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# WEEKLY RISK ROUNDUP

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KEY STORIES TO LOOK OUT FOR:



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President Biden tightens restrictions on several Chinese companies



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**Armenia/Azerbaijan**  
Intense fighting at border ends in ceasefire



## GLOBAL HEADLINES



### United States

#### President Biden tightens restrictions on several Chinese companies

On 12 November, United States President Joe Biden signed the Secure Equipment Act. This legislation is aimed at preventing companies judged to be a security threat from receiving new telecoms licenses. The legislation received bipartisan support from both the Democrats and the Republicans, with 420 votes for, and only four against in the House of Representatives, and was approved unanimously in the Senate.

The act stipulates that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) should no longer review license applications from firms deemed a threat to the security of the United States. In March of this year, the FCC identified five Chinese firms to be posing such a threat. Namely, these are Huawei, ZTE, the Hytera Communications Corporation, the Hangzhou Hikvision Digital Technology Company, and the Zhejiang Dahua Technology Company.

In addition to the Secure Equipment Act, the FCC has also proposed rules that would enable it to revoke licenses that have already received approval. In October, the FCC voted to withdraw the permit for China Telecom to operate in the US, citing national security restrictions.

China has subsequently denounced these restrictions. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign affairs claims that the US is acting without evidence and is deliberately manipulating national security concerns to suppress the international operations of Chinese firms.

**Comment:** The Secure Equipment Act is a rare display of bipartisanship in American politics. This would indicate that hawkish US policy towards China, described as America's primary 'peer competitor' in US defence strategy, will be a long-term feature of bilateral relations between the two countries. This is regardless of whether the Democrats or the Republicans control the White House in the future.

At the same time, President Xi Jinping has recently secured a third term, further consolidating his power over the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the wider country. Therefore, it is likely that Beijing will continue with moves that raise tensions with Washington and its allies, such as naval expansion in the South China Sea, exerting influence via the Belt and Road Initiative, and preparing for a potential annexation of Taiwan.

Mutual hawkish policy from both Washington and Beijing is likely to inhibit any areas both countries have shared interests. The recent agreement to reduce carbon emissions following COP26 demonstrates this. The Joint Declaration issued during the summit has been described as a symbolic gesture rather than meaningful cooperation.

It is a near certainty that China will respond with its own sanctions on American firms seeking to operate in China. Any Western organisation seeking to conduct operations in China should make decisions with this in mind and be aware that any operations will be subject to restrictions.

Further in this regard, it is likely that employees of these companies will be monitored by Chinese authorities whilst they are in the country. To that end, there is a significant risk of arbitrary arrest and detention for anyone suspected of espionage.



### Libya

#### Son of former ruler Gaddafi registers candidacy for December election

Saif al-Islam Muammar Gaddafi, son of Libya's former leader Muammar al-Gaddafi, registered on Sunday, 14 November, as a candidate for Libya's presidential and parliamentary elections, planned as part of a United Nations-backed peace plan next month. The first round of the presidential election is scheduled to take place on 24 December with the parliamentary round set for January 2022. At the time of writing, other candidates include military officer and commander of Libyan National Army (LNA) Khalifa Haftar, Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah, and speaker of Parliament Aguila Saleh.



**Comment:** Since the ousting of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 by NATO-backed forces, Libya has witnessed multiple deadly civil wars. The fighting subsided last year when the rival sides in Libya's conflict (the leaders from Libya's internationally recognised government and those from opposition forces led by General Khalifa Haftar) signed a ceasefire brokered by the United Nations. The ceasefire saw the formation of a new government with the mandate to prepare the nation for long-awaited elections.

On 12 November, French Prime Minister Emmanuel Macron hosted a conference on Libya. Centred around Libya's presidential election, the meeting was attended by leaders from twenty nations including Germany, Italy, the United States as well as United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, all voicing their support for the vote. Emphasizing the importance of this moment for a stable future of the nation, once again world leaders called for fair and inclusive elections.

Several candidates in the election are divisive figures and there are concerns that some may not recognise the election results. Such a scenario may spark a renewed political fracture which could escalate into open conflict. Voicing similar concerns, rights groups have cast doubt over whether the vote will be inclusive and credible. Among other threats, it is feared that current laws restricting the freedom of expression and press freedom have the potential to derail the presidential vote.

At present, Gaddafi is not seen as a frontrunner in the upcoming election, and he is unlikely to gather as much public support as the other candidates. Libyans remember his father's rule as a brutal regime that plunged the nation into a complex emergency, and this does not play in his favour. Out of political sight for years, he has not made any significant public appearance, or speeches and his political agenda remains unclear. In addition to this, he is also wanted by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity.



## Iran

### Damaging earthquakes strike in Hormozgan province

At least one person was killed, and several others were injured by a succession of strong earthquakes that hit southern Iran on Sunday, 14 November. The first two tremors measured 6.4 and 6.3 on the Richter scale and struck at the shallow depth of 10 kilometres. The epicentre was recorded at 59 kilometres north of the port city of Bandar Abbas in Hormozgan province.

In the aftermath of the event, images circulating on social media showed downed power lines and reported disruption to electricity in Bandar Abbas. The impact of these earthquakes was also reportedly felt in the Northern United Arab Emirates with residents in Abu Dhabi and Dubai reporting buildings shaking.

In the aftermath of the event, authorities reported that the nuclear power plant in nearby Bushehr Province had not been affected. Whilst relief operations continue, damage in the worst-hit areas is still being assessed.

**Comment:** Iran is a disaster-prone country. The nation is highly vulnerable to environmental risks due to numerous hazards that include earthquakes, floods, and droughts. Iran is geographically located in the active Alpine-Himalayan seismic belt and at the crossroad of three active fault lines. More than 70 percent of its urban areas sit in high-risk areas for earthquakes. Strong-magnitude and destructive earthquakes are not unusual and in the past, these have resulted in deaths and great financial loss. Data shows that since 1900, more than 180,000 Iranians have been killed by this type of natural disaster.

Individuals currently in country should anticipate further strong aftershocks over the coming days and weeks. These have the potential to cause further damage and disruption. Travellers to earthquake-prone areas should familiarize themselves with local safety procedures and follow the advice from the local authorities.



## United Kingdom

### Terrorism threat level raised to severe

On 15 November, the UK's Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC) raised the nationwide terrorism threat level from 'substantial' to 'severe'. A terrorist attack is now regarded as highly likely under the UK's index of threat



levels, of which the severe categorisation is the second-highest level of warning. The decision to raise the UK's terrorism threat level has been undertaken in response to two terrorist incidents that had taken place within a span of 31 days between 15 October and 15 November.

Home Secretary Priti Patel confirmed that the JTAC's decision to raise the UK's terrorism threat level had been undertaken in response to two terrorist incidents that had taken place within a span of 31 days between 15 October and 15 November.

The most recent of these two incidents occurred on 14 November after 32-year-old Emad al-Swealmen detonated an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) in a taxi outside the Liverpool Women's Hospital in Liverpool, Merseyside. The subsequent explosion resulted in the death of Emad al-Swealmen and injured a taxi driver who had managed to successfully flee the vehicle just following the detonation.

Investigations following the incident have led to the arrests of four individuals in Liverpool's Kensington area under the Terrorism Act 2000. Head of Counter Terrorism Policing Northwest, Russ Jackson, confirmed that all four individuals were suspected to have been associates of Emad al-Swealmen. They have since been released without charge.

On 15 October, Conservative MP Sir David Amess was stabbed and killed by 25-year-old Ali Harbi Ali at a constituency surgery in Leigh-on-Sea, Essex. Police established a connection to radical Islamic extremism as a potential motivation for Ali Harbi Ali's attack, although no definitive judgement has yet been reached by the UK justice system at the time of writing.

The advice issued by UK authorities in the wake of these incidents has focused on vigilance. Prime Minister Boris Johnson urging all members of the public to maintain a high level of situational awareness as a result of the increase in the UK terror threat level.

**Comment:** Prior to the JTAC's recent announcement, the last time a 'severe' terror threat level was implemented in the UK was between 3 November 2020 and 4 February 2021. The usage of the 'severe' category indicates that there is no existing government intelligence of any immediate risk to life, but that further attacks remain highly likely due to the frequency of attacks in recent weeks.

Terrorism in the UK has historically been undertaken by a variety of actors, including far-right extremists, dissident Irish nationalist groups and radical Islamists, among others. Of these, the most prominent driver of the current 'severe' terror threat level is the likelihood of further attacks related to Islamist extremism.

The usage of bladed weapons, homemade IEDs and vehicular-ramming attacks represent a set of common themes across UK terror attacks in the past five years. The October 2021 attack on Sir David Amess, the November 2021 Liverpool bombing, and the August 2018 Westminster attack illustrate these respective threats.

Lone-wolf attacks especially have become more frequent, though it is not uncommon for terrorist attacks in the UK to later be claimed by a terrorist group, or for an attacker to pledge allegiance to an extremist cause in some way prior to an incident.

Public venues and high-profile political figures such as MPs have regularly been targeted by both successful and would-be assailants. Train stations, music concerts, main city roads and the UK Houses of Parliament are all examples of locations deliberately targeted by terrorists in recent years.

Though it is impossible for the authorities to prevent every attack of this nature, the British Security Services, MI5, stated that 31 late-stage terror plots had been prevented in the past four years. Additionally, as highlighted by the Liverpool attack, police in Britain and other emergency services are able to respond rapidly to attacks and limit their potential to evolve into major mass casualty events.



## Uganda

### Fatalities following double bombing in Kampala

At least four people have died and at least 33 people have been injured following a double bombing in central Kampala. The blasts were located within proximity to both parliament and the central police station. The parliamentary building was evacuated, but only minor injuries were reported. This attack is the latest in a string of bombings that have taken place throughout the country, but which have centred on Kampala.



ISIS have claimed responsibility for the attack via the group's Amaq news agency on an affiliated Telegram account. This marks the first time IS has claimed responsibility for a suicide attack in Uganda since it began its operations in the country last month. The attack was claimed in the name of the IS' Central Africa Province (ISCAP) which has been linked to the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF). Whilst the official government death toll is four people, ISIS officials have claimed the scale of the blasts was larger. They allege that 30 people were killed in the attack.

**Comment:** Terrorist attacks in Uganda are common. ISCAP, ADF and Al-Shabaab have all claimed responsibility for attacks in recent years. However, the emergence of ISCAP in 2019 marked a shift in terrorist activity in East Africa. ISCAP is a combined group of two independent insurgencies: the ADF and Ansar Sunnah or Ahlus Sunnah Wal Jama'ah (ASWJ). Whilst the ties between the two groups is vague, its emergence has increased jihadist insurgencies in an area without a long history of radicalisation.

Terrorist attacks at the local level in Uganda have been on the rise due to uncertain political succession, socio-economic status, and growing discontent over differing religious beliefs. In Uganda, the predominant religion is Christianity, and the historical left-wing liberation movements that have gained power have been frequently hostile towards organised Islam. The Ugandan regime has sought to control Muslim elites to nullify any Islamic-based politics from occurring. As a result, they have alienated a portion of Muslim communities and created a space for radicalisation and insurgency to thrive.

Travellers in Uganda are advised to exercise increased caution at this time and maintain situational awareness when in crowded spaces, including events, restaurants, and public transport. The terror threat remains high and further attacks cannot be ruled out.



## Bulgaria

### Centrist party wins parliamentary elections

The anti-corruption 'We Continue the Change' party (PP) has won the parliamentary elections in Bulgaria. The official results showed that the new centrist party won 25.5 percent of the vote, based on 93 percent of ballots counted. The party was founded by two entrepreneurs, Kiril Petkov and Asen Vasilev just two months before the elections.

Bulgaria has been in a political deadlock since the two previous parliamentary elections in April and July produced an inconclusive outcome. Despite the PP winning the majority in this election, the next parliament will still have seven parties represented. The PP will attempt to form a coalition with the help of two small anti-corruption groupings and a Socialist party.

**Comment:** The twelve-year long era in which populist Boyko Borisov was the Prime Minister saw Bulgaria effectively dismantle democracy and the rule of law to an extent. Upon joining the EU in 2007, the GERB-led administration was linked to a number of scandals, such as a lack of transparency in public contracts and public funds. However, unlike his Hungarian or Russian counterparts, Borisov did not directly engage in attacks on human rights, minorities, and women's rights, which would have attracted the attention of EU governing bodies. Instead, he was concentrated on the separation of powers and control of state institutions.

Bulgaria is the European Union's poorest member state and the parliamentary election results are a much-needed step for the country. The new government will have to tackle a host of problems including a growing COVID-19 epidemic in the country and surging energy prices. Coalition talks are set to be challenging due to the political distance between the potential coalition partners. The PP are a young political party but their focus on anti-corruption and the energy sector have made them different to other traditional parties. They will be under scrutiny to provide the Bulgarian public with a stable and functioning government after so many months of uncertainty.



## Canada

### Severe storm causes flooding and landslides in British Columbia

One person is known to have died and many more are missing following two days of intense rainfall across the Pacific province of British Columbia. More than the monthly average of rainfall fell within 24 hours. The province is now experiencing severe flooding and landslides that have cut travel links throughout the region. Though the hardest hit area was the Fraser Valley with over 250 millimetres of rain, Vancouver and Vancouver Island also took a significant hit with 185 millimetres. In multiple areas of the province, thousands of people have been evacuated from their homes due to the risk of flooding. Search and rescue crews, emergency services and the military are working together to search for survivors and rescue those trapped.

The rainfall was caused by an atmospheric river, which is a narrow path of moist air that can contain an excessive amount of water vapour. This, combined with earlier snowfall, has made the conditions more dangerous due to already high-water levels. This weather has since been replaced by sunshine, but the aftereffects of the storm are expected to be significant and lasting.

**Comment:** This year, Canada has experienced the most extreme and diverse weather conditions in its history. In the summer, British Columbia had one of the hottest seasons on record which left dozens of people dead. The region also experienced more than 1,600 intense wildfires that burned almost 8,700 square kilometres of land. The situation reached a critical point in the city of Calgary, Alberta, where a climate emergency has been declared.

Atmospheric rivers are long, narrow bands of water vapour in the atmosphere that extend from the tropics to higher latitudes, acting like a pipe in the sky. British Columbia often sees around 25 to 30 of them a year. However, this latest event was particularly extreme. As climate change continues to lead to increasing climatic instability, climate scientists believe that it is likely more storms and atmospheric rivers of this magnitude or worse will occur.

Travellers are advised to avoid driving through floodwaters as a safety precaution. Dangerous obstacles are often unseen in floodwaters and there is the potential for strong undercurrents, even in low-level flooding. It is recommended that travellers adhere to all instructions issued by authorities, including orders to evacuate. Anticipate weather-related travel disruptions in the coming days and weeks.



## Armenia/Azerbaijan

### Intense fighting at border ends in ceasefire

Violent clashes have again erupted between Azerbaijani and Armenian forces in the border zones between the two territories and the contested region of Nagorno-Karabakh. The violence resulted in at least eight fatalities and multiple injuries on both sides. Around 24 Armenian soldiers remain missing because of the clashes.

The armed confrontations broke out during afternoon hours local time on Tuesday 16 November as Azerbaijani officials alleged a large-scale Armenian provocation in the border districts of Lachin and Kalbajar. Conversely, the Armenian defence ministry claimed that Azerbaijani forces instigated the hostilities by firing upon Armenian positions.

The violence was swiftly followed by a renewed ceasefire, which was mediated by Russian authorities. The agreement has since been tentatively upheld after initial opposition from the Azerbaijani government.

**Comment:** This week's clashes constitute the worst fighting the region has seen since the prolonged conflict of 2020, which began in September and ended when a Russia-brokered peace agreement was signed by both sides on 9 November 2020. Over 6,500 lives were lost amid the weeks of heavy ground clashes, artillery fire and aerial bombardment, including drone strikes.

Regional peace has remained fragile as sporadic exchanges of fire and armed encounters have occurred on several occasions. Although the ceasefire agreement stands, the threat of a resumption of conflict will continue



to linger unless significant diplomatic efforts are made to move from a 'frozen war' towards genuine reconciliation and mutual trust. The efforts of outside actors, including the Kremlin and The Council of Europe, alongside domestic civil society efforts that aim to bring together communities, will be required to aid such progression.

Amid the current tense diplomatic landscape, travellers to Armenia and Azerbaijan are advised to avoid all non-essential travel to the border regions encompassing Nagorno-Karabakh. Any travel to the border zones should only be conducted with enhanced security and risk mitigation measures in place prior to arrival.