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Diamonds are one of the few major Russian exports still untouched by EU sanctions imposed in response Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine last year © Johanna Geron/Reuters

New Round of Sanctions: Ban on Russian Diamonds

By Sarah Cernikova

Last week, the European Commission officially proposed a new round of sanctions to EU member states after months of negotiations. Russia's diamonds are the target of this latest package, which High Representative Josep Borrell also signed off on. It should be noted that this proposal to ban Russian diamonds aligns with the G7 partners, but refraining from banning the import of Russian diamonds to Europe may be a more practical approach, as they could still make their way to European markets through other means. Therefore, it is crucial to coordinate such steps globally.

Russia is the world's largest producer of rough diamonds, with a production value of almost four billion dollars in 2021. While the amount fell slightly in 2022 due to the absence of sanctions following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the ban, if agreed upon by all European member states, would take effect on January 1, 2024.

Although the 12th package's primary focus is on diamonds, it also includes other sanctions, such as a ban on liquefied petroleum gas and a draft list of elite names, including the likes of Russian President Vladimir Putin's cousin Anna Putina-Tsivilyova and Russian ex-President Dmitry Medvedev's son, Ilya Medvedev.



[1/3] NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg shakes hands with Bosnian Prime Minister Borjana Krišto during his visit to Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, November 20, 2023. REUTERS/Amel Emric/Anadolu Agency License Rights

NATO Secretary General and Four-day Visit to the Western Balkans

By Sarah Cernikova

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg began his four-day visit to the Western Balkans on November 19th. He started his visit in Bosnia and Herzegovina, emphasizing the importance of the country's security to Europe and the region. Though Bosnia and Herzegovina has been a strategic security partner with NATO since 2010, it is not yet a member. However, after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, the country strengthened its ties with NATO, which led to deeper cooperation starting in 2023 with the new Defence Capacity Building package. This package focuses on strengthening Bosnia and Herzegovina's defence and security capabilities such as cyber security.

Stoltenberg's visit to the Western Balkans included meetings in Kosovo, Serbia, and the Republic of North Macedonia. On the last day, he met with regional allied partners such as Albania, Croatia, Montenegro, and others. This visit is essential, especially in light of the changing security environment in Europe, as NATO seeks to ensure its position in the region where it has maintained a presence for years.

US-China Military Talks Resume, Senators Probe Online Influence

By Ondrej Pragr

In a landmark summit, President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping have agreed to resume military communications, signalling an effort to alleviate escalating tensions. This marks their first in-person meeting in over a year, taking place in California during the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) summit. Despite lingering disputes, both leaders expressed commitment to open, transparent communication channels. The talks included addressing the Israel-Hamas conflict, tensions over Taiwan, and agreements to combat the flow of fentanyl. The resumption of military communications is seen as a positive step, but challenges persist, exemplified by President Biden's characterisation of Xi as a dictator, sparking criticism from China.

The Biden administration is conducting a classified briefing for U.S. Senate Intelligence and Commerce committees on recent foreign online influence, specifically centered on Israel/Gaza and the Ukraine conflict. The closed-door session, organised by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, aims to address misinformation concerns, focusing on Chinese, Russian, and Iranian actors undermining U.S. interests through online activities. Proposed legislation granting the administration powers to counteract foreign communications technology, including TikTok, has stalled. Lawmakers express urgency in dealing with misinformation, citing incidents such as the Oct. 7 Hamas attack and raising concerns about the spread of misleading content on social media platforms.

Chinese Military Drills Near Taiwan and Australian Naval Divers' Confrontation with Chinese Warship

By Ondrej Pragr

Taiwan has reported an escalation in Chinese military activity, with nine aircraft breaching the Taiwan Strait's median line. The incident follows the Biden-Xi talks during the APEC summit. While such activities were reduced during Xi's visit to San Francisco, the latest move underscores ongoing tensions between China and Taiwan. The aircraft, including Su-30 and J-10 fighters, were accompanied by warships engaged in "combat readiness patrols." Taiwan's defence ministry responded by monitoring the situation, emphasising China's persistent pressure on Taipei's sovereignty claims. As Taiwan gears up for elections, the island remains a central focus of US-China discussions.



📷 Taiwan says Chinese aircraft crossing Taiwan Strait's median line included Su-30 and J-10 fighters, accompanying Chinese warships. Photograph: Mei Shaoquan/AP

Australian naval divers were injured in a confrontation with a Chinese warship, described as "unsafe and unprofessional" by acting Prime Minister Richard Marles. The incident occurred when HMAS Toowoomba encountered a PLA-Navy destroyer during a routine operation in Japan's exclusive economic zone. Despite clear communication and a dive warning, the Chinese warship approached, activating sonar pulses that posed risks to the divers. Marles expressed "serious concerns" to Chinese officials, emphasising the importance of professional conduct in military operations and personnel safety.

The incident underscores ongoing challenges in maritime encounters amid international waters.

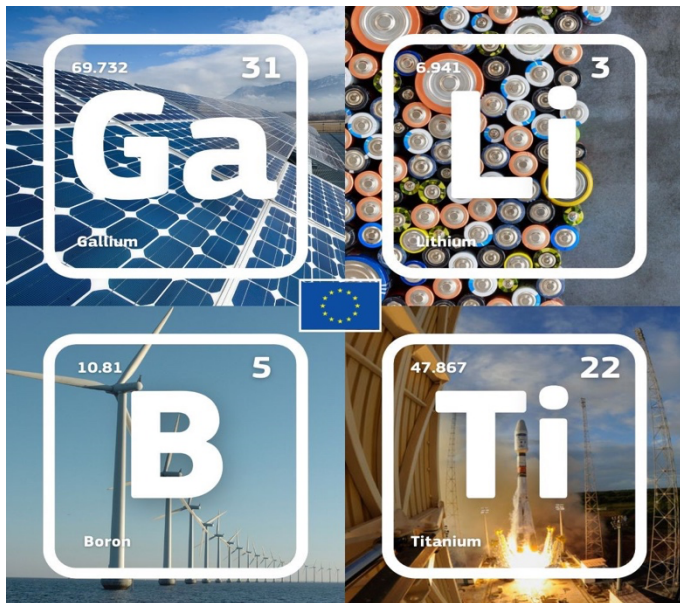


Illustration of some critical raw materials important for the energy sector. Source: European Commission on LinkedIn

Critical Raw Materials Act: EU's Energy Security

By Karolina Baldrianova

The global shift from centralized fossil-fuel-based industries to decentralized clean energy places new challenges upon countries committed to decarbonization. Specifically, the strategic importance of critical raw materials such as lithium and nickel has intensified. As demand is expected to increase dramatically, Europe finds itself reliant on imports from third countries, notably China, which has emerged as the world's and EU's largest supplier. This overarching dependence raises concerns about substituting reliance on fossil fuel imports with dependency on alternative resources and suppliers.

In March, the European Commission introduced a new strategy, referred to as the Critical Raw Materials Act, aiming to bolster the EU's competitiveness against the U.S. and Chinese clean tech industries. This week, a political agreement was reached between the European Parliament and the Council of EU, endorsing the objectives outlined in the strategy. EU bodies have decided that by 2030, the EU should extract 10%, recycle 25%, and process 40% of its annual raw material consumption. Additionally, they agreed that no third country should provide more than 65 % of any strategic raw material. Based on these principles, the legislative bill is expected to enter force early in 2024 and is essential for ensuring the EU's energy security objectives.

Conference of Labour Ministers of Sahel-Saharan Countries

By Petra Nemcova

Libya's Ministry of Labour and Rehabilitation is organizing a conference for Labour Ministers from the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD) in Tripoli from 27 to 28 November. The conference aims to develop the foreign labour system, create opportunities for investment and stability, and regulate the labour market. The ministry also plans to target upstream countries exporting illegal migrant labour and establish a database to develop an action plan for cooperation and peace in the Mediterranean Basin.

Liberating the City of Kidal in Mali

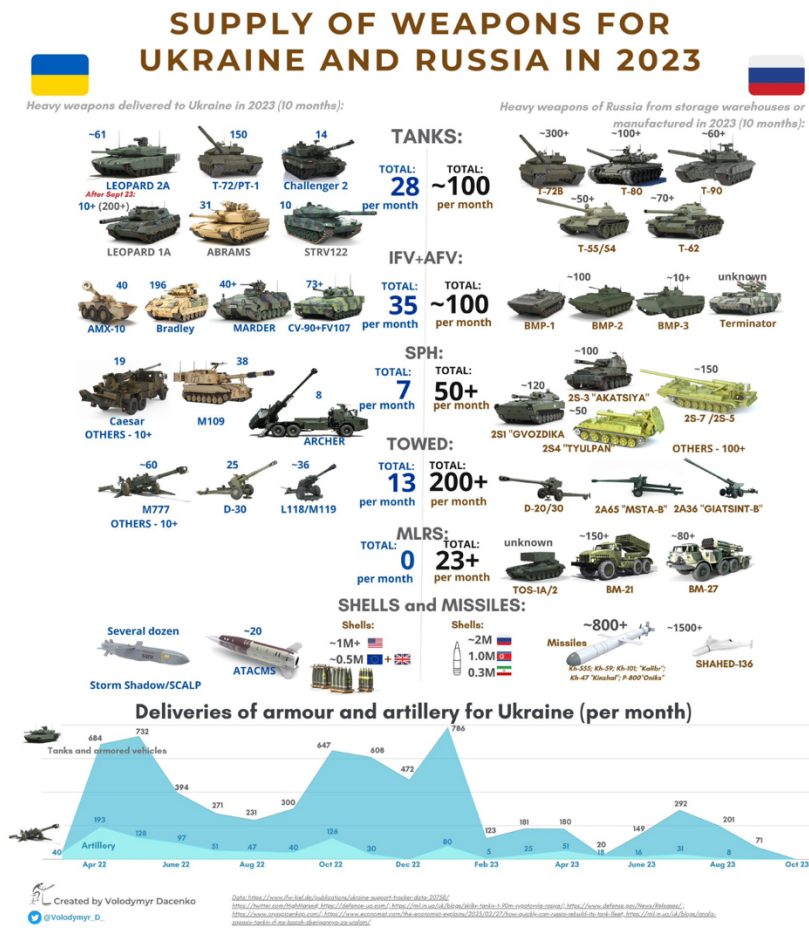
Niger's military regime has congratulated the Malian junta on the "liberation of Kidal," a strategic town which was under control by terrorists. This victory represents a turning point in the commitment of the Malian authorities to "liberate the entire country". The liberation is a significant symbolic success for Mali's military leaders, who seized power in 2020. Burkina Faso has also expressed positive views on the city's liberation, describing it as a pivotal moment in fights against armed groups in the Sahel region. However, the Malian junta plans to restore the country's territorial sovereignty, but rebels controlling the northern parts of Mali claim leaving Kidal was a strategic decision and that they want to continue fighting.

Ukraine: In the Need of Ammunition

By Karolina Baldrianova

European Union may not fulfil its pledge to supply Ukraine with 1 million ammunition shells by the end of March 2024. Such concerns were raised by Germany's Minister of Defence, Boris Pistorius, during last week's meeting at the European Council in Brussels. So far, about 300,000 shells have been delivered. The 155-mm artillery rounds play a crucial role in the Russia-Ukraine war. As the daily consumption is estimated from 6,000 to 7,000 shells, the acquisition of 1 million shells has strategic importance for Ukraine's substantial advantage on the battlefield.

Europe's overreliance on soft power in pursuing its foreign policy objectives over the past 30 years has resulted in a consistent budget decline for the defence industries. Countries like Estonia, Germany and the Netherlands actively advocate for ramping up production. The same applies to the U.S. as they announced a new \$100 million aid package for Ukraine, including ammunition supplies.



Disbalance in Russia-Ukraine supplies of weapons. Source: Volodymyr Dacenko on X

At the same time, Russia's war capabilities have been improving. Estonian Defence Minister warned that Russian manufacturers are now making up to 7 times as much ammunition as Western producers, even exceeding Russian pre-war production levels. Moreover, apart from Russia's production capabilities, North Korea has been supplying Russia with large amounts of ammunition, shells, and missiles.

Cybersecurity Guidance for Healthcare and Public Health Organizations

By Petra Nemcova

US cybersecurity agency CISA has released a new guidance for healthcare and public health organizations to understand cyber threats and risks in their sector. The guidance, titled Mitigation Guide: Healthcare and Public Health (HPH) Sector, uses data from vulnerability scanning and web application scanning programs to contextualize vulnerability trends. It recommends mitigations in line with CISA's Cross-Sector Cybersecurity Performance Goals and provides additional guidance and support. The covered areas in this guidance are asset management, identity management, device security, vulnerabilities, patching, and managing configurations. Furthermore, it recommends secure-by-design principles for HPH product manufacturers. Vulnerability remediation guidance, focusing on five known vulnerabilities, is also provided.

Holiday AI Scammers

As the holiday shopping season approaches, scammers are using new tactics to trick holiday shoppers. A report from the Better Business Bureau cites a 50% increase in reported gift card scams over the last year. An example of a scammer's tactic involves using artificial intelligence to mimic the voice of an elderly man's granddaughter, who has been arrested and needs bail money.



Photo Credit: Canva/Best4Best

To better protect yourself, never trust anyone who asks you to buy a gift card to pay for something, use a credit card if possible, and be on the lookout for phishing scams. Emerging technologies can also be used in various scams, and cybersecurity experts have used the voice of CBS News correspondent Carter Evans to demonstrate the dangers.

Israel-Hamas War



[1/7] People hold signs during a demonstration held to demand the liberation of hostages who are being held in the Gaza Strip after they were seized by Hamas gunmen on October 7, in Tel Aviv, Israel, November 21, 2023. REUTERS/Amir Cohen [Acquire Licensing Rights](#)

Israel and Hamas Agreed upon Hostage Release and Temporary Ceasefire

By Sarah Cernikova

On Wednesday morning, both Israel and Hamas confirmed that, during the four-day ceasefire, 50 women and children held in Gaza by terrorists will be released. In response, the Israeli government will return 150 Palestinian women and children from Israeli jails. Starting on Thursday morning, the initial wave of returns focuses on women and children, with expectations of further releases. However, before the voting on the agreement, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated that the war was not over. He emphasized that the Israeli army would persist until all goals are achieved.

Since the Hamas attack on Israel in early October, the Israeli government has been actively working to free all hostages. According to the Israeli prime minister's office statement on the latest hostage agreement, the ceasefire will be extended for a day for every ten freed hostages.

This breakthrough deal emerged after six weeks of negotiations mediated by Qatar, with the involvement of the United States and Egypt. The agreement marks a significant de-escalatory step. The deal is accompanied by increased humanitarian aid to Gaza, which is on the brink of a humanitarian crisis due to shortages of medicines, fuels, and water. The deal allows for the entry of humanitarian convoys and fuel supplies for humanitarian purposes.