

Executive Summary

There is a high risk of miscommunication, miscalculation, and “red lines” being crossed that could result in the escalation and expansion of current regional conflicts in the global environment. The prospect of conflict escalation across the Middle East, in particular, is the most unpredictable due to current volatility and the role of Iranian-supported proxy groups. This report assesses the likelihood of four major conflict escalation scenarios that have the potential to materialize across the globe, detailing diplomatic, informational, military, and economic (DIME) signposts and indicators of those scenarios transpiring, and analyzes other global conflict flashpoints.

The Russia-Ukraine war is unlikely to escalate into a NATO Article 5-linked conflict in 2024. Russia and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) are almost certainly taking steps to avert a direct military conflict. However, there is potential for military incidents — resulting from miscommunication or miscalculation — that could cause the Russia-Ukraine war to escalate and involve NATO, including Russia responding militarily if it perceives NATO as threatening its equities in the Black Sea region.

The current Israel-Hamas conflict is unlikely to expand to a second front with a war between Israel and Hezbollah, Palestinian militants, and Iranian proxy groups based in Lebanon and Syria in 2024. Hezbollah is unlikely to invade Israel and provoke a war that engulfs Lebanon and risks incurring US involvement. Instead, the current tit-for-tat exchanges of fire allow both Hezbollah and Iran to support Hamas in its conflict with Israel by tying up Israeli resources and striking its military infrastructure without provoking a damaging Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Similarly, Iran is unlikely to direct Hezbollah to invade Israel, instead reaping the strategic benefits of its regional proxy strategy wherein it supports the application of asymmetric pressure on the US and Israel while avoiding direct engagement. Moreover, Israel is unlikely to invade Lebanon or take action that would result in a second front while its current campaign to eradicate Hamas, and US pressure to avoid an escalation, persist.

The Red Sea and Gulf of Aden conflict between the Iran-backed Houthis and the US-led military coalition is unlikely to expand into a wider war waged across the Arabian Peninsula in 2024. The Houthis can likely achieve their political and military objectives by continuing to attack their adversaries in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden without turning their sights on American, British, or Israeli interests across the Arabian Peninsula. Instead, low-intensity conflict will very likely persist in the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, and Yemen in 2024 as Houthi rebels broaden their maritime campaign to attacks against American and British interests. US-led coalition airstrikes intended to, in their words, “disrupt and degrade” Houthi capabilities in Yemen are unlikely to halt the Houthis’ attacks.

China is very unlikely to invade Taiwan or initiate other forms of armed conflict with Taiwan in 2024. A combination of political, military, economic, and diplomatic factors will very likely make armed conflict with Taiwan unappealing to Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders, and other potential triggers of a conflict are equally unlikely. Instead, CCP leadership will very likely continue economic, cultural, and other efforts that seek to induce Taiwan’s people to willingly support unification with the mainland while

using coercive measures to deter Taiwan from moving toward formal independence, isolate Taiwan, and punish Taiwan's perceived supporters.

There are numerous other global conflict flashpoints to monitor in 2024, including but not limited to the following:

- North Korea is very unlikely to unilaterally restart armed combat with South Korea in 2024, despite threats from North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.
- Although a direct conflict between the US and Iran is unlikely, Iraq and Syria will likely see escalating conflict in 2024 as a proxy battleground while Tehran and its proxies pursue more direct opposition to Washington's presence on the ground, prompting US and Israel's continued retaliatory strikes on Iranian-supported forces, such as the February 7, 2024, US retaliatory strike on an Iraqi militant commander responsible for attacks on US forces.
- Armed conflict between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea in 2024 is unlikely, with neither country having much incentive to purposefully initiate a military conflict.
- Low-level conflict in Jammu and Kashmir between Indian military forces and Kashmiri insurgent groups backed by Pakistan will likely intensify in 2024, following increased attacks against Indian military forces in the latter half of 2023.

Russia-Ukraine War Unlikely to Escalate to Involve NATO

Assessment of Escalation Scenario

The current Russia-Ukraine war is unlikely to escalate into a NATO Article 5-linked conflict in 2024. Russia and NATO are almost certainly taking steps to avert a direct military conflict. Over the past 24 months, [Russian](#) and [Western](#) leaders have repeatedly stated they do not want a direct military confrontation. In this, it is very unlikely that either Russia or NATO would intentionally seek out an opportunity to attack one another.^{1 2} Additionally, Russia and the West almost certainly still [maintain](#) emergency, back-channel communications specifically [established](#) to avert conflict escalation, which have existed since the Cuban Missile Crisis. Moreover, Ukraine will not be [permitted](#) to join the NATO alliance until its current war with Russia is resolved and other governmental issues are addressed, reducing the risk of crossing Russia's red line concerning Ukrainian NATO membership. However, there is potential for military incidents — resulting from miscommunication or miscalculation — that could cause the Russia-Ukraine war to escalate beyond its current geographic constraints, which we judge is most likely linked to the strategic significance of the Black Sea region.

Beyond escalation in the Black Sea, there are several situations that could also likely lead to Russia-NATO military conflict, such as Russian [targeting](#) of Ukraine-NATO supply lines near NATO nation borders or escalation [linked](#) to a Belarus-NATO border incident. However, based on our awareness of Russia's foreign policy and national [security interests](#) in the [Black Sea region](#), we assess the other potential flashpoints to be less likely to result in a Russia-NATO conflict.^{3 4 5} Absent the conditions for a direct Russia-NATO military conflict, Russia will likely conduct the following actions through 2024 based on Russia's national leadership's stated objectives:

- Continuing military operations in an effort to eliminate political and military elements of the current Kyiv administration, which Moscow believes is aligned with neo-Nazism, in pursuit of Russia's strategic goal to install a pro-Russian government^{6 7 8}
- Continuing military strikes [against](#) advanced armaments in Ukraine provided by NATO countries and Armed Forces of Ukraine capabilities that Moscow determines represent a military threat to the Russian Federation; this objective is described by the Kremlin as "[demilitarization](#)"^{9 10 11}

¹ <https://www.rt.com/russia/588747-medvedev-direct-russia-nato-clash/>

² <https://tass.com/world/1713135>

³ https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/

⁴

https://thailand.mid.ru/en/o_rossii/vneshnyaya_politika/voennaya_doktrina_rf/#:~:text=The%20Military%20Doctrine%20reflects%20the,instruments%20of%20non%2Dviolent%20nature.

⁵ <https://tass.com/politics/1547371>

⁶ <https://tass.com/politics/1720931>

⁷ <https://tass.com/politics/1634173>

⁸ https://t.me/medvedev_telegram/426

⁹ <https://tass.com/politics/1409189>

¹⁰ <https://tass.com/politics/1634505>

¹¹ <https://www.rt.com/russia/591046-russia-know-ukraine-hide-weapons/>

- Continuing military strikes against Ukraine's defense-industrial base to degrade Ukraine's ability to plan and execute military operations^{12 13 14}
- Continuing influence operations [designed](#) to undermine Ukraine's national leadership and Western economic and military support to Kyiv¹⁵
- Conducting efforts to secure Russia's national security interests in Ukraine, specifically the strategic geography in Crimea, the "land bridge" corridor, and Russia's annexed Ukrainian oblasts in eastern Ukraine^{16 17 18}
- [Retaining](#) a dominant military presence with the Black Sea Fleet in the Black Sea region and defending Russia's main naval port at Sevastopol¹⁹
- Continuing strategic messaging towards the West concerning the implications of a Russia-NATO war and the [potential](#) for World War III^{20 21}
- Separate from Moscow's stated objectives, Russia will very likely continue [targeting](#) civilian infrastructure, including residential areas, to degrade Ukraine's morale and willingness to continue its war effort

Signposts and Indicators of Escalation Scenario

A Russia-NATO conflict would be more likely if NATO established an offensive military footprint in the Black Sea that Russia perceives as a direct military threat. These actions include but are not limited to the following:

- Türkiye authorizing the deployment of NATO military vessels in the Black Sea per the [Montreux Convention](#)
- NATO [deploying](#) military vessels into the Black Sea to [secure](#) Ukrainian or NATO interests
- NATO assuming a military posture in the Black Sea that upsets Russia's view of "[strategic parity](#)", with Moscow viewing it as a direct military threat
- NATO or Russia miscalculation concerning stated opposing threat red lines

As above, Russia very likely does not seek a direct conflict with NATO, but Moscow would very likely act militarily if the Kremlin believed NATO was attempting to directly and militarily threaten its equities in the [Black Sea](#).^{22 23 24} In our Black Sea-focused scenario, Russia would likely conduct military attacks against NATO naval vessels in the event Russia believed there was a direct threat to Russian interests, such as NATO naval assets deployed in close proximity to Russia's current combat theater.

¹² <https://www.rt.com/russia/590891-not-enough-weapons-zelensky/>

¹³ <https://www.rt.com/russia/589328-ukraine-conflict-total-losses/>

¹⁴ <https://tass.com/world/1721671>

¹⁵ <https://tass.com/politics/1713065>

¹⁶ <https://tass.com/tag/crimea-and-sevastopol>

¹⁷ <https://tass.com/politics/1590427>

¹⁸ <https://tass.com/politics/1517899>

¹⁹ <https://www.rt.com/russia/583692-black-sea-ukraine-russia-crimea/>

²⁰ <https://tass.com/world/1591859>

²¹ <https://tass.com/politics/1682885>

²² <https://tass.com/politics/1722429>

²³ <https://tass.com/politics/1722987>

²⁴ <https://www.rt.com/russia/580528-russia-is-ready-for-confrontation/>

It is very likely we would observe the following signposts and indicators if the Russia-Ukraine war were to escalate into a Russia-NATO conflict.²⁵ Because Russia is actively engaged in combat operations in Ukraine, several of the strategic indicators we would expect to observe as Russia prepares for war with NATO have already occurred, such as partial [military mobilization](#), [ramping](#) up Russia's military-industrial base for war, and preparations to [insulate](#) the Russian economy against the potential for additional Western economic sanctions.

Signposts and Indicators Across DIME ²⁶
Diplomatic
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct and increasingly aggressive efforts to warn against NATO activity towards Russia • Calls for United Nations (UN) Security Council meetings to address increasing tensions • Official declaration of Russia's intent to secure its national security interests • The Kremlin uses diplomatic communications to warn NATO against threatening Russia's interests • The Kremlin messages NATO that Russian military actions were defensive in nature and in response to NATO aggression • Moscow appeals to the UN to address perceived NATO aggressive military action • Moscow warns that NATO military actions against Russia will be considered an act of war
Informational
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moscow articulates new objectives that expand the scope and scale of its military activities to secure Russian interests • The Kremlin anchors military goals in its threat perception of NATO, invoking its "besieged castle" narrative to claim its actions are defensive in nature • Moscow claims expanded military goals are to secure Russia's long-term national security interests • The Kremlin claims NATO seeks a military conflict, pointing to perceived aggressive military activity • Moscow claims NATO's military actions represent a declaration of war against Russia • The Kremlin states domestically that Russia is officially at war with NATO • Moscow warns NATO about the potential implications of a strategic conflict, specifically the employment of nuclear weapons
Military
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Russia conducts no-notice, snap exercises that signal its preparedness for war

²⁵ The signposts and indicators listed in **Table 1** are informed by Insikt Group research, Western Russia-NATO [wargame results](#) over the past decade from prominent Western government-linked think tanks and military-focused research [publications](#), and the Defense Intelligence Agency's [Russia Military Power Report](#). Additionally, Russia's actions in our scenario are anchored in Russia's official government foreign policy documentation and Russia's Defense Ministry military doctrine: 1) "The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation", 2) "Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation", and 3) the [Center for Naval Analysis'](#) translation of Russia's "Foundations of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Area of Nuclear Deterrence".

²⁶ DIME is a framework used to capture a nation's instruments of state power, typically employed in Western policy circles to understand adversary capabilities in each domain. "Diplomatic" refers to official government processes between governments or within international organizations; "Informational" refers to actions taken within the information and intelligence arenas, such as official statements and media; "Military" refers to military activities and capabilities; and "Economic" refers to financial actions.

- The Kremlin initiates a general military mobilization and orders Russia's Strategic Nuclear Forces to high alert
- Russia mobilizes its conventional military forces along its borders with NATO nations
- Russia establishes air and maritime exclusionary zones to prevent perceived NATO threats
- Russia conducts demonstrations with its strategic forces to deter perceived NATO aggression
- Russia disperses its strategic assets for survivability during a war with NATO

Economic

- Moscow signals efforts to nationalize the economy to support war
- Moscow continues to call for Russian efforts to decouple from the West, seeks further economic cooperation with Asia and BRICS countries
- Moscow calls for expedited economic measures for the domestic production of critical components
- The Kremlin orders Russia's military-industrial base to increase the production of critical military capabilities
- The Kremlin calls for Russia's domestic economy to prepare for direct conflict with NATO
- The Kremlin formally nationalizes Russia's critical economic sectors
- Moscow bans external financial transfers to Western financial entities, such as SWIFT

Table 1: Signposts and indicators of a decision by authorities in Russia to initiate an armed conflict with NATO (Source: Insikt Group)

Israel-Hamas Conflict Unlikely to Result in War Between Israel and Lebanon

Assessment of Escalation Scenario

The current Israel-Hamas conflict is unlikely to expand to a second front with a war between Israel and Hezbollah, Palestinian militants, and Iranian proxy groups based in Lebanon and Syria.²⁷ Hezbollah has already [demonstrated](#) calculated responses to Israeli [strikes](#) against senior Hezbollah and Hamas leaders in Lebanon and has not utilized its full military capabilities in an effort to mitigate the risk of escalation and a forceful Israeli retaliation. Hezbollah officials' public messaging has articulated the group's military [intent](#) to weaken Israel and to [support](#) Hamas in its conflict with Israel as a "resistance front" partner — but not to [provoke](#) a damaging war that engulfs Lebanon and risks incurring US involvement. Iran, too, is unlikely to direct its proxy Hezbollah to invade Israel along its northern border, instead reaping the strategic benefits of its regional proxy strategy wherein it supports the application of asymmetric [pressure](#) on the US and Israel while avoiding direct engagement.

²⁷ In addition to Hamas, which has a [well-established](#) hub in Lebanon, a number of Palestinian militant groups [operate](#) from Lebanon and would likely be drawn into an Israel-Hezbollah war. Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), designated a foreign terrorist organization by the [US](#), [UK](#), and [EU](#), has a leadership presence in southern Lebanon and [claimed](#) one of the first cross-border raids into Israel on October 9, 2023, which initiated skirmishes along the Israel-Lebanon border. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine - General Command (PFLP-GC), also a [designated](#) foreign terrorist organization by the US and EU, [has](#) its political headquarters in Damascus but has military bases in southern Lebanon, which Israel [struck](#) in May 2023.

Despite Tel Aviv's [threat](#) to “copy-paste” the Gaza conflict to Lebanon if needed, Israel is also unlikely to invade Lebanon or take action that would escalate the border fighting and turn it into a second front. Israel's current campaign to eradicate Hamas will likely keep Israel [occupied](#) in an effort to [achieve](#) difficult objectives against Hamas in Gaza and militants in the West Bank. Israel is under significant US [pressure](#) to avoid a war in Lebanon and faces [divisions](#) within its population and with its closest ally, the US, over its conduct during the Gaza conflict. The US reportedly [convinced](#) the Israeli government to stand down on a pre-emptive attack against Hezbollah forces on October 11, 2023, underscoring the key role US diplomacy will very likely play in avoiding escalation with Lebanon in 2024.

Even with each side strategically calibrating its military actions — aimed at keeping the flames of cross-border conflict under control — the wider regional dynamics make the situation extremely unpredictable. Unintentional escalation, miscalculation, or misinformation can upend either side's rational operational calculations and overcome the current restraint. Actions that the two sides will likely take in 2024 include, but are not limited to:

- Continuing cross-border [exchanges](#) of fire between Israel and Hezbollah, with strikes against targets deeper within adversarial territory and against more strategic targets
- Hezbollah [tapping](#) deeper into its extensive missile arsenal, using more of its advanced capabilities against strategic Israeli military targets
- Israel [conducting](#) targeted strikes against Hezbollah commanders and Palestinian leaders in [Lebanon](#) and Syria, as well as “[degrade and dissuade](#)” strikes against Hezbollah's military infrastructure
- Israel [widening](#) its campaign of strikes against Iranian [military advisors](#), weapons [transfers](#), and infrastructure in Syria
- Iran continuing its [support](#) to Axis of Resistance members in Lebanon and Syria, through both military means and “soft power” operations in the information realm
- Hezbollah rejection of US and French diplomatic proposals to [de-escalate](#) the border, including continued [violation](#) of UN Security Council Resolution 1701, [implemented](#) after the 2006 Israel-Lebanon war

Signposts and Indicators of Escalation Scenario

An Israeli military ground [offensive](#) into Lebanon would almost certainly provoke a direct confrontation with Hezbollah forces [amassed](#) along the Blue Line, including its elite [Radwan](#) unit.²⁸ An Israeli invasion would almost certainly be preceded by an expansive bombardment of southern Lebanon, [akin](#) to its air campaign during the 2006 war against Hezbollah. Although the death of Hamas's Saleh al-Arouri and two Hezbollah senior commanders in January 2024 did not compel a declaration of war by Hezbollah, Israel's current strategy of targeted strikes against Hezbollah, Palestinian, and Iranian officials in Lebanon and Syria likely [increases](#) the risk of an escalatory response by Hezbollah. For example, Israel's

²⁸ The Blue Line is the UN-demarcated provisional border between Israel and Lebanon, [set](#) in 2000 to confirm the withdrawal of Israeli forces from southern Lebanon. The line has been contentious for Israel and Lebanon particularly after the 2006 Israel-Lebanon war, and Hezbollah has [established](#) a significant military presence along the line in contravention of UN Resolution 1701, which sought to remove the presence of Hezbollah forces from southern Lebanon after 2006 and to establish UN and Lebanese forces' control over the area.

targeting of one of Hezbollah’s top political leaders, such as its secretary-general, within its stronghold in southern Lebanon would likely compel Hezbollah to conduct more aggressive retribution, risking actions that cross Israel’s red lines. The following signposts and indicators would suggest an armed conflict between Hezbollah — with the backing of Iran, Palestinian groups, and Syria/Iraq-based Shi’ite militias — and Israel is becoming more likely.

Signposts and Indicators Across DIME
Diplomatic
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hezbollah’s political bloc reverses its current position of openness to diplomatic contacts, signaling through intermediaries that it has rejected any US- or French-led discussions of a new border security agreement • The Lebanese government shifts its stance — currently opposed to a war with Israel — to publicly supporting a Hezbollah offensive into Israel • Under pressure from Hezbollah, the Lebanese Armed Forces rejects its relationship with the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL, the UN’s peacekeeping force in Lebanon) and abandons the international forum for Israeli and Lebanese security discussions
Informational
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hezbollah official rhetoric about the group’s role against Israel dramatically shifts from touting the group’s battle of “resilience, patience, endurance” that “effectively diverted” Israeli forces from Gaza, to a narrative claiming the necessity of Hezbollah offensive military action to protect Lebanon from Israel • Hezbollah media, appealing to the Lebanese domestic audience, increases influence narratives that seek to justify preemptive offensive military action against Israel • Iranian senior officials, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commanders, and state media call for resistance elements to conduct decisive military action against Israel along a second front, encouraging Shi’ite militants to assist Hezbollah
Military
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hezbollah’s border forces, including its Radwan unit, conduct incursions into Israeli territory or initiate early stages of its invasion plan • Hezbollah uses its more-advanced, longer-range weapons such as the mobile-launched Fateh-110 surface-to-surface ballistic missile or launches precision-guided munitions (PGMs) within its arsenal to successfully attack Israel and elude its missile defense system • Iran establishes new logistical routes or transfer mechanisms that evade Israeli military strikes or interdictions, resulting in Hezbollah’s acquisition of new, more-advanced weapons systems that pose an unacceptable threat to Israel • Hezbollah broadens its airstrike targeting from Israeli military infrastructure in northern Israel to populated or urban civilian targets deeper in Israel, resulting in Israeli civilian deaths • Attacks emanating from Syria ramp up against Israeli targets in the Golan Heights, reflecting Iran’s decision to allow greater leeway for its Shi’ite militias operating from Syria • Hezbollah mobilizes its Islamic Jihad Organization (also known as External Security Organization or Unit 910) global networks to conduct terrorist operations targeting Israeli and

Jewish interests outside of Israel
Economic
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hezbollah or Iranian proxies threaten Israel's largest seaport, the port of Haifa, and the Mediterranean seaborne trade corridor • Hezbollah shifts its financial activities and endeavors to conceal funding networks in anticipation of greater US sanctions pressure • Iran boosts funding to Hezbollah and Syrian-based militants • Hezbollah activates its global finance networks to increase its illicit funding mechanisms, including facilitating Iranian illicit funding schemes and conducting criminal activities

Table 2: Signposts and indicators of a decision by authorities in Hezbollah to initiate an armed conflict with Israel along its northern border (Source: Insikt Group)

Houthi Campaign Against Israel and US Coalition Unlikely to Escalate into a Ground War Across Arabian Peninsula

Assessment of Escalation Scenario

The Red Sea and Gulf of Aden conflict between the Iran-backed Houthis and US-led military coalition is unlikely to expand into a wider war waged across the Arabian Peninsula in 2024. The Houthis have both the [warfare](#) experience and weapons capabilities to conduct a destructive and disruptive campaign against US coalition interests in [Saudi Arabia](#), [United Arab Emirates](#), and Bahrain — [demonstrated](#) during multiple attacks against its adversaries during Yemen's civil war. However, the Houthis can likely [achieve](#) their political and military objectives by continuing to impact their adversaries in the strategic global waterway without turning their sights on American, British, or Israeli interests across the Arabian Peninsula. Furthermore, it is unlikely that the Houthis have the capability to completely close down commercial shipping in the region or — [despite threats](#) — destroy submarine cables without significant support from Iranian submarine naval capabilities.

A shift from the Houthis' current maritime targeting to US, UK, or Israeli land-based targets within missile [range](#) — such as oil infrastructure, commercial interests in Saudi or Emirati cities or ports, diplomatic facilities, or military bases, including major US Central Command (CENTCOM) [headquarters](#) in Bahrain and Qatar — would almost certainly be a significant escalation, and one that would likely alienate the Gulf Arab states that have intentionally remained on the sidelines (other than Bahrain) of the Houthi-West maritime conflict. Houthi military objectives in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden are [centered](#) on demonstrating ideological alignment with, and proving the group as a key contributor to, Iran's "axis of resistance" — which it can accomplish without regional escalation. A Houthi spokesperson has [asserted](#) that the group has no plans to target the interests of Riyadh or Abu Dhabi, and renewed warfare against its foes in Yemen's nine-year civil war would distract from its anti-US, anti-Israel [strategy](#).

Likewise, Iran is unlikely to explicitly direct the Houthis to escalate against American, British, or Israeli targets on the Arabian Peninsula, given that Iran has recently [improved](#) ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Iran is reportedly playing a key role in [assisting](#) Houthis on the ground in Yemen, with commanders from Iran's IRGC and Lebanon's Hezbollah providing expertise to identify Israel-bound maritime targets and intelligence to support the attacks in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. Iran may not entirely control the Houthis' military strategy or direct their decision-making, but this tactical targeting guidance and Iran's long-standing [weapons](#) supply and [backing](#) of the Houthis likely suggest substantial Iranian influence on the Houthi campaign. Iran likely views the current, geographically bound Houthi maritime assault as advantageous — allowing Iran to project its regional power and resist its archenemies through [arming](#) its proxies while [maintaining](#) deliberate distance and plausible deniability to avoid repercussions.

Instead, low-intensity conflict will very likely persist in the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, and Yemen in 2024, as Houthi rebels [broaden](#) their maritime campaign to [attacks](#) against American and British interests.²⁹ US-led coalition airstrikes to [disrupt and degrade](#) Houthi capabilities in Yemen are unlikely to halt the Houthis' attacks. Undeterred, Houthi leadership has [committed](#) to continuing its blockade of Israel in solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza. Given that the Houthis [survived](#) 7 years of Saudi air strikes [during](#) Yemen's civil war, the rebel group will likely be able to withstand the US's and UK's "precision strikes" against its military infrastructure. Hostilities are likely to remain constrained by the Houthis' geographic reach — namely, their strategic [control](#) of western Yemen, enabling access to key waterways and proximity to [strike](#) southern Israel with its advanced missile [arsenal](#).

Actions that the two sides will likely take in 2024 include, but are not limited to:

- Houthis continuing to [target](#) commercial vessels in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden with missiles and suicide drones, and [deploying](#) additional sea-denial capabilities such as [unmanned surface vessels](#), to deliberately [target](#) US-, Israeli-, and UK-flagged, -owned, and -operated ships
- Houthis continuing to [fire](#) ballistic and cruise missiles at southern Israel
- Houthis [expanding](#) aerial attacks against US warships
- Iran [continuing](#) its supply of advanced weapons to Houthis through maritime channels to replace systems destroyed by US-UK strikes in Yemen
- Iran [deploying](#) naval vessels to assert presence in the Red Sea, while covertly [maintaining](#) a spy ship to assist Houthis with surveillance and targeting
- Houthis [capitalizing](#) on global attention with propaganda, seeking to mobilize Yemeni and regional support for its actions in solidarity with the Palestinian cause and [framing](#) its disruption of global maritime commerce as strictly directed at Israel, the US, and the UK
- Iran continuing to [deny](#) support for the Houthis in public statements and diplomatic channels and [employing](#) "strategic patience" to avoid direct confrontation with US military forces

²⁹ [Low-intensity conflict](#), according to the US Army Field Manual 100-20, is a "political-military confrontation between contending states or groups below conventional war and above the routine, peaceful competition among states" which "frequently involves protracted struggles of competing principles and ideologies" and is "waged by a combination of means, employing political, economic, informational, and military instruments".

- The US [conducting](#) preemptive unilateral strikes against Houthi missile launch sites to neutralize imminent threats
- US, UK, and coalition forces [degrading](#) key Houthi military infrastructure, including surveillance and weapons storage facilities
- US, UK, and coalition forces [conducting](#) additional flag verification boarding operations in the Gulf of Aden, stemming the flow of weapons from Iran to Yemen

Signposts and Indicators of Escalation Scenario

The US and UK are unlikely to proactively escalate a large-scale, ground-based conflict against the Houthis in Yemen. Thus far, the Houthis’ missile and drone attacks have caused minimal damage to its adversaries’ vessels — often [intercepted](#) by air defenses or hitting the water near vessels. US and UK calculations would very likely change in 2024 if those strikes resulted in fatalities. A Houthi strike that kills a coalition military service member or a crew member on a US-, UK-, or Israel-owned or -operated ship would very likely compel a more significant coalition military response — potentially including [ground-based](#) special [operations](#) — and increase the risk of a more widespread regional escalation in the Arabian Peninsula. Similarly, a Houthi or Iranian-directed attack against US facilities in the region resulting in mass US casualties, such as the Al-Qaeda [bombing](#) of the USS Cole in Aden, Yemen, in 2000, would likely precipitate a significant US retaliation, potentially including a strike on Iran itself but more likely [targeting](#) Iranian advisors or IRGC facilities in the region. Likewise, an Iran-sponsored Houthi terrorist plot on foreign soil that killed or injured civilian targets would likely compel US counterterrorism operations and the potential for deployment of ground forces into Houthi-controlled territory in Yemen. The following signposts and indicators would suggest a broadening conflict across the Arabian Peninsula.

Signposts and Indicators Across DIME	
Diplomatic	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Houthis signal escalatory intent to the US through Omani diplomatic channel • Houthis upend peace framework in place with Saudi Arabia, signaling Riyadh is now vulnerable to its actions in the Red Sea • Iran communicates through Swiss intermediaries that Houthis intend to escalate 	
Informational	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Houthis publicly threaten to widen maritime targeting beyond the US and UK, to NATO members of the US-led coalition and Arab nations that maintain diplomatic relations with Israel, including Saudi Arabia and Abraham Accords signatory nations UAE and Bahrain • Iranian rhetoric shifts from denial of Houthi support to praise of Houthi actions and threats to widen maritime disruption to the Persian Gulf or Strait of Hormuz, despite the negative impact on regional security • Iran increases its state-sponsored influence operations supporting Houthi attacks against US, 	

UK, and NATO assets ³⁰
Military
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Houthis' use of advanced anti-ship cruise and ballistic missiles result in lethal strikes against US, UK, or Israeli-linked vessels • Houthi missile and drone strikes shift from sea-borne targets to attacks on adversaries' diplomatic, military, or economic facilities in the Arabian Peninsula • Houthi or Iranian operatives conduct preparations for and execute terrorist attacks against US, UK, or Israeli facilities outside of Yemen • Iran conducts deniable operations against US, UK, and international commercial maritime targets in the Persian Gulf, such as its naval sabotage in 2019 • Houthis claim attacks against US, UK, and international targets in Saudi Arabia or UAE that actually originated in Iran, such as the September 2019 attack on Saudi Aramco facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais, Saudi Arabia • Houthis attack submarine communications cables at shallow locations, the landing station, or submarine cables in deeper waters with support from Iran submarine naval capabilities
Economic
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Iran diverts significant financial flows from Hezbollah (estimated to be \$700 million annually) to the Houthis • Iran threatens to disrupt the Strait of Hormuz in conjunction with the Houthis' disruption of Red Sea-Suez Canal commercial maritime transit • Houthis refuse international humanitarian aid for their area of control in western Yemen in protest of Israel's war in Gaza, amplifying an ongoing humanitarian crisis in Yemen

Table 3: Signposts and indicators of a decision by Yemeni Houthi or Iranian leadership to initiate an armed conflict with the US-led naval coalition and Israel (Source: Insikt Group)

China-Taiwan Conflict Very Unlikely in 2024

Assessment of Escalation Scenario

China is very unlikely to initiate armed conflict with Taiwan in 2024, with possible armed conflict scenarios defined as [including](#) a large-scale amphibious invasion, air and maritime blockades, air and missile strikes, the seizure of small outlying islands, and special operations. Though CCP leadership desires unification with Taiwan, their greatest priority is very likely [preventing](#) Taiwanese independence, and they almost certainly would prefer to [achieve](#) unification through political means. Moreover, China's leaders have never publicly articulated a specific deadline for unification with Taiwan, the [implicit goal](#) of achieving this by 2049 notwithstanding. Additionally, despite China's military modernization efforts over the past decade, an amphibious invasion of Taiwan would almost certainly still be extremely difficult and risky for the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and would also almost certainly endanger China's [economy](#), political stability, and diplomatic influence. As such, unless Taiwan formally declares

³⁰ [https://www.tasnimnews\[.\]com/fa/media/1402/10/25/3023513](https://www.tasnimnews[.]com/fa/media/1402/10/25/3023513)

independence in 2024, the CCP has little incentive to initiate an armed conflict with Taiwan. However, Taiwan's government is very unlikely to pursue de jure independence in 2024. Chinese authorities have [criticized](#) Taiwan's recently elected president Lai Ching-te as a pro-independence "troublemaker", but his party, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), largely [prioritizes](#) the [preservation](#) of Taiwan's de facto independence, and Lai has consistently emphasized his desire to [maintain](#) the status quo in the Taiwan Strait. There are other potential events — which are also very unlikely — that could drive China to begin an armed conflict; these are discussed further below.

Rather than invading Taiwan or initiating some other form of armed conflict with Taiwan in 2024, China will very likely continue working toward peaceful unification with Taiwan, deterring Taiwan's government from pursuing formal independence, deterring Taiwan's populace from supporting perceived pro-independence government activities, isolating Taiwan from the rest of the world, and punishing governments and organizations for supporting Taiwan. Actions that China will likely take in 2024 include, but are not limited to:

- [Carrying out](#) united front [activities](#), which involve co-opting and influencing individuals and groups outside of the CCP in [support](#) of CCP goals, and [influence operations](#) in Taiwan
- [Conducting](#) military exercises near Taiwan and regularly [violating](#) Taiwan's [declared](#) Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ)
- [Promoting](#) economic integration with Taiwan, particularly in [Fujian Province](#)
- [Carrying out](#) cyber [coercion](#) and espionage against Taiwan
- [Sanctioning](#) Taiwanese politicians, officials, and activists, as well as their supporters in other countries
- [Engaging](#) in economic [coercion](#) against Taiwan
- [Convincing](#) countries to [switch](#) their diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China
- [Preventing](#) Taiwan from [participating](#) in international [organizations](#)
- [Sanctioning](#) US defense companies for arms [sales](#) to Taiwan
- [Applying](#) diplomatic and economic [pressure](#) to governments that [express](#) support for Taiwan and carrying out [influence](#) activities in those countries

Signposts and Indicators of Escalation Scenario

Although it is very unlikely that China will initiate armed conflict with Taiwan in 2024 based on the current cross-strait situation, there are events that would likely compel China's leadership to initiate armed conflict regardless of risk to domestic politics and questions about the PLA's ability. The event most certain to lead to this outcome would be a very unlikely declaration of formal independence by Taiwan. Other events likely [include](#) significant internal unrest in Taiwan, Taiwan's acquisition of nuclear weapons, foreign military intervention in Taiwan's internal affairs, "unidentified moves" toward independence, and "indefinite delays" in cross-strait negotiations about unification. Current rhetoric from Chinese authorities [indicates](#) their assessments do not yet find that the latter ambiguous red lines have been crossed. It is possible that China could perceive action by the US government or military in 2024 as abandoning the US's "One China" policy, which would likely also drive the CCP to consider using armed force on a more urgent timeline. The following signposts and indicators would suggest an

armed conflict over Taiwan is becoming more likely. These warning signs should be assessed in aggregate.³¹

Signposts and Indicators Across DIME
Diplomatic
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China intensifies warnings to Taiwan, the US, and other regional and concerned parties about the costs of interfering in a Taiwan scenario Countries friendly to China, possibly at China's request, issue statements warning Taiwan and the international community against perceived pro-independence activities China intensifies public statements that it considers the Taiwan Strait to be internal rather than international waters
Informational
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chinese leaders stop discussing "peaceful reunification" or stop characterizing perceived independence forces as representing a minority view in Taiwan China's official rhetoric regarding Taiwan and perceived supporters of Taiwan independence escalates to include phrases such as "[Name] will meet the punishment it deserves" or "we have been driven beyond forbearance" China surges propaganda warning of and justifying (domestically and internationally) major imminent military action, potentially to include marshaling messages of support from friendly countries
Military
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China surges production of missiles, rockets, and other munitions China halts enlisted demobilizations and regular training, surges maintenance China hardens, resupplies, repairs, and expands logistical, transport, and rearming and repair facilities outside of areas most likely to be bombed by Taiwan and others China significantly increases security in domestic and border areas where internal or external threats may be seeking to exploit its focus on Taiwan for their own objectives
Economic
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Military activities significantly disrupt civilian air traffic around China China imposes (even) stronger controls on cross-border capital flows China freezes foreign financial assets in China or begins repatriating Chinese assets held abroad China suspends exports and begins rationing strategic goods and products China restricts travel outside of the country for political or financial elites and workers in strategic industries China begins stockpiling emergency supplies Chinese roll-on/roll-off ferries depart routine routes or "go dark" in significant numbers

³¹ The warning signs in **Table 4** are informed by Insikt Group research as well as analysis published by the [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#), the [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#), [National Defense University \(NDU\)](#), the [Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs](#) at NDU, and [Reuters](#).

- Chinese ports along the Taiwan Strait erect obfuscation measures to hide preparatory activities from satellite imaging
- China begins urgently promoting measures to insulate itself from the effects of potential sanctions, such as requiring settlement in RMB for important commodities and issuing gold-denominated bonds
- China initiates national defense mobilization procedures across society, industry, and the economy, especially in coastal provinces, entailing disruption to civilian economic activities

Table 4: Signposts and indicators of a decision by authorities in China to initiate an armed conflict over Taiwan (Source: *Insikt Group*)

Nature of Russia-Iran-China Coordination

On February 6, 2024, Iran [announced](#) naval exercises with Russia and China aimed at “ensuring regional security”, which is likely to intensify concerns about the trilateral relationship between these powers. Deepening ties between Russia, China, and Iran over the past decade and the rising assertiveness of each in recent years has led some observers — especially in Washington, DC — to express fears over a new “[Axis of Evil](#)” that challenges the US’s global influence. The February 2022 [declaration](#) by Russia and China of a “no limit” partnership and Iranian security officials’ [assertion](#) that a “new world order, a triangle consisting of ... Iran, Russia, and China ... has formed in Asia” inform such concerns.

However, deep trilateral coordination between these regional powers is very unlikely to develop in 2024 with regard to the conduct of the conflicts with which they are involved. Rather than leveraging existing and potential conflicts to present a coordinated front, Russia, China, and Iran are likely to opportunistically — with an eye on their own objectives and a wider view toward degrading US influence — support each other primarily through bilateral mechanisms. Russia, China, and Iran are increasingly [promoting](#) the establishment of a “multipolar world order” to upend perceived US global hegemony and defang the threat that US hegemony poses to their interests. At the same time, these powers also lack significant institutions that facilitate trilateral engagement outside of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS (which Iran joined in January 2024). Important bilateral infrastructure was also still [weak](#) in some areas as recently as 2022, such as compatible import-export systems, though this is almost certainly [improving](#). The recently announced naval exercises, while particularly salient in the current context, are routine; Russia, China, and Iran have [conducted](#) these [joint naval exercises](#) almost yearly in January, February, or March since 2019. How Russia, China, and Iran are likely to support each other in 2024 is outlined below.

- Russia’s most important [strategic](#) partner is China, and Moscow is [increasing](#) strategic cooperation with Tehran. In the event of a China-Taiwan conflict, Russia would likely provide diplomatic, informational, and economic support. It is unlikely that Russia would become directly militarily involved, such as sending combat forces, but would likely provide military aid if Beijing requested it. The degree to which Russia would provide support to Iran is less certain. While it is very likely that Russia would support Iran diplomatically and informationally, there is a lack of information to assess with any degree of confidence whether or how Russia would provide military or economic support.

- China enjoys comprehensive strategic partnerships with both [Russia](#) and [Iran](#). These relationships are [rooted](#) in [opposition](#) to perceived Western (especially US) hegemony and manifest in deepening diplomatic, economic, defense, security, media, and cultural cooperation. China would almost certainly support Russia diplomatically and informationally if a Russia-NATO conflict developed, as it has during the Ukraine war, while [exhorting](#) all parties to avoid escalation to the use of nuclear weapons. China is very likely to extend similar support to Iran throughout the duration of any 2024 conflict and, similar to Beijing's interest in preventing the use of nuclear weapons, only privately [intervene](#) to control escalation in an Iran-related conflict if China's interests are directly threatened. In all cases, China is very unlikely to support or comply with US or European sanctions, which would mean Chinese dual-use goods — including those with battlefield utility — would continue moving into Russia and Iran. Both countries could also very likely rely on Chinese companies as a source of revenue. However, no formal alliance is likely to develop between China and Russia or Iran in 2024. China is very unlikely to become directly involved in any conflict and almost certainly would refrain from overt actions that it assesses would prompt secondary sanctions on itself.
- Iran's "[Look East](#)" policy guides its strategic partnerships with Russia and China. Tehran's [pivot](#) towards Moscow and Beijing reflects its foreign policy worldview, seeking global influence in an anti-West bloc that both challenges US hegemony while [enhancing](#) its own economic, domestic, and regional security. Given Iran's burgeoning military and economic [partnership](#) with Russia, Tehran would almost certainly continue or broaden its support to Russia in the event of a NATO escalation in 2024. Likewise, robust [trade ties](#) and shared geopolitical [interests](#) have forged a close relationship between Iran and China, and Iran would almost certainly support China — including continued [export](#) of oil, in violation of Western sanctions — to China during a conflict with Taiwan.

It is an open question as to whether a formal alliance or strategic partnership that is akin to a formal alliance that sees Russia, China, and Iran closely coordinate in existing or potential conflicts beyond 2024 will develop. At least in the mid-term, the three countries are unlikely to develop a mutual defense pact, strategic alliance, or similar relations requiring significant security or economic commitments to one another. Russian, Chinese, and Iranian strategic culture almost certainly prioritizes their own national interests, regime stability, and regional security calculations over a collective strategic interest. In China, for instance, leaders are unlikely to break with past precedents, begin evaluating alliances favorably, and view direct participation in the conflicts of others (beyond the support outlined above) as serving China's interests. Moscow has [repeatedly stated](#) that it is cooperating with Beijing and Tehran where there are shared interests but has no intent to establish "alliances" akin to NATO.

Nevertheless, external factors could continue to push the trio closer together, and the trilateral relationship is very likely to grow closer throughout 2024 and beyond, rooted in shared interests and common threat perception. Western foreign policy decisions and military actions, such as successfully leveraging international organizations like the United Nations Security Council to undermine what Russia, China, and Iran view as their security interests, intensifying economic sanctions, and

forward-deploying advanced military assets (such as aircraft carriers), would likely prompt further unity among these countries.

Signposts and indicators across DIME that would signal increasingly close trilateral coordination include the following:

- In the diplomatic space, trilateral diplomatic events and announcements of trilateral strategic cooperation
- In the informational space, trilateral joint statements and intensifying articulation of perceived common threats
- In the military space, joint strategic military exercises and increasingly frequent trilateral military exercises more generally
- In the economic space, increasing emphasis on de-dollarization and establishment of alternative financial systems, such as to replace SWIFT

Other Global Conflict Flashpoints

In addition to current conflicts (Russia-Ukraine, Israel-Hamas, and events in the Red Sea) and areas of high tensions (China-Taiwan), there are many other conflict flashpoints to monitor across the globe in 2024. Our assessments of some of the most prominent of these are below.

- **Korean Peninsula.** North Korea is very unlikely to unilaterally restart armed [combat](#) with South Korea in 2024, despite Kim Jong Un [ordering](#) state industries to begin [preparing](#) for war, making a speech [calling](#) South Korea the “primary foe”, and [ending](#) North Korea’s policy of reunification with South Korea. North Korea will instead almost certainly continue its belligerent dialogue and provocative actions along the demilitarized zone and Northern Limit Line and accelerate its weapons research development, including ballistic and nuclear weapons. Additionally, it is unlikely that North Korea can [both supply](#) Russia with arms for use in Ukraine and produce enough arms for a sustained conflict against South Korea. Pyongyang will very likely [continue](#) its nuclear test site preparations as well and will likely seek to [reinforce](#) its nuclear deterrence with another successful nuclear test. Potential high-level North Korean provocations include shelling a South Korean island or island chain — similar to the 2010 [bombardment](#) of Yeonpyeong-do (연평도 포격전) — or firing at a South Korean naval vessel — similar to the 2010 [sinking](#) of the ROKS Cheonan (대한민국 해군 천안, PCC-772).
- **Iraq and Syria.** In 2024, Iraq and Syria — which [have long been](#) arenas of war, including proxy battlegrounds for Iran, Israel, Russia, Türkiye, and the US — will likely see escalating conflict as Iran-backed militias [pursue](#) more direct opposition to Washington’s presence on the ground, and the US and Israel [continue](#) retaliatory strikes on the IRGC and Iranian-supported forces. In the wake of Hamas’s October 7, 2023, attack on Israel, Iranian regional proxies, most notably the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, have [initiated](#) an aggressive campaign of drone, rocket, and ballistic missile strikes against US forces in Iraq and Syria. These harassing barrages resulted in relatively few casualties until January 28, 2024, when an Islamic Resistance in Iraq-claimed drone attack

[killed](#) three US soldiers and injured dozens. The deadly attack reportedly [crossed a line](#) for the Iranian and Iraqi governments, which pressured Iraqi militants to [stand down](#). This de-escalation is likely tenuous; Iran does not [exert](#) full control over its Iraqi and Syrian proxies, according to US intelligence officials. Following the 85 strikes [conducted](#) by the US on February 2, 2024, Iraqi militias [responded](#) with another deadly strike on a US facility in Syria and have indicated their intention to continue their campaign. Additional US kinetic [retaliation](#) against Iran-backed militias, such as the February 7, 2024, US [strike](#) on a senior Iraqi militia commander directly [responsible](#) for attacks on US forces, would likely trigger Iraq- and Syria-based groups to ramp up their operations. Direct US attacks on targets within Iran are unlikely, but if they do occur, will likely elicit a hybrid response from Tehran encompassing conventional and asymmetric tactics — such as heightened attacks on US military forces in the region and terrorist [attacks](#) on US-affiliated [targets](#). A reversal in Iran's de-escalatory actions, or a decision by Iraqi or Syrian militants to escalate attacks, would very likely increase the risk of the conflict intensifying between Iraqi and Syria militias and US forces, [prompting](#) heightened pressure on the Iraqi government to expel, rather than just curtail, the US's presence in the country. In eastern Syria, US bases are likely to come under greater threat from Iraq- and Syria-based militias [operating](#) in the border region.

- **South China Sea.** Armed conflict between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea in 2024 is unlikely. Though confrontations between China and the Philippines over their competing maritime and territorial claims [increased](#) in frequency and intensity in 2023, neither country has much incentive to purposefully initiate a military conflict. The Philippines has strong economic [ties](#) with China, and its armed forces have little hope of defeating China's larger, more technologically advanced military. China [prioritizes](#) consolidating its claims and deterring other claimants from strengthening their own claims, and it primarily does so through civilian, paramilitary, and law enforcement activity, with its [military forces](#) largely playing a supporting role. For more than a decade, China has successfully implemented this strategy to strengthen its control over the South China Sea and, therefore, very likely does not intend to depart from this strategy. Moreover, given that the US and the Philippines have a [mutual defense treaty](#), fighting between the Philippines and China could spiral into a great power war between China and the US, a scenario that both China and the Philippines would almost certainly prefer to avoid. However, unintentional [escalation](#) between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea remains a risk, and tensions — marked by periodic confrontations between Chinese and Philippine vessels — will likely remain high throughout 2024.
- **South Asia.** Low-level conflict in Jammu and Kashmir between Indian military forces and Kashmiri insurgent groups [backed](#) by Pakistan will likely intensify in 2024, following a December 2023 decision by India's Supreme Court [affirming](#) the disputed region's integration into India as two union territories. Militants associated with front organizations tied to [Jaish-e-Mohammed](#) (JeM) and [Lashkar-e-Taiba](#) — both designated as terrorist groups by the UN and numerous countries — [increased attacks](#) against Indian military forces in the latter half of 2023. This uptick will very likely precipitate a forceful response from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government in advance of India's general election, likely to be [held](#) between April-May 2024. A repeat of the

2019 Pulwama attack, in which JeM forces [killed](#) 40 Indian security personnel, would very likely result in conventional air strikes by India against terrorist training camps and infrastructure in Pakistan, escalating tensions between the two nuclear-armed neighbors.

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