



STRATEGIC INTELLIGENCE

Health-ISAC Biweekly Geopolitical Watchlist Update



TLP:WHITE

Oct 03, 2022

Developments

Economic Risk

- Nord Stream 2 Gas Pipeline Leaks
- Chinese Real Estate Crisis

Kinetic Conflict

- NATO Posturing for Conflict in the Baltic Sea
- Russian Annexation of Ukrainian Territories

Cyber Trends

- Hacktivists Target Iran to Facilitate Anti-Government Protests

This edition of the Geopolitical Watchlist was delayed due to Hurricane Ian.

Economic Risk

Nord Stream 1 & 2 Gas Pipelines Sabotage



Summary: Amid the worsening energy crisis in Europe, two major liquid natural gas lines from Russia to European nations under the Baltic Sea have mysteriously sprung leaks.

Analysis

The European Union has engaged with Russia in an economic conflict to apply pressure to cease the military effort in Ukraine. Due to Russia's extensive natural gas resources, natural gas has become the object of scrutiny in this economic conflict. First, the EU placed a price cap on Russian gas imports. Then, Russia stopped exporting to the EU until they decided to remove the price cap. Most recently, the pipeline has been sabotaged. At the time of writing, both the Stream One and Nord Stream Two gas pipelines are inoperable.

The focal point of this controversy is finding a definitive culprit. The EU has sent independent inspectors to assess the damage. This resulted in allegations of self-sabotage being thrown at the Russian government. In response to this, Russian President Vladimir Putin has denied involvement and made direct statements targeting the legitimacy of these allegations. While attribution has not been definitively made, a powerful political statement has. Resolution will now be more difficult as negotiations with Russia will likely include conditions surrounding the repair of the natural gas pipelines.

Regardless of who is at fault, this new development has strained tensions between Russia and G7 countries to a tenseness that have not been seen in decades. In continuance with the tense situation between the two entities, the supply of Russian trade commodities and shipping routes are likely to destabilize, furthering economic uncertainty in the region. Therefore, it is recommended to broker clauses with Russian suppliers that allow for the integration of contingent suppliers should they be unable to export their products.

Impact

As the energy crisis continues to worsen and the path to resolution becomes increasingly complex, healthcare entities everywhere should be aware of the decreased pharmaceutical exports that are likely to stem from European suppliers. Additionally, should the energy crisis persist, the likelihood of European hospitals receiving less-than-ideal amounts of energy is increasing. At the time of writing, hospitals have been spared from the energy rationing efforts, but this exemption may not last if the crisis worsens.

Chinese Real Estate Crisis



Summary: The Chinese real estate market remains in turmoil, sewing economic discord domestically and abroad.

Analysis

Since 2021, Chinese real estate developers have been incurring massive debt to pursue huge domestic projects. In response, China has decided to tighten down on debt, hoping to relieve itself of the financial risk that comes with it. In the previous years, Beijing has invested disproportionately in the real estate sector. During this recession, China wants to diversify its domestic spending portfolio and steer towards more skilled labor and industries like technology and research. However, the economic fallout from the real estate market is hindering further progress.

Not only does this affect the domestic industry of China with the proliferation of mass debt and unaffordable home prices, but it has also dissuaded foreign investors from investing in the Chinese economy. The pressure on Beijing to remedy its economic crisis has provoked harsher responses to perceived threats from the west, straining trade further.

As the perception of China's economic stability falters, China may begin to import less than usual. This will impact countries that rely on the Chinese domestic market. With this importing shift, trade with China may become more unilateral, further straining relationships with western countries.

Impact

The Chinese domestic real estate crisis puts more strain on an already tense trade relationship. This new eagerness to break into the skilled labor fields will also come with a push to evolve domestic industry as quickly as possible to compete with developed economies. Members with business assets in China should be wary of this new push and the historical use of espionage and intellectual property theft to achieve similar goals.

Kinetic Conflict

NATO Posturing for Conflict in the Baltic Sea



Summary: In response to the alleged Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipeline sabotage, NATO has begun to defensively posture in the Baltic Sea to protect Norwegian energy assets.

Analysis:

In response to the alleged intentional sabotage of the Nord Stream gas pipelines, NATO countries have agreed that Russia's involvement in the Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines constitutes a kinetic attack on European energy infrastructure and therefore have begun to defensively posture in the Baltic Sea.

Norway is projected to produce much of Europe's oil without the Nord Stream pipelines. In a proactive measure, Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store has sent military vessels to the Baltic Sea to protect Norwegian energy assets from Russian sabotage. This action projects the notion that Russia holds hostile intentions for the upcoming winter. An act that has rallied the support of fellow NATO countries.

This event is the first of its kind and has set a precedent—the precedent of Russia attacking critical energy infrastructure within its periphery. Russia is facing continued backlash for its reluctance to abandon its military effort in Ukraine, and it has also proven itself reckless in

the face of adversity. At the recent SCO summit, the relationship between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin appeared strained, with experts citing the Russian military effort in Ukraine as the cause. Should this reckless hostility continue, Russia may find itself estranged from the larger international community.

Impact

Members with business assets in Europe, especially in EU nations, will feel the economic pressure of this energy crisis. It is advised that business continuity plans account for massive increases in energy costs as the ongoing turmoil begins to crescendo.

Russian Annexation of Ukrainian Territories



Summary: Russian President Vladimir Putin has announced that Russia plans to annex four Ukraine regions.

Analysis

On September 30, 2022, Putin stated that he intends to annex the Ukrainian regions of Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson. This area encompasses millions of Ukrainians,

all of which Vladimir Putin has vowed will be “[Russian] citizens forever.” Kyiv is taking a very aggressive stance against this action and has promised to use military force to stop the annexation. Furthermore, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has stated he is only open to negotiations with Russia when they acquire a new president.

This is the most severe escalation in the Ukrainian conflict since it began in February 2022. It has also resulted in pledges to abstain from negotiation to resolve this conflict. At the same time, Russia has used the most aggressive anti-west rhetoric in 20 years during its public speeches, solidifying its hostile perception. When the UN security council was asked to vote on this decision, Russia did not receive any support. Instead its principal ally, China, abstained from voting at all. This aversion to voting further proves that Russia is losing its allies’ unconditional support.

This move further signifies Russia’s estrangement from the international community. As the Kremlin pushes harder to achieve victory in the Ukrainian conflict, the UN and Russia’s allies are becoming increasingly distant. If Russia continues down this path, it will likely adopt an isolationist foreign policy.

Impact

Members with business assets or suppliers in Russia should be aware of the international tensions between Russia and the western world. Should they continue, a lapse in trade may occur. Supply chain resilience plans should have alternative suppliers outside of Russia.

Cyber Trends

Hacktivists Target Iran to Facilitate Anti-Government Protests



Summary: Anonymous and other hacktivist groups have declared war on Iran following the unjust death of Masha Amini at the hands of the national Morality Police.

Analysis:

The newest campaign, dubbed Oplran, proves that Hactivism is here to stay after the campaign to support Ukraine. Unlike the previous large-scale hacktivist effort in Ukraine, this one seeks to serve two purposes. The first is to give the people of Iran the technical knowledge to circumvent Iran's censorship and plan coordinated protests. The second is to attack critical Iranian infrastructure using operational technology (OT) attacks, denial of service attacks, and leaking sensitive data.

The protests surrounding the unjust death of Masha Amini are the largest Iran has seen since 2019, when protestors banded together over the rise in fuel prices. Since the death of Masha Amini on September 19, 2022, the Iranian government has used extreme measures to disperse protestors, resulting in the death of 41 people.

Oplran deviates from standard hacktivist campaigns as this campaign is one of the first that has a core element of helping the native population communicate amongst themselves to coordinate protesting efforts. This differs from the standard offensive actions against political enemies of the local proletariat in politically troubled nations. Whether or not this campaign represents a unique mission statement or proves itself to be a harbinger of a new hacktivist strategy is yet to be determined. However, it shows cyber campaigns' potential influence on foreign internal affairs.

Impacts

This campaign is one of many indicators of the level of relevance cyber campaigns will hold in the future. Healthcare is one of the most targeted industries in the cyber threat landscape and must enhance its security to thwart hacktivist campaigns targeting healthcare entities. With each passing hacktivist campaign, the line of what is deemed socially acceptable seems to rise higher and higher, while hacktivist target restrictions are becoming fewer and farther between.

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Tags Nord Stream, Opiran, Chinese Real Estate, Geopolitical Watchlist, NATO, Ukraine

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H-ISAC Geopolitical Watchlist Statement of Purpose

The Health-ISAC Geopolitical Watchlist serves to inform members of international issues to promote well-informed global risk mitigation strategies. Any feedback or

recommendations that could help Health-ISAC accomplish this goal will be greatly appreciated.

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