also badly damaged, but did not fully destroy, three key Iranian nuclear facilities, although at least part of Tehran's stockpile of near-weapons grade uranium survived, according to *The New York Times*. After the war, Tehran suspended its cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), triggering snapback sanctions, according to Reuters. This follows the overthrow of the Syrian Assad regime, a key ally of Tehran, in December 2024; the new government of Ahmed al-Sharaa has no formal diplomatic ties with Tehran, has been intercepting Iranian weapons shipments to Lebanese Hezbollah (LH), and has reportedly expelled Iranian-backed militias, including LH, from the country, according to CNN and Iran International. Over the past two years, Israeli military actions have significantly degraded LH's capabilities, and Beirut is attempting to disarm and gain control over the group, according to the Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center.

Economic Prospects Likely Very Poor: The Iranian economy will likely experience significant downturn in 2026, primarily due to the reimposition of United Nations snapback sanctions on 28 September. While Moscow and Beijing have refused to implement the sanctions, the European Union (E.U.), British, and American sanctions will very likely have a significant impact on the Iranian economy. From August to late October, inflation reached at least 40%, and possibly as high as 50%, according to Reuters. Furthermore, the unemployment rate rose from 7.6% to 9.2% in 2025, according to the International Monetary Fund. As sanctions remain in effect, this economic downturn will almost certainly worsen. However, Tehran will likely avoid the worst impacts of the sanctions through its continued economic ties with Moscow and Beijing. These economic ties will almost certainly intensify, as both Moscow and Tehran are largely isolated from the global economic system and rely on one another to maintain their economic and military capacity. Tehran will also likely seek deeper economic ties with non-Western aligned countries, such as Pakistan, which also opposed the reactivation of snapback sanctions. These economic ties will likely prevent the total collapse of the Iranian economy but will almost certainly not preempt a significant economic downturn.

Domestic Stability: There is a roughly even chance that Tehran will face significant public discontent in 2026, but almost no chance that this would lead to the overthrow of or meaningful reform within the regime. Economic downturn will almost certainly lead to increased private discontent with the government, and there is a roughly even chance that this discontent will result in large-scale protests against the regime. If this occurs, the regime will almost certainly respond by cracking down on dissent and increasing its repression, rather than reform, as it did after the 2022 protests. Militias opposed to the regime, most notably Baloch militias in the southeast, likely lack the ability to significantly threaten the regime. While the 29 November merger of Jaish al Adl with other Baloch militia groups will likely enhance the groups' effectiveness, it remains unlikely to significantly impact the regime.

Government Reform: Mild reform, aimed at slightly decentralizing the government and increasing its resilience in the event of another attack, will likely continue. On 7 July, two weeks after the end of the 12 Day War, Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian announced that Tehran would delegate an increased share of its power to regional governors, stating "We have delegated all powers to the governors, the governors in the provinces represent the president so that if we are martyred, the people's work will not be delayed," according to Iranian news source Khabar Online News Agency. This almost certainly reveals that Tehran fears a renewal of conflict could decapitate its political leadership. However, Pezeshkian also noted that the governors must "act within the framework of the general policies of the Supreme Leader," and Tehran retains significant control over the electoral process. Therefore, while some decentralization in the form of delegating certain powers to regional authorities in the event of a crisis will likely continue, true decentralization will almost certainly not occur. Tehran will likely retain day-to-day control over most significant policies and will likely intensify its control over regional politics and civil society. Therefore, decentralization will almost certainly not reform or weaken the regime's control, but instead almost certainly serves to consolidate Tehran's power.

Political and Diplomatic Influence: Tehran will almost certainly continue its efforts to bolster its political and diplomatic influence in neighboring countries, likely with mixed results. Iranian-backed Iraqi political parties will likely play a significant role in the composition of the new Iraqi government following the country's parliamentary elections on 11 November, according to the Institute for the Study of War. Although these parties will almost certainly not control Baghdad or the prime minister's position outright, they will likely exercise increased influence within the government, to Tehran's almost certain benefit. Tehran will almost certainly prioritize attempting to expand its influence within Syria due to the country's vital position as a corridor between LH and Iran. Sharaa will likely not accept deep political or diplomatic ties with Tehran for multiple reasons. First, Tehran's status as one of the Assad regime's key supporters makes it highly unlikely that Sharaa would trust or seek relations with it. Secondly, deeper political and diplomatic relations with Tehran would likely be a liability, rather than an asset to Sharaa, who is attempting to increase the country's diplomatic and economic ties with the U.S. and E.U. Furthermore, the presence of Iranian and Iranian-backed military and political elements would likely aggravate Jerusalem and prompt continued Israeli military actions within Syria. Therefore, Sharaa will likely continue to mostly shun Tehran and seek relations elsewhere. In 2026, Tehran will almost certainly have Beijing and Moscow as firm allies, with some allies in Baghdad and Islamabad, and very few allies in other governments.

Proxy Network: Tehran will almost certainly attempt to maintain its proxy network despite widespread economic downturn. Authorities in Erbil reported several attacks by Tehran-backed militias in 2025, while Aden and Damascus reported interdicting Iranian weapons being sent to the Houthis and LH, respectively, according to CNN. Because the proxy network offers Tehran the ability to project power in

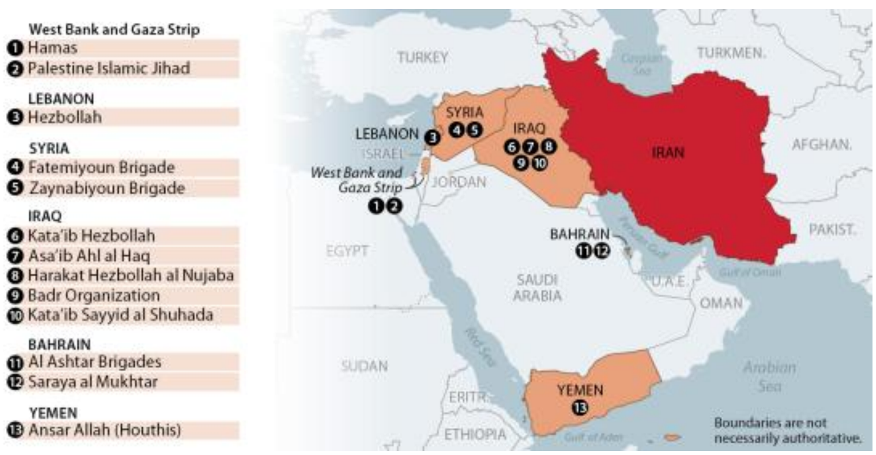

Figure 2: Map of Iranian Proxies in the Middle East (Source: Congressional Research Service)

the absence of strong diplomatic ties and confront its enemies militarily with relatively low risk of escalation or direct retaliation, Tehran will almost certainly prioritize attempting to arm, rebuild, and expand its proxies, even to the point of prioritizing these proxies over domestic difficulties. However, the proxy network will almost certainly remain significantly degraded over the course of 2026 due to Israeli military activity against many of these proxies, Beirut's ongoing struggle against LH, and Damascus' opposition to proxies within Syria and Lebanon.

Conventional Military Capabilities: Alongside attempting to rebuild its proxy network, Tehran will almost certainly prioritize rebuilding and expanding its conventional military forces. Tehran will almost certainly focus first on rebuilding its air defenses, weapon production sites, and ballistic missile stockpiles, destroyed or severely depleted during the war. Tehran will likely attempt to expand its drone production for its offensive use, to supply its proxies, and to raise revenue by selling drones to Moscow. Tehran is also in the midst of a modernization push, which will likely be less of a priority compared to rebuilding its destroyed stockpiles and defenses. On 29 November, Tehran unveiled multiple new naval vessels, according to Critical Threats. On 1 December, leaked Russian military-industrial documents revealed that Tehran has purchased 16 Su-35 air superiority fighters, to be delivered by the end of 2027, according to *Military Watch*. Due to the risk of military conflict with Jerusalem and others, Tehran will almost certainly not make significant steps towards creating a nuclear weapon. However, the regime will almost certainly maintain the pretense that it might to maintain the semblance of power.

Outlook and Implications: Tehran will almost certainly remain a potent threat in 2026, as it prioritizes enhancing the regime's resilience and rebuilding military power over addressing its economic crisis or domestic dissatisfaction. While internal pressures will likely limit Tehran's regional reach throughout 2026, it will likely expand its influence in Iraq and attempt to rebuild its power in Lebanon, Yemen, and Syria, as well as its direct power. If successful, Tehran would likely pose a significant threat to regional stability again within the next five years.

[Christina Muchow]

RUSSIA: Moscow Likely to Encircle the "Fortress Belt" of Ukraine

Summary: On 1 December, Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov informed President Vladimir Putin that Russian forces seized Pokrovsk and Vovchansk. These gains strengthen Moscow's drive deeper into eastern Ukraine and support efforts to encircle the "Fortress Belt." Throughout November, Russian units pushed west and expanded their control faster than in any previous month of the war. This momentum shows that Moscow now relies on sustained offensive pressure to break Ukrainian defenses and set conditions for further advances.

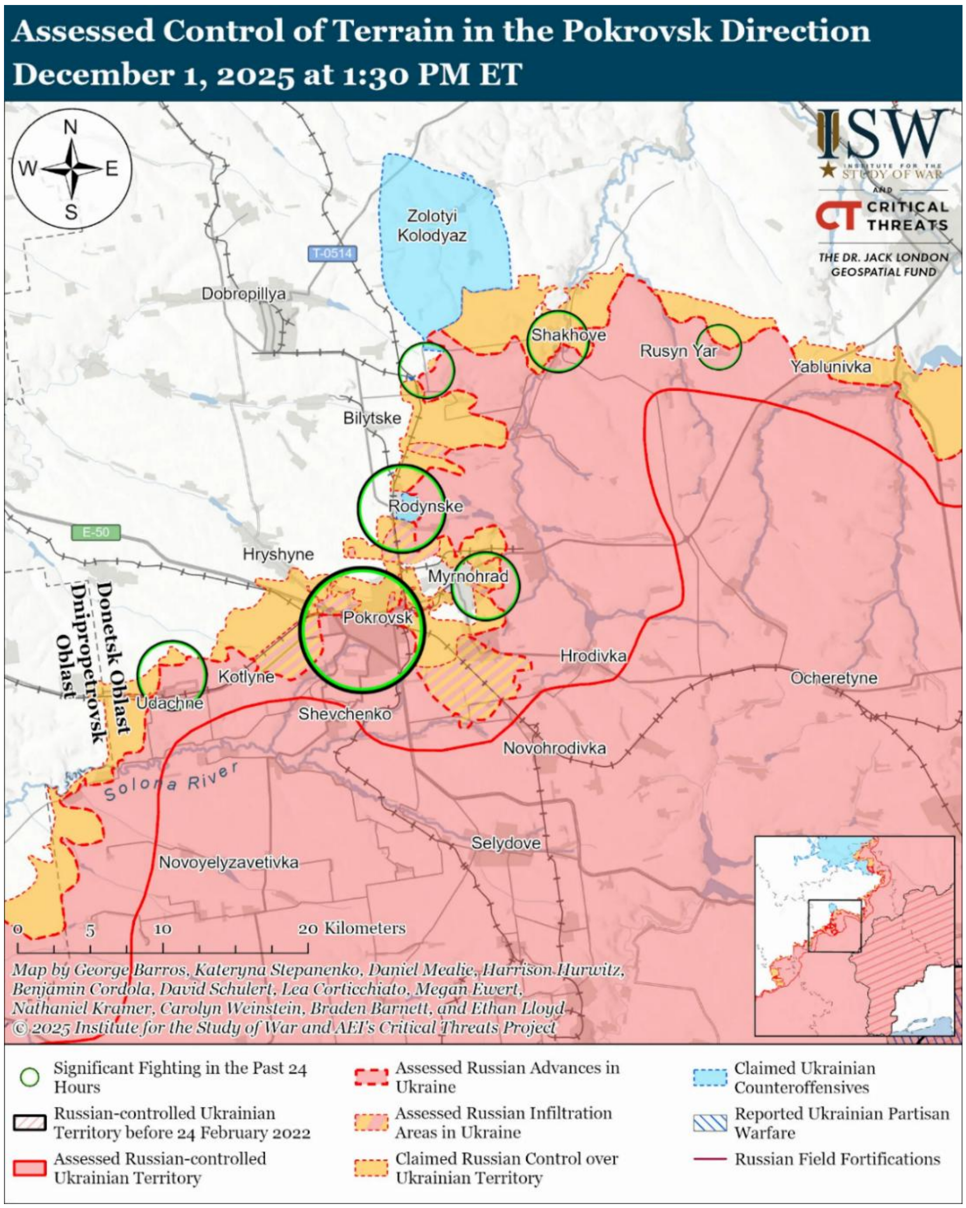

Figure 3: Map of significant Russian advances as of 1 December. (Source: Institute for the Study of War)

Background: In recent months, Russian forces have repeatedly infiltrated around Pokrovsk and Vovchansk to degrade Ukrainian defenses and create freedom of maneuver for their follow-on units. Pokrovsk, located southwest of Ukraine's "Fortress Belt," provides Russia with a potential approach into the wider defensive zone. The operational status of both cities remains uncertain, as Ukrainian forces may still hold pockets of resistance within urban areas. On 1 December, the Ukrainian 7th Rapid Reaction Corps of the Air Assault Forces reported that Russian forces became bogged down in urban warfare within Pokrovsk, contradicting previous claims from Russian military and political leaders, according to the Institute for the Study of War. Russian forces accelerated their infiltration operations in late October, setting the conditions for the recent advances. Both cities serve as major industrial hubs with significant rail infrastructure, which Moscow has viewed as a strategic point of interest for some time

Pattern of Premature Capture: Historical patterns suggest that Moscow will likely announce city captures before securing full control. During the battles for Bakhmut and Severodonetsk/Lysychansk, Moscow claimed control months before Ukrainian forces finished their withdrawal. Similar overclaims emerged in Mariupol in 2022 and other cities, indicating a consistent approach in Russian operational reporting. This pattern reflects how doctrinal differences between Russian and Western militaries. Russian forces often consider a city captured when they reach the administrative center, raise a flag, or displace Ukrainian units from key districts. These conditions usually occur well before fighting fully ends. Such announcements likely boost domestic morale and signal progress to higher command. Russian forces will likely need more time than anticipated to completely capture the city and advance westward around the "Fortress Belt."

Change in Operational Planning: Moscow has probably shifted its operational planning. In October and November, Russian forces gained an estimated 270 square miles, about double their average monthly gains earlier in the conflict. Improved coordination among combined arms units, more effective exploitation of Ukrainian defensive gaps, and a higher tempo of sustained offensive operations likely drive these gains. If this trend continues, Russian forces will maintain increased operational momentum, apply greater pressure on Ukrainian positions, and influence the pace of future engagements in the region. This will likely lead to greater Ukrainian losses and afford even more freedom of movement for Russian forces.

Encirclement of the "Fortress Belt": Moscow will likely bypass the Fortress Belt rather than attack through it, conserving the bulk of its forces for future operations and enabling maneuver through the flatter terrain of Eastern and Central Ukraine. The Fortress Belt presents a highly defensible region in Ukraine, strengthened over decades by Ukrainian forces. Russian attempts to penetrate it in 2022 failed to achieve their objectives, demonstrating the challenges of direct assaults. This approach could increase operational tempo and allow Russian units to exploit weaknesses in Ukrainian defensive lines outside the fortified zone.

Outlook and Implications: Russian forces will likely require several weeks to months to fully secure Pokrovsk and Vovchansk. Once under Russian control, Moscow will very likely leverage the cities' logistic infrastructure to support operations bypassing the "Fortress Belt." There is a roughly even chance that current reports of city captures are premature, and Ukrainian resistance could remain sporadic, but Kyiv currently lacks the manpower to retake these locations. Russian forces will likely exploit this momentum during the winter months to advance further and consolidate gains, increasing pressure on Ukrainian defensive lines and expanding freedom of movement for follow-on operations.

[Bennett Kidder]

RUSSIA: Protracted War in Ukraine Will Likely Harm Long-Term Economic Stability

Summary: Russia will almost certainly face long-term economic instability because of its ongoing war in Ukraine. Moscow's dependence on energy exports, combined with sustained Western sanctions and military expenditures, will likely erode its fiscal resilience and slow growth. Over the next five years, Russia's economy will likely not collapse, but it will likely stagnate, increasing the risk of domestic unrest and diminishing Moscow's global influence. The Kremlin's efforts to pivot toward non-Western markets will likely provide partial relief, but not enough to offset the structural damage caused by isolation and war-related costs.

Background: Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 triggered sweeping sanctions from Washington, the European Union, and allied partners. These measures targeted Russia's financial institutions, energy exports, defense industry, and access to global markets. Sanctions reduced Russia's trade with Western economies by nearly 90 percent between 2021 and 2023, according to a 2023 report by the Congressional Research Service. Moscow weathered the shock by raising oil and gas prices in 2022 and 2023 to stabilize revenues, and trade with China, India, and Turkey surged. Russia's Gross Domestic Product grew by 3.5 percent in 2023 and 3.2 percent in 2024, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF). However, by mid-2025, growth slowed sharply. The IMF now projects only 0.9 percent expansion in 2025 and 1.0 percent in 2026. To offset declining revenues, Moscow's

Figure 4: Status of the Russia-Ukraine War as of 24 November (Source: The BBC)

parliament raised the Value-Added Tax from 20 to 22 percent and introduced new levies on energy firms. These measures have strained small businesses and consumers, contributing to inflation and reduced domestic demand, according to Reuters. Ukraine's drone strikes on Russian oil infrastructure have further reduced refining capacity by 10 percent, tightening Moscow's war financing. Sanctions and military spending have created inflationary pressures, reduced foreign investment, and increased capital flight, according to RAND analysts.

Energy Dependence and Sanctions Pressure: Russia's long-term economic stability will likely erode due to declining energy revenues and persistent sanctions. Moscow relies on oil and gas for over 50 percent of its federal budget, and Western restrictions have sharply curtailed access to European markets. Natural gas exports to Europe fell by 25 percent between 2022 and 2024, and pipeline infrastructure remains underutilized, according to the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Although China and India have increased purchases of Russian crude, they demand steep discounts. In 2023, the Russian Urals crude traded at $20–$25 below Brent benchmarks, reducing profit margins, according to the Guardian. This constraint almost certainly limits fiscal flexibility and undermines Moscow's ability to fund military operations and social programs.

Domestic Instability Risks: Economic stagnation will likely increase social unrest and elite fragmentation. Rising inflation, labor shortages, and inequality are straining households and small businesses. Real wages declined by 8 percent in 2024, and unemployment in regional cities has risen sharply, according to the Carnegie Endowment. Moscow's increased reliance on regressive taxation and reduced subsidies will likely heighten dissatisfaction among middle-class Russians. Protests in Yekaterinburg and Novosibirsk in late 2024 over pension reforms and fuel prices suggest growing discontent. If economic conditions deteriorate further, the probability of sustained unrest and elite defection will likely increase.

Strategic Decline in Global Influence: Russia's weakened economy will likely reduce its ability to project power globally. Moscow's military modernization programs have slowed due to budget constraints and limited access to Western technology, according to the Geneva Center for Security Policy. As Russia's GDP growth stagnates, its capacity to sustain foreign influence operations, arms exports, and diplomatic initiatives will almost certainly diminish. Moscow's pivot toward Beijing may provide short-term relief, but it will likely increase dependence on

Chinese capital and technology. Over time, this shift will probably reduce Moscow's strategic autonomy and bargaining power in global affairs.

Outlook and Implications: Russia will almost certainly experience long-term economic stagnation, with GDP growth hovering near 1 percent through 2026. Sanctions will likely continue to erode energy revenues, while domestic unrest will probably intensify as fiscal pressures mount. Moscow's global influence will almost certainly decline, leaving it vulnerable to external influence and increasingly reliant on Beijing. Russia's economic decline will almost certainly weaken its ability to act as a major power, but the risks of aggression remain high. If Moscow perceives its strategic position as untenable, it may resort to asymmetric tactics, including cyber operations, disinformation campaigns, and covert destabilization efforts. These risks will likely persist even if conventional military operations in Ukraine slow or cease.

[Sam Hurley]

RUSSIA: Kyiv Likely to Reject Drafted Peace Terms

Summary: Kyiv will likely reject the proposed peace deal due to the territorial and military concessions it includes. The draft peace plan imposes significant concessions, including military reductions and territorial losses. European countries have expressed opposition to the proposal, signaling resistance and reinforcing Kyiv's stance. Kyiv and the European Union will likely seek to renegotiate for stronger concessions by Moscow rather than accept terms that undermine Kyiv's sovereignty.

Background: On 21 November, media outlets leaked a drafted peace deal presenting 28 compromises between Kyiv and Moscow. The plan emerged secretly and appeared as a 28-point framework, according to the *Telegraph*. The draft proposes limiting the Ukrainian military to 600,000 troops, recognizing Crimea, Luhansk, and Donetsk regions as Russian territory and designating the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions as frozen front lines, according to AP News. Furthermore, Moscow would receive more provisions such as gradual lifts of sanctions, Ukraine's restriction of joining North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and invitation to rejoin the G8, according to AP News. The plan immediately faced heavy opposition from the European Union and NATO due to the concessions included. For example, various leaders in EU and NATO have come out and criticized the draft as "favor[ing] Moscow," according to *Kyiv Post*. German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, the UK prime minister Keir Starmer, and the French President Emmanuel Macron reiterated that any provisions

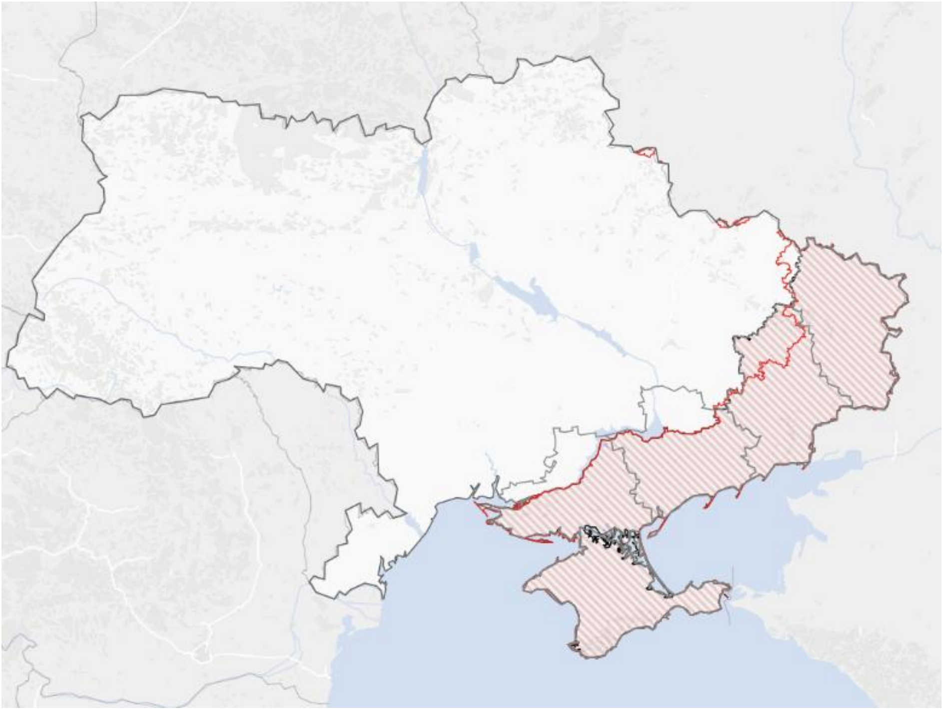

Figure 5: Current territorial control in Ukraine (Source: The Telegraph)

involving the EU or NATO would require the consent of their members before being finalized, according to Euro News. On 23 November, officials revised and reduced the drafted plan to nineteen points with undisclosed changes, according to the BBC.

Kyiv Under Pressure: Zelensky will likely reject the peace deal due to the heavy concessions imposed on Kyiv. Under the plan, Kyiv must withdraw from parts of Donetsk and create a demilitarized zone that recognized as part of Russia, according to AP News. By permanently barring NATO membership, the plan would significantly restrict Ukraine's security guarantees. The plan will also likely limit Ukraine's ability to modernize its military and expand their air force capabilities. Furthermore, Zelensky has repeatedly ruled out the idea of surrendering the entire Donbas to Moscow for peace, according to *Telegraph*. This stance suggests that Kyiv will likely reject the deal and seek a more balanced compromise.

European's Continued Support: The European Union will likely sustain military and financial support for Kyiv and press for a counter-proposal to reshape the draft with alternative peace terms. Berlin, Paris, and the London have reaffirmed their "full and unwavering support" for Kyiv, according to Kyiv Post. Additionally, EU ministers criticized the points, warning that "rewarding Russian aggression would undercut European security," according to *National Security Journal*. Leaders also emphasized that any provisions involving NATO or the EU require full member consent, limiting the possibility of one-sided concessions. European leaders are likely unwilling to endorse the peace deal and push for its own peace framework to preserve European and alliance unity.

Escalated Military Pressure: Moscow will likely escalate military pressure to force Kyiv into concessions. Moscow did not include Ukraine and the EU in the drafting process, according to Reuters. This exclusion highlights that Moscow's likely intends to negotiate provisions that fit their vision of the aftermath of the fighting. Furthermore, Moscow is advancing near Pokrovsk and escalating missile strikes despite the drafted deal, according to the *National Security Journal*. These strikes suggest Moscow will likely intensify military operations to compel Kyiv into accepting a peace deal that limits its sovereignty.

Outlooks and Implications: Until further details of the plan emerge, Kyiv will likely reject the current peace deal terms and press for stricter concessions on Moscow. Additionally, the EU will likely continue their unwavering support for Kyiv through military deals and financial assistance.

The strong opposition to the original 28-point draft clearly underlines the risk of fractures within the transatlantic alliance. Because the EU and Kyiv were excluded from the drafting, the EU will likely respond by advancing its own negotiation framework that demands stricter concessions from Moscow. In turn, Moscow will likely escalate military pressure against Kyiv to force acceptance of the current peace terms. The current uncertainty suggests that negotiations will likely remain prolonged and contentious.

[Ashley Calogero]

INDIA–PAKISTAN: Border Standoff Likely Risks Repeated Clashes

Summary: New Delhi and Islamabad continue to posture militarily along the Line of Control (LoC) and the international border. Their actions make limited clashes the most probable outcome over the near term. Both governments exploit border incidents to signal resolve, maintain domestic legitimacy, and test adversary thresholds. The interplay of nuclear deterrence, evolving tactics, and rapid escalation means sporadic firefights, retaliatory strikes, and repeated crises will likely persist.

Background: On 22 April, gunmen killed 26 civilians, mostly tourists, in a meadow near Pahalgam in Indian-administered Kashmir. The Indian government immediately blamed Pakistan-based militants and responded with forceful military and diplomatic measures. Over subsequent nights the two armies exchanged small-arms fire and light machine-gun bursts across the LOC and international border in multiple sectors (Kupwara, Baramulla, Poonch, Naushera, Akhnoor and Pargwal); the LoC divides the contested Jammu and Kashmir between India and Pakistan along the ceasefire line established during the 1971 Indo-Pak War. Authorities reported multiple nights of “unprovoked firing” by Pakistani posts; Indian forces said they responded proportionately. The violence sparked border closures, suspension of treaties, and diplomatic expulsions, plunging bilateral ties between the two nuclear states deeper into crisis.

Figure 6: Map of the Kashmir region, current borders, and conflicted territories. (Source: ABC News)

Domestic Incentives: Both New Delhi and Islamabad almost certainly gain domestic political capital from appearing strong on national security and Kashmir. In India, popular outrage after the Pahalgam massacre created pressure for a forceful response; in Pakistan, military leaders faced internal demands to uphold sovereignty. Under these conditions, each side found coercive signaling through limited firing, retaliation, and border-post shelling as an attractive way to satisfy domestic audiences without risking broader war. That dynamic makes repeated low-intensity clashes more likely than dramatic diplomatic breakthroughs or de-escalation.

Evolving Border Tactics: The structural ambiguity of recent cross-border clashes will likely make future border crises more probable and more volatile once triggered. The 2025 clashes did not rely solely on traditional small-arms or artillery exchanges. Reports indicate use of light-machine guns, sporadic shelling, and attempts at infiltration, reflecting growing diversity and sophistication in border tactics. Such tactics compress decision cycles: a gunshot or mortar round may trigger immediate retaliation, leaving little time for de-escalatory diplomacy. The multiplicity of border sectors, and the fact that incidents cluster unpredictably along them, means neither side can reliably distinguish a militia strike from a major offensive until exchanges begin.

Nuclear Deterrence: Both states' nuclear arsenals almost certainly anchor strategic restraint, reducing incentives for full-scale war. However, nuclear weapons also amplify the cost of miscalculation. In the current environment with issues of rapid escalation potential, domestic political pressure, and ambiguous provocations, the threshold for nuclear signaling will likely lower if either side misinterprets a limited strike as a precursor to a major offensive. That risk increases the stakes of border flare-ups and stresses the management of limited crises, making periodic but contained confrontations more likely while full-scale war becomes less probable.

Outlook and Implications: Given these dynamics, India–Pakistan border tensions will likely remain a recurring security equilibrium, leading to a cycle of provocation, limited violence, signaling, then temporary calm before it repeats. In the near future, further cycles of cross-border firings, localized strike-and-retaliate episodes, and escalatory but controlled exchanges will likely occur. Crises will likely remain contained because of nuclear deterrence and domestic constraints, but unpredictable triggers like militant attacks, infiltration attempts, and border skirmishes could flare into broader confrontations. The structural drivers of rivalry, mainly unresolved territorial claims, political incentives, asymmetric tactics, and escalation ambiguity, will almost certainly continue to produce instability in the region. Unless both capitals revisit dispute resolution mechanisms and build durable confidence-building measures, clashes will more than likely remain an entrenched feature of the region's security landscape.

[Armaan Needles]

MEXICO: Youth Protests Highly Likely to Increase Regional Violence

Summary: Anger over the assassination of local officials has sparked youth-led protests across Mexico. These protests have already turned violent and will likely continue to do so as group think continues to set in and as criminal groups, political actors, and Mexico City begin to get involved.

Development: On 15 November, thousands of mostly Gen-Z demonstrators marched across multiple Mexican states after the assassination of Uruapan Mayor Carlos Manzo, a killing that protesters blame on cartel penetration within the government, according to *El Universal*. Marches occurred in at least 50 cities, according to *Milenio*. Rioters in Mexico City also breached security fencing near the National Palace. At least 100 police officers and several dozen civilians sustained injuries during these clashes. according to the Associated Press. Protest organizers used social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram to coordinate rapid mobilization, allowing demonstrations to scale faster than police anticipated, according to *BBC Mundo*.

Analysis: Security forces will likely intensify their presence in high-risk urban centers, which will increase opportunities for confrontation and unintentional escalation. Cartel groups will likely exploit police diversion to expand territorial control or target symbolic figures, knowing that large-scale protests strain state resources. The movement's decentralized structure and digital coordination will almost certainly reduce the government's ability to negotiate with leadership. As protests continue, frustrated youth will likely adopt more confrontational tactics, increasing the risk that small violent elements become broader demonstrations. The scale of these protests and riots will likely pressure local officials to use harsher crowd control measures, raising the probability of civilian casualties and subsequent retaliatory mobilization.

[Anthony Rizza]

COSTA RICA: Rising Violent Crime Likely to Increase Drug Trafficker Influence

Summary: A recent rise in violent crime in San José is almost certainly creating operational openings for cartels and trafficking groups. Weakened local deterrence will likely allow these groups to deepen territorial control while strengthening recruitment and expanding smuggling routes.

Development: As of the first quarter of 2025, San José now accounts for about 34 percent of the nation's total murders, according to *Entorno*. Costa Rican authorities report that turf wars between growing organized crime groups are to blame for many of these murders. From Q1 of 2023 to Q1 of 2024, vehicular thefts rose 19 percent, according to *The Tico Times.* Costa Rican law enforcement have stated that this crime increase marks a shift from Costa Rica's prior role as a transit country for drug trafficking from southern countries to the north, according to *Control Risks.* The homicide rate increased from 12.2 per 100,000 people in 2022 to 17.2 per 100,000 people in 2023, the highest recorded homicide rate in the country's history, according to the United States' Diplomatic Security Service.

Analysis: This historic rise in violent crime will almost certainly intensify. Police forces will likely remain spread too thin to adequately respond to threats in an effective manner. This ineffectiveness from the local government is highly likely to increase public reliance on cartel groups for protection. This will almost certainly grow the influence of these groups and expand their capabilities.

[Anthony Rizza]

HONDURAS: Election Fraud Claims Likely to Lead to Post-Election Unrest

Summary: Claims of electoral fraud preceding the 30 November vote have likely increased the chances of violent demonstrations. Both internal and international actors have warned that the public perception of institutional biases will highly likely cause the public to contest these results through violent means.

Development: On 30 November, Honduras citizens will execute the vote for their next president. But in the past week of campaigning, each of the three candidates have increased their accusations of fraud towards the other candidates according to Reuters. The electoral council in Honduras has historically faced criticism for partisan disputes and institutional disagreements, further undermining public trust in their ability to accurately count the votes according to the Washington Office on Latin America. Recent military movements in areas within the country have also set a precedent for a highly contested election according to *Human Rights Watch.* Regional reports have emphasized how past elections, such as those in 2017, have created public distrust and more significantly, widespread violence according to *The Tico Times*. Internal security institutions have begun to prepare for unrest, but these preparations may provoke future conflicts according to *Stratfor.*

Analysis: Intensifying claims of election fraud in Honduras have almost certainly created near identical conditions to past instances of post-election unrest. Because of this, post-election unrest remains likely. Security forces and their resources will likely remain stretched too thin, causing their responses to insurrection to have minimal effectiveness. Tegucigalpa's inability to effectively respond will likely further erode any remaining public trust. In this period of perceived central weakness, disruptive actors will likely use this to their advantage to amplify claims of fraud and further increase public distrust in the government.

[Anthony Rizza]

NICARAGUA: Authoritarian Influence Will Likely Expand Regional Security Risks

Summary: Managua's accelerating authoritarian consolidation and expanding partnerships with Beijing, Moscow, and Tehran will likely increase regional instability and elevate long-term risks to U.S. strategic, economic, and homeland security interests. Managua's political repression, permissive environment for transnational criminal networks, and willingness to host U.S. adversaries will almost certainly strengthen external footholds in Central America.

Background: Since 2007, President Daniel Ortega and Vice President Rosario Murillo have consolidated full control over Managua's political institutions by dismantling checks on executive authority, according to the Congressional Research Service. After nationwide protests erupted in April 2018, security forces killed more than 300 civilians and detained thousands, triggering a severe human rights deterioration, according to Human Rights Watch. Rising domestic repression and economic decline have driven significant migration outflows toward Costa Rica and the United States, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Authoritarian Entrenchment Will Likely Continue Eliminating Democratic Constraints: Managua will likely continue deepening its authoritarian governance structure as the Ortega-Murillo regime expands political repression and removes remaining democratic constraints. The government has systematically arrested opposition leaders, revoked citizenship from critics, and seized independent media outlets since 2018, according to Human Rights Watch. Security forces and pro-government militias maintain tight control over civil society through surveillance, intimidation, and targeted detentions, according to the Organization of American States (OAS). Judicial reforms have further centralized power in the executive branch, allowing prosecutors and courts to criminalize dissent with minimal oversight, according to the Congressional Research Service. The regime's political survival now depends on eliminating institutional checks and preventing any organized challenge to its authority, according to regional analysts. The consolidation of state power has reduced space for political parties, NGOs, and university groups, contributing to steep declines in civic participation, according to the OAS. To ensure the regime's survival, these conditions will almost certainly remain and intensify. Effective civil society opposition will almost certainly not occur.

Managua’s Strategic Utility to U.S. Adversaries: Managua’s will almost certainly deepen its security, economic, and diplomatic partnerships with Moscow, Beijing, and Tehran as the regime seeks external supporters willing to underwrite authoritarian stability to offset international isolation. Moscow has rapidly expanded its use of intelligence and law enforcement cooperation with Managua. This includes a long-standing police training center widely assessed as an intelligence and security hub, according to the Congressional Research Service (CRS). In addition, Russian personnel have increased cooperation on cyber operations, law-enforcement training, and intelligence exchanges that strengthen the regime’s internal control, according to regional security assessments. In addition, Beijing has accelerated its engagement since Managua’s diplomatic shift in 2021, pursuing telecommunications upgrades, energy projects, and early-stage port discussions with potential dual-use implications, according to Stratfor. Beijing’s infrastructure negotiations increasingly mirror patterns seen in other Latin American states where China’s financing model yields long-term political influence, according to CSIS. Meanwhile, Tehran has expanded its footprint through higher-level diplomatic exchanges and new economic cooperation agreements, according to the Wilson Center. Tehran’s activities in Managua reflect its broader strategy of leveraging isolated authoritarian governments to build influence in the Western Hemisphere, according to regional analysts. These relationships collectively provide the Ortega-Murillo regime with economic and political insulation while giving adversarial states a stable foothold in Central America, according to CRS reporting. This cooperation will almost certainly lend all four regimes increased economic stability and increased diplomatic leverage. The four authoritarian regimes almost certainly intend to deepen their cooperation. This is likely due in part to a relative lack of other available partners, especially for Managua, Tehran, and Moscow. In addition, the presence of other stable authoritarian regimes will likely allow each regime to claim additional international legitimacy.

Criminal Networks Will Likely Exploit Weak Rule of Law and Economic Decline: Managua will likely remain a permissive environment for narcotrafficking, human smuggling, and illicit finance as corruption and weakened state institutions reduce effective law enforcement. Drug-trafficking organizations increasingly use Nicaraguan territory as a transit corridor for cocaine and precursor chemicals moving northward, according to the UNDOC. Weak judicial oversight and politicized policing have created opportunities for cartel-linked groups to operate with limited state interference, according to regional security assessments. Widespread corruption within customs, border forces, and municipal authorities facilitates money laundering and illicit cargo movements, according to UNODC reporting. Economic decline and restricted legal employment options have contributed to rising participation in smuggling networks, according to the International Monetary Fund. Migration flows from Nicaragua into Costa Rica and toward the United States continue to increase each year, driven by limited economic opportunity and escalating domestic repression, according to UNHCR. These structural weaknesses will almost certainly reinforce criminal organizations and undermine broader regional stability, according to Central American security monitors. These economic pressures will likely weaken the regime's stability, but not enough to pose a risk to the regime's survival.

Outlook and Implications: Managua will almost certainly remain a consolidated authoritarian state aligned with Moscow, Beijing, and Tehran through at least 2026. Foreign adversaries will almost certainly continue to expand their influence in Managua through diplomatic, military, economic, intelligence, and law enforcement means. The ongoing economic and humanitarian conditions will almost certainly persist. This will likely lead to an uptick in human trafficking, drug trafficking, and money laundering within and through the country. Taken together, Managua's political trajectory, foreign alignments, and criminal permissiveness will likely degrade regional stability and expand long-term strategic risks to U.S. interests.

[Gavin Packard]

BRAZIL: Unambitious Environmental Resolution Unlikely to Reduce Climate Change

Summary: The unambitious resolution of the Conference of Party 30 (COP30) will likely not reduce climate change, even with new policies enacted. Global warming will likely worsen without policies that restrict countries' use of fossil fuels. The resolution of the COP30 will also likely push countries that support climate action to commit to more actionable policies.

Background: On 22 November, the COP30 ended with a deal to triple the funding given to nations affected by global warming, according to NPR. The COP30's ultimate goal is to decrease the world's carbon emissions to combat climate change. In 2015, the COP21 approved the Paris climate agreement, according to CNN. Those who signed this agreement acknowledged limiting global warming to two degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels, however a detailed plan was not included. The Paris climate agreement also required countries to submit national climate plans every five years to hold them accountable. The latest report was due during the COP30, but 90% of countries failed to submit them before the deadline, according to CNN.

Climate Change Highly Likely to Worsen Without Restrictions on Fossil Fuels: Climate change will highly likely continue without a detailed plan for moving away from fossil fuels. The COP requires a consensus to reach a decision, often leading to weak deals. The resolution signed at the COP30 included a promise of $1 trillion to improve energy grids, infrastructure, and industrial decarbonization plans in developing countries and $5.5 billion to pay countries to keep their forests standing, according to AP News. Even with enacting new policies yearly, climate emissions still must drop heavily. The current policies would lead countries to drop their carbon emissions by 12% by 2035, but to avoid catastrophic warming it needs to drop five times that much, according to NPR. The COP30 highlighted an important gap in how businesses and governments view climate change. Businesses push the economy into renewables and clean electrification while governments find it harder to reach a consensus on how to approach global warming policies, according to Reuters. The COP30 ended without a clear roadmap on transitioning away from fossil fuels. This transition will likely still occur even without a pathway, but it will almost certainly occur in a less organized and more costly manner, according to Reuters.

Resolution of the COP30 Will Likely Push Supporting Countries to Action: The unambitious resolution of the COP30 will likely push countries supportive of climate change to commit to more aggressive policies. 80 nations publicly supported a roadmap to phase out fossil fuels during the COP30, according to AP News. However, other countries blocked the proposal. Brasilia faced pressure from Riyadh, Moscow, and other large fossil fuel producers to exclude phasing out fossil fuels, according to The Guardian. Andre Correa do Lago, the COP30 president, promised that his office would come up with roadmaps to guide the transition away from fossil fuels and to stop deforestation. Do Lago also agreed to meet with Bogota and Amsterdam to organize a fossil fuel phaseout conference for next April. The countries that supported phasing out fossil fuels began to write an initiative that would allow every country to choose their own policies for lessening their carbon emissions and would not require countries to sign-up for a firm deadline, according to The Guardian. Riyadh, Cairo, Tehran, and La Paz still opposed this initiative, calling it an unreasonable commitment for developing countries.

Outlook and Implications: The unambitious resolution of the COP30 will likely not reduce climate change due to the need for total consensus to enact new policies. Global warming will highly likely worsen without policies that restrict countries' use of fossil fuels. The new funding given to developing countries will likely help with current conditions, however, will likely lose their effectiveness without the acknowledgement of fossil fuels. Given the statistics given by NPR and the slow pace of COP discussions, carbon emissions will likely not be reduced by the amount needed by 2035. Therefore, increased global warming will likely occur. The resolution of the COP30 will likely push countries that support climate action to commit to more functional policies. The 80 countries support restricting fossil fuels will almost certainly come together with a new initiative to decrease carbon emissions. However, due to strong opposition, it will likely not decrease emissions enough to prevent continued warming. The supporting countries will likely continue to implement policies against climate change with the support of the public.

[Madison Turner]

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