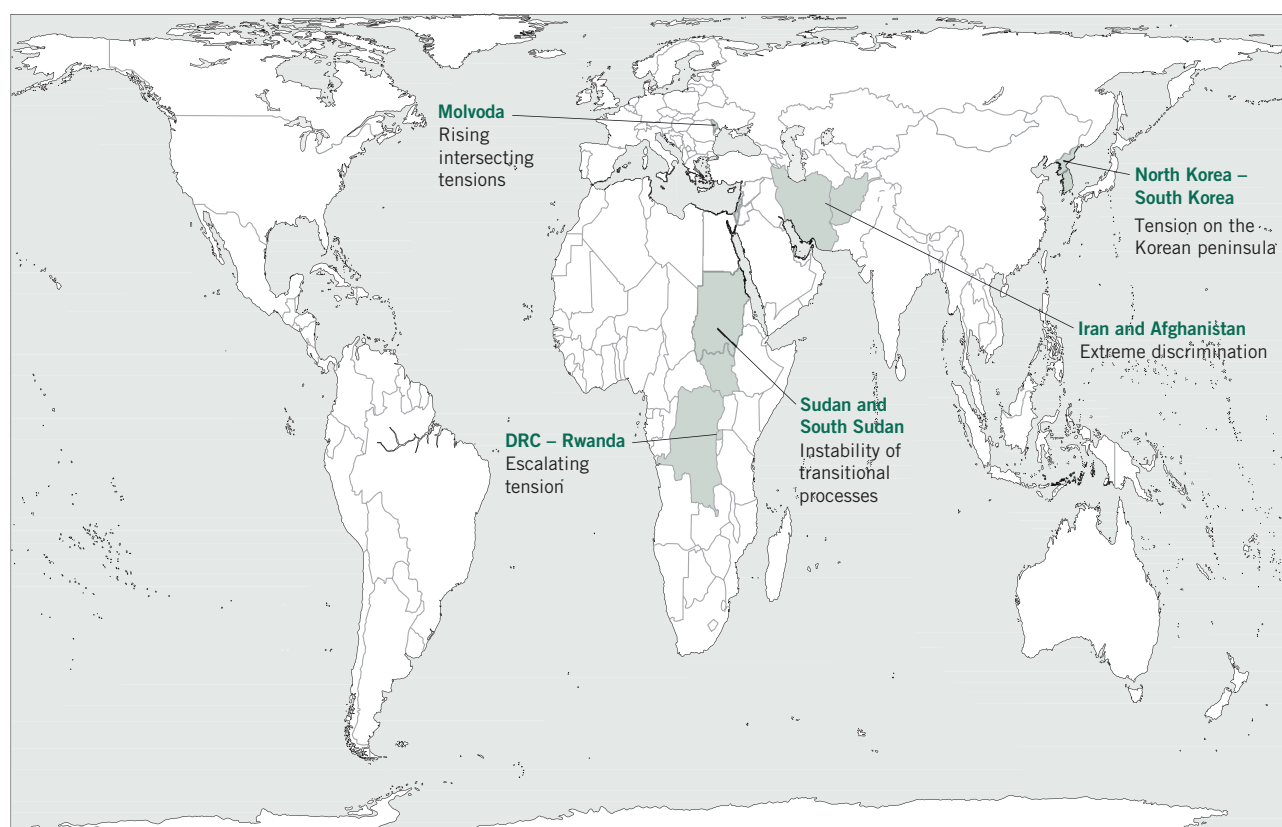


5. Risk scenarios

Drawing on the analysis of the armed conflicts and socio-political crises around the world in 2022,¹ in this chapter the UAB's School for a Culture of Peace identifies five contexts that may worsen and become sources of greater instability and violence in 2023 or even further into the future due to their conditions and dynamics. The risk scenarios refer to the crises in the transitional processes in South Sudan and Sudan, which could expand due to the drift of violence in Sudan; the risk of escalation in the Great Lakes area as a result of the deterioration in relations between Rwanda and the DRC; the rising political and military tension between North Korea on the one hand and South Korea, the US and Japan on the other; the growth of multidimensional tension in Moldova as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine; and the worsening of discriminatory policies against women and the intensification of attempts to control their lives and bodies in Iran and Afghanistan, which has led to describe their situation as one of "gender apartheid".

Map 5.1. Risk scenarios



1. The analysis of each context is based on the yearly review of the events that occurred in 2022 and includes some important factors and dynamics of the first four months of 2023.

5.1. Sudan-South Sudan: the deterioration of political transitions threatens regional stability

Since achieving its independence in 1956, Sudan has experienced long periods under the shadow of war and instability. More than 2.5 million people lost their lives in the first (1955-1972) and second (1983-2005) stages of the Sudanese Civil War. Between 2005 and 2010, part of the country enjoyed a certain stability as a result of the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) that ended the war in the south, though the outbreak of war in Darfur (2003) cut the peace short. During the 2010s, the region was once again marked by profound instability as a result of the effects of the independence of South Sudan (2011), the convulsive transitions in Sudan and South Sudan and the different armed conflicts in Sudan (Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile) and the civil war that began in South Sudan in December 2013. Although positive steps were also observed during this period, such as the signing of separate peace agreements (the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) of 2018 and the Juba Peace Agreement on Sudan of 2020) and the formation of transitional governments in both countries, as well as their improved relationship as a result of mutual cooperation agreements around pending border delimitations, among which Abyei stands out, political instability and violence have continued to undermine efforts to build peace, stability and democracy.

The latest episode of violence threatening to affect the already fragile stability of the region took place in mid-April 2023, following the start of intense fighting in Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, and in other parts of the country pitting the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan (chairman of the Transitional Sovereign Council) against the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) led by Lieutenant General Mohamed Hamdan “Hemedti” Dagalo (deputy chairman of the Transitional Sovereignty Council). These events threaten to have a boomerang effect not only on neighbouring South Sudan, but on all bordering countries: Chad, the Central African Republic, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Libya, Egypt and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, many of which are already facing complex scenarios of violence of their own.

This is the latest episode of crisis in Sudan since the popular demonstrations in late 2018 that led to the fall of the government of Omar al-Bashir in April 2019 after three decades in power. From that moment on, the country has been unable to achieve an effective political transition to overcome the obstacles of the

old regime. The military usurped power in April 2019, and even though it agreed to share the transitional government with the civilian coalition Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC) in August 2019, it carried out a new coup d'état in October 2021, dissolving the transitional government and dismissing Prime Minister Abdallah Hamdok. After 2022 was marked by two negotiating processes between the military junta and the political opposition, the Trilateral Mechanism (facilitated by UNITAMS, the AU and IGAD) and the Quad (USA, United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates), a framework agreement was reached in December in which the military promised to relinquish much of its political power and create a civilian transitional government by April 2023. However, the second stage of the negotiations began in January 2023 and was intended to address different sensitive issues, such as transitional justice; security sector reform, including the incorporation of the RSF into the Sudanese Army; the Juba Peace Agreement; the status of the committee to dismantle Omar al-Bashir's former regime; and the crisis in eastern Sudan, but it ended up returning the transition to its starting point, resulting in an outbreak of fighting between the SAF and the RSF.

The transitional process in South Sudan is similar in some respects to the Sudanese crisis. After five years of war, the two main actors responsible for prolonging the conflict, the government headed by President Salva Kiir and the SPLA-IO led by the Vice President Riek Machar, signed a peace agreement in 2018 (R-ARCSS)

that made it possible to begin a transitional period. This agreement has not put an end to the violence, but rather has been used cynically and continuously by the parties. The last episode occurred in August 2022, when the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) presided over by Kiir, with Machar as vice president, unilaterally extended the transition period for another two years, scheduling the elections for December 2024. However, many analysts sense that this date will likely not even be reached, since a new Constitution must be in force before the transitional regime ends, as provided for in the Revitalised Agreement, which seems far away today. Another key to the Revitalised Agreement is the creation of a unified national army. As in Sudan, the steps to achieve this integration and controversies over the timing, form and command structure threaten to derail the transitional process.

While the transitions in both countries falter, their populations face a major humanitarian crisis that may be

While the transitions in both countries falter, their populations face a major humanitarian crisis that may be amplified by the new trend of violence in Sudan

amplified by the new trend of violence in Sudan. By the end of 2022, one third of Sudan's population (more than 15 million people) faced severe food insecurity and 3.7 million people had been internally displaced by violence, while the country was simultaneously hosting more than a million refugees from crises in neighbouring countries. In South Sudan, the scenario is similar. According to data from the World Food Programme (WFP), 6.6 million people (more than half of the country's population) face acute food insecurity, hunger and malnutrition. These figures could rise to 7.8 million during the first half of 2023. In addition, 2.3 million people were refugees due to insecurity. The outbreak of violence in Sudan in April could have other catastrophic effects on South Sudan, especially on its economy, since 90% of its income depends on the export of oil through Sudan. According to estimates by the United Nations, it could also cause more than 800,000 people to seek refuge

Joint action by local, national, regional and international actors is required to get the parties back to the negotiating table, put an end to the violence and restore the spirit of the transition

in other countries, expanding the forced displacement crisis in the already highly stressed region. This could also affect the dynamics of violence in the CAR, the DRC, Chad, Libya and Ethiopia (Tigray and Oromia), in addition to the internal conflicts in Darfur, South Kordofan, Blue Nile and in the eastern region of Sudan and in South Sudan, turning the region into a tinderbox.

While the possibility of the crisis in Sudan escalating into a protracted war cannot be ignored, an escalation of the conflict is not inevitable. Joint action by local, national, regional and international actors is required to get the parties back to the negotiating table, put an end to the violence and restore the spirit of the transition. If this does not happen, the impact of another war in Sudan will have an unpredictable ripple effect throughout the Central African region and the Horn of Africa.

5.2. Great Lakes: on the brink of a third Congolese war?

The relationship between the DRC and Rwanda seriously deteriorated in 2022 as a result of sporadic clashes between both countries' security forces in the border area and accusations (verified and demonstrated by the United Nations)² of Rwandan military and logistical support for the attacks of the March 23 Movement (M23) in North Kivu. The various regional diplomatic initiatives, such as the Luanda process headed by Angola under an AU mandate, as well as offers of mediation from countries like Qatar and the US, have so far failed to reverse the situation. In mid-April 2023, Rwandan President Paul Kagame stoked the flames by blaming the M23 crisis on colonial-era borders,³ arguing that "a large part of Rwanda was left out, in eastern DRC and southwestern Uganda", giving a new dimension to the conflict. Kagame also defended the M23 rebels, claiming that they are being denied their rights in the DRC, remarking that "the DRC's problem, the regional problem and Rwanda's problem is not the M23". Kinshasa denounced these statements as a new form of provocation by Rwanda and blamed Kagame for all the problems in the eastern part of the country over the last 20 years. The rhetoric of accusations and incidents on the ground have pushed the tension between both countries to the brink of an armed conflict with dangerous regional consequences.

Although the borders created during the colonial era may partially explain the conflict convulsing the region, like so many other consequences of colonialism that are still being felt and that form part of this and other conflicts in Africa, recent events have significantly worsened the strained relations between the DRC and Rwanda.⁴ In the early 1990s, Zairian Marshal Mobutu Sese Seko supported the Rwandan regime of Juvenal Habyarimana to stop the offensive of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), an insurgency led by Paul Kagame, who overthrew and expelled the regime responsible for the 1994 genocide and seized power in Rwanda. This was followed by the first and second wars in the Congo, which ended with the signing of various peace agreements and the withdrawal of foreign (mainly Rwandan) troops from the country between 2002 and 2003. These foreign troops had justified their presence by their intention to eliminate national insurgent groups in the DRC, given

the Congolese Armed Forces' lack of will to do the same, while they exercised control and plundered the natural resources in the eastern part of the country directly or through armed groups supervised by them and especially by Rwanda. The existence of enemy insurgent groups from Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi, the persistence of the root causes of the conflict in the DRC at multiple levels and the failed implementation of the agreements to demobilise these groups led to the emergence of the Rwandan-backed M23 in 2012. Despite the signing of a new peace agreement in December 2013, the group reorganised again with Rwandan support in 2021.

On 4 April 2012, the armed group M23⁵ rebelled against the Congolese government, claiming that it had broken the peace agreement of 23 March 2009. Nkunda, who had been an officer in the armed group Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie (RCD)-Goma, a proxy of Rwanda in the Second Congo War (1998-2003), officially remains under house arrest in the Rwandan town of Gisenyi. On 20 November 2012, the M23 entered the streets of Goma, the capital of North Kivu, following the dishonourable withdrawal of Congolese troops from the city before the passive gaze of the UN peacekeepers, leaving the date engraved on the Congolese collective imagination. The M23 then engaged in looting, extrajudicial killings, sexual violence and other war crimes. In 2013, the DRC and Rwanda reached a peace agreement according to which the M23 had to be dismantled. However, the group resumed its activities in late 2021 with Rwanda's support. Since then, it has once again spread panic in the DRC and threatened to plant itself in the heart of the capital.⁶

All these insurgent leaders supported by Rwanda have been part of the Banyamulenge Tutsi community, related to the Tutsi community that lives in Rwanda and was massacred in the 1994 genocide. Among many other factors, the insurgency is supported by fear, the desire to protect its own community, the exploitation of Congolese territory and resources, the absence of other prospects for the future and sustenance following the failed reform of the security sector and its cynical use as a proxy actor by Rwanda on Congolese soil. Another issue to bear in mind is revenge on and persecution

International inaction to stop the 1994 genocide has made Rwanda the West's ally in the region, shielding it from criticism of its authoritarianism and its interference in Congolese affairs

2. UN Security-Council, [reports by the Group of Experts](#), DRC Sanctions Committee [online, viewed on 15 January 2023].

3. Infosplus RDC, [Paul Kagame dévoile la vraie raison du conflit Rwanda – RDC](#), 16 April 2023.

4. See the summary on the socio-political crisis in DRC-Rwanda in chapter 2 (Socio-political crises).

5. The group is called the March 23 Movement in reference to the day a peace agreement was signed three years earlier, on 23 March 2009, between the Congolese government and the Congr s National pour la D fense du Peuple (CNDP), led by Bosco Ntaganda after he replaced General Laurent Nkunda, who had ceased to be Rwanda's prot g  and was arrested on the way to Kigali. For further details about the origins of the M23, see the summary on DRC (east) in chapter 1 (Armed conflicts) in Escola de Cultura de Pau, [Alert 2010! Report on conflicts, human rights and peacebuilding](#), Barcelona: Icaria, 2010; and [Alert 2014! Report on conflicts, human rights and peacebuilding](#), Barcelona: Icaria, 2014; Sabbe, Brian, [Why M23 is not your average rebel group](#), IPIS Briefing, January 2023.

6. See the summary on the armed conflict in the DRC (east) in chapter 1 (Armed conflicts).

of the Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Ruanda (FDLR), a political and military movement that has sought to force political change in Rwanda and is the heir to those who committed the 1994 genocide. The elimination of the FDLR is a recurring theme for Rwanda and for these armed groups and splinter groups and serves as a permanent argument for Rwanda to act with total impunity in financing and arming groups that conduct attacks on Congolese soil. The inaction of the international community to stop the 1994 genocide led it to support the new Rwandan regime that emerged after the genocide and to make it its privileged ally in the unstable region. This international political support and Rwanda's commitment to promoting peace and security in Africa, including its active participation in UN and bilateral missions, such as in northern Mozambique, have earned it an aura of respectability and commitment to peacebuilding that has shielded it from criticism related to its authoritarianism, which is characterised by its restriction of political space and freedom of expression and its silencing of political dissent. It has also protected it from criticism about its interference in Congolese internal affairs. Even though the UN has reported on Rwanda's direct and indirect participation in the systematic and systemic plundering of natural resources and of arming and organising rebellions to protect the Banyamulenge community and its interests in North and South Kivu since 2001, as revealed in the last internal UN report leaked in August 2022 and by the Group of Experts in December 2022, bringing it much criticism, it remains unpunished by the UN and other actors in the international community. However, all these factors also show that the conflict is not simply an act of external aggression by Rwanda against the DRC, as the Congolese president has argued many times.

A deeper analysis is essential to understanding the local, regional and international dynamics at the origins of the conflict between the DRC and Rwanda and to promoting attempts to resolve it

A more exhaustive analysis is urgently needed by the key actors that can influence both countries, includes other dimensions from a multi-causal and multi-level perspective and goes beyond reducing the conflict to a mere ethnic one or to the exploitation of resources as a means and an end to finance the war and that can only be resolved by dismantling the armed groups or obtaining ceasefires, in addition to the different DDR processes with the armed actors. It is essential to understand the historical and cultural roots of the peoples of the region, the continued looting and social injustice experienced under colonial and postcolonial oppression, the grievances of the local population against incoming populations, the cynical use of ethnic differences by Mobutu and later by Laurent-Désiré and Joseph Kabila, pressure and competition over land ownership, the legitimate security challenges of neighbouring countries (especially Rwanda vis-à-vis the much larger DRC), the growing Anglophone and Chinese postcolonial presence in the face of gradual Francophone marginality and regional and international dynamics linked not only to the exploitation of natural resources but also to geopolitical dynamics in which Rwanda and other countries in the region play a fundamental role in a globalised world in which great powers such as the US and China compete to expand their areas of influence. This globalised world has ratified implementation of the liberal state model to solve the problems of the DRC, but has not solved them, as demonstrated once again with this umpteenth escalation of violence. Local and international community efforts to resolve the conflict do not address the root causes of the war and the instability plaguing the region due to an analysis not focused on them or on the international actors (primarily the UN, China, the US and the EU) that have a real ability to put pressure on both countries to halt the dangerous escalation of tension.

5.3. Rising military tension on the Korean peninsula

After a brief period in which inter-Korean relations reached their greatest closeness and cooperation in decades and in which North Korea and the US began a process of rapprochement and dialogue regarding the denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula (2018-19), the political and military tension on the Korean peninsula has ostensibly escalated in recent years and very clearly since 2022. This escalation has not only included an increase in the usual militaristic rhetoric and mutual accusations, but also a rise in military tension and warfare between North and South Korea on the land and sea borders, an unparalleled increase in the number of missile launches by North Korea, a growing assertiveness by South Korea in responding to Pyongyang's weapons tests, the resumption of North Korea's nuclear programme and its manufacture of new weapons, heightened tension between North Korea and Japan and growing cooperation between the US and South Korea on nuclear matters.

On 26 April 2023, US President Joe Biden and South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol strengthened their military cooperation on nuclear matters by signing the Washington Declaration in the White House, by which, in essence, South Korea agreed not to develop its own atomic programme and the US pledged to strengthen South Korea's role in decision-making on nuclear planning and deterrence. Specifically, the agreement, which was signed to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the start of the alliance between the two countries, lays out the expansion and deepening of cooperation between both their militaries, the strengthening of joint military exercises and manoeuvres, the creation of a new Nuclear Consultative Group to bolster the "extended deterrence" and the upcoming shipment of a US nuclear ballistic missile submarine to South Korea. During the press conference after the Declaration was signed, Biden said that any nuclear attack by North Korea would trigger a quick and overwhelming response, but he also made clear his refusal to place nuclear weapons on the Korean peninsula at the same time.

Such declarations by Biden, as well as the South Korean government's commitment to respect the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, take on special significance since the proportion of South Korean citizens who advocate deploying nuclear weapons or developing its own nuclear programme has increased notably in recent months (in 2022, it exceeded 70%). Along the same lines, in early 2023, President Yoon Suk-yeol said that he was considering developing nuclear weapons for South Korea or asking the US to deploy them on the Korean peninsula and publicly called for Seoul and Washington to intensify their collaboration on nuclear weapons, including

planning, information sharing, exercises and training. The US withdrew all its nuclear weapons from the Korean peninsula in 1991 and the following year North and South Korea signed a joint declaration that neither party would make, test, stockpile, deploy or use nuclear weapons. However, in the decades since, North Korea has repeatedly violated these commitments to the point of having carried out six nuclear tests (the first in 2006 and the last in 2017, with a hydrogen bomb with a detonation power well above the previous ones), having accumulated dozens of nuclear warheads (between 40 and 50, according to some sources) and having manufactured enough fissile material to build at least several more bombs each year. North Korea has also improved its long-range ballistic missile programme in recent years, as well as its ability to miniaturise nuclear warheads. In addition to its nuclear and ballistic capabilities, Pyongyang has significant conventional forces, with 1.2 million active-duty soldiers and 600,000 reservists.

After a period of détente and dialogue with the US and South Korea in which North Korea promised to freeze its nuclear programme, close some of the country's main facilities and impose a moratorium on new nuclear tests, in recent years the US and South Korean governments, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and some research centres have issued warnings that North Korea is reactivating and accelerating its nuclear programme. Specifically, in 2022 they pointed out that North Korea was reactivating the country's main nuclear test facility in Punggye-ri, which was supposedly closed in 2018 as part of the diplomatic process with the US, and warned at various times of the year of the possibility that North Korea may conduct a new nuclear test, which would be the first since 2017. In fact, the United Nations claimed in a confidential report leaked in August 2022 that North Korea had made preparations for a nuclear test during the first six months of 2022. In September, North Korea enacted a new law specifying the conditions for deploying and using its nuclear arsenal. The law stipulates that Pyongyang will not attack non-nuclear states, except if they ally with nuclear states, and also that the use of nuclear weapons could prevent the expansion or prolongation of a war or be a response to an attack against the country.

Alongside the resumption of its nuclear weapons programme and the approval of legislation facilitating its deployment and use, North Korea's missile launches and production of new weapons also increased sharply. In fact, in all of 2022, Pyongyang launched around 100 missiles, several of them intercontinental, clearly more than the eight launches in 2021 or the four in 2020. In addition to the dramatic increase

in the frequency of such launches, several analysts also expressed concern about the type of weapons that Pyongyang tested during the year, including cruise and ballistic missiles, hypersonic weapons and long-range intercontinental ballistic missiles (such as the Hwasong-17, with a range of about 15,000 kilometres). In the first five months of 2023, the trend does not seem to have changed significantly compared to 2022. In mid-February, North Korea launched a Hwasong-15 intercontinental ballistic missile, which reached almost 6,000 km in altitude before falling into the Sea of Japan (known in Korea as the East Sea), two “tactical nuclear” rockets and four long-range cruise missiles all within a span of a few days. In March, North Korea launched a Hwasong-17 intercontinental ballistic missile toward the East Sea, as well as several long-range cruise missiles. In mid-April, North Korea declared that it had successfully conducted its first flight test of the Hwasong-18 solid-fuel intercontinental ballistic missile, which some analysts say is an important step in Pyongyang’s efforts to protect the country’s missile security system from a pre-emptive strike. Shortly thereafter, Kim Jong-un said that he intended to launch a military reconnaissance satellite (one of the five military priorities he announced in January 2021), fully in line with the North Korean government’s previous claims that it had developed a powerful rocket engine that could launch such a satellite. In late 2022, Pyongyang released high-altitude photos of the cities of Seoul and Incheon and claimed to have successfully launched a space rocket as part of the development of a military reconnaissance satellite.

North Korea’s development of new weapons is fully in line with the five-year plan unveiled by Kim Jong-un during the 8th Party Congress in 2021, which provided for solid-fuel intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of being launched both by land and by sea, and with his speech on 31 December 2022 in which he promised to exponentially step up the manufacture of nuclear weapons by 2023. In that end-of-year speech, the North Korean leader also announced that he was developing a new intercontinental ballistic missile system with rapid nuclear counterattack capability in response to threats from the US and South Korea and the growing coordination between them and Japan. Tension between North Korea and Japan has also increased notably in recent times. For example, in October 2022 a North Korean intermediate-range ballistic missile flew over Japan for the first time since 2017. The following month, one of the 26 missiles that Pyongyang fired for two days in a row fell 200 km to the west of the northern Japanese island of Hokkaido. In response, Washington made its commitment to Japan clear, while Tokyo participated in joint naval exercises

In April 2023, the leaders of the US and South Korea signed the Washington Declaration, in which South Korea committed not to develop its own atomic programme and Washington pledged to strengthen South Korea’s role in decision-making on nuclear planning and deterrence

with South Korea and the US for the first time since 2017 and declared its willingness to strengthen its defensive and counterattack capabilities. In December 2022, the Japanese government publicly presented its new national security strategy, which views North Korea’s nuclear and ballistic programme as a threat. Pyongyang asserted that the “counterattack capability” included in Japan’s new national security strategy does not refer to the right to legitimate defence of any sovereign state, but rather to the ability to carry out a pre-emptive attack against third countries, which it believes entails a serious security crisis on the Korean peninsula and in East Asia as a whole. Some analysts said that the launch of missiles that cross the airspace of a third country without prior notice or coordination, as North Korea did in October 2022, not only breaks international law, but could also be interpreted as an attack against Japan in light of its new national security strategy.

Another factor that has contributed to the growing tension in the region has been new South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol’s change in policy towards North Korea since he took office in May 2022. As a result of this new strategic direction, the South Korean government has responded to North Korea’s launch of missiles with the launch of a proportional number of missiles. Seoul has also promoted the largest military exercises and manoeuvres (normally in alliance with the US) in recent times and has tried to strengthen its relationship with the US regarding the use of nuclear weapons on the peninsula. As a consequence, the military tension between the two Koreas increased significantly in late 2022, with several serious episodes. In late October, North and South Korea exchanged warning shots at the Northern Limit Line (NLL), their disputed de facto maritime border, near Baengnyeong Island. Shortly thereafter, on two consecutive days in November, Pyongyang fired more than 20 missiles, one of which landed south of the NLL, a few kilometres from the South Korean city of Sokcho, and around 100 artillery shells near the maritime border. In December, five North Korean drones entered South Korean airspace after South Korean planes and helicopters failed to shoot them down. More recently, in February 2023, South Korea and the US conducted joint bomber drills. A few days later, South Korean, American and Japanese destroyers participated in a missile defence drill off the eastern coast of the peninsula. In mid-March, the US and South Korea began the largest military exercises since 2018.

Some analysts argue that China, which has historically had clear influence over the North Korean regime, will

discourage any nuclear escalation that could destabilise the Korean peninsula, while others maintain that both the acceleration of the North Korean weapons programme and Seoul's greater strategic assertiveness can partly be explained by internal reasons, but it seems clear that the situation on the Korean peninsula is undergoing dynamics that involve risk. Judging by recent statements by representatives of the North Korean government, it does not appear that the political and military escalation on the Korean peninsula will

subside in the coming months. In mid-April, Pyongyang responded to a G-7 statement calling on it to dismantle its nuclear capabilities by refusing to negotiate or to give up its nuclear deterrent capability. Along the same lines, in early May, Kim Yo-jong, Kim Jong-un's sister, warned that the Washington Declaration signed by the US and South Korea only deteriorates peace and security on the peninsula, reinforces North Korea's right to self-defence and reaffirms its determination to accelerate and hone its nuclear capabilities.

5.4. Intersecting challenges in Moldova in a time of war in Europe

A country of 2.6 million inhabitants, with an absolute poverty rate of 24.5% (26.3% for women) and sharing a border with Ukraine and Romania, Moldova is considered one of the most vulnerable countries to the spread of the war in Ukraine. A former Soviet republic, neutral towards NATO though split over its foreign policy orientation, with a political history marred by corruption and an unresolved conflict over the status of the region of Transdniestria, Moldova is the scene of rising multidimensional and intersecting tensions influenced by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The deterioration of the situation has been reflected in impacts of the war in Moldova, reports of covert coup plans, risks of greater polarisation with territorial expression, the energy crisis and worsening human security. Upcoming elections in the short and medium term bring more uncertainty (municipal in the last third of 2023, presidential in 2024 and parliamentary in 2025).

Moldova is the scene of rising multidimensional and intersecting tensions influenced by the Russian invasion of Ukraine

The deteriorating situation in Moldova encompasses various aspects. First, the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine initially generated risks that the war could spread directly to Moldova and worsened the security situation there. The developments of the armed conflict in Ukraine throughout 2022 has kept these risks at bay, with Ukraine maintaining control of Odessa, which dispelled fears that Russian troops could reach Transdniestria. This strip of territory east of the Dnieper River, with a Russian-speaking majority, has been the scene of an unresolved conflict over its status since the 1990-1992 armed conflict and a place where Russia maintains military forces.⁷ However, the security situation remained fragile, including security incidents in Transdniestria, described by some analysts as false flag attacks by Moscow,⁸ violations of Moldova's airspace by Russian missiles fired from the Black Sea towards Ukraine (Moldova reported at least three in October 2022 and two more in February 2023) and the impacts of Russian missile fragments on Moldovan soil. All this revealed military risks closely linked to a war with uncertain prospects.

Second, there has been the risk of Russian attempts to destabilise Moldova politically and socio-economically. In February 2023, based on intelligence shared by Ukraine, Moldovan President Maria Sandu reported Russian plans for a coup in Moldova by individuals with military

experience from Russia, Belarus, Serbia and Montenegro who would infiltrate as civilians and seize government buildings.⁹ According to Sandu, the coup attempt expected to have the support of local groups such as the pro-Kremlin opposition Shor party, led by magnate and politician Ilan Shor, sentenced *in absentia* for massive fraud in the banking system in 2014 (in a case in which financial and political actors of other stripes were also found guilty). In the closing months of 2022, fears of the risk of outside interference had increased due to the anti-government protests staged by the Shor party in September, which lasted until 2023, demanding the resignation of the Moldovan government and president.¹⁰ Moldovan journalists published evidence from *The Washington Post* based on a review of documents obtained by Ukraine's intelligence services that Russia had spent tens of millions of dollars of Russian state-owned companies on promoting a network of like-minded Moldovan politicians and reorienting the country to Russia's sphere.¹¹ In 2023, Moldovan journalists released documents from the Kremlin presidential administration in 2021 showing Russia's plans to bring Moldova into its sphere of influence by 2030¹² (in 2021, the pro-EU PAS party won the parliamentary elections with 53% of the vote, over the pro-Russian Bloc of Communists and Socialists, which received 27%, and the Shor party, which got 5.8%, with 48% turnout). Additional aspects include the unprecedented level of cyberattacks that Moldova has faced since the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Third, the risks of multidimensional tension that Moldova was facing were also reflected in Gagauzia, a territorially discontinuous region in the southern part of the country with 134,535 inhabitants (2014 census), inhabited mainly by Gagauz people, who speak a Turkic language and profess the Orthodox religion, and historically dominated by pro-Russian political positions. Gagauzia was the scene of a political conflict in the early 1990s over its status and has had an autonomous regional government since the mid-1990s. In the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and of the deteriorating relations between Russia and Moldova and between Russia and the West, the gulf widened between the Moldovan government and the Gagauzia region. Some analysts said that the result of the Gagauzia gubernatorial election of April 2023 could be used by Russia against

7. There are around 1,500 Russian soldiers in Transdniestria. However, some analysts downplay the military risk that they pose to Moldova and say that most are local citizens with Russian passports and only around 100 are Russian officers. De Waal, Thomas, "Time to Get Serious About Moldova", Carnegie Europe, 11 May 2023.

8. Pociumban, Anastasia, "Moldova's Fragile Security Situation", DGAP Memo, German Council of Foreign Relations, 13 May 2023.

9. Wesolowsky, Tony, "Vulnerable, Volatile Moldova Could Be The Kremlin's Next Target. It Could Also Be Just Another Distraction", RFE/RL, 3 March 2022.

10. Calugareanu, Vitalie y Robert Schwartz, "Pro-Russian group pays protesters in Moldova", DW, 10 December 2022.

11. Belton, Catherine, "Russia's security service works to subvert Moldova's pro-Western government", *The Washington Post*, 28 October 2022.

12. Necsutu, Madalin, "Moldova Condemns 'Russian Plan' to Regain Control of Country", *Balkan Insight*, 16 March 2023.

Moldova.¹³ The election handed victory in the second round in May to the candidate of the pro-Russian Shor party, Evghenia Gutul, which points to challenges in relations between the central government and the region in the short and medium term. In 2014, the authorities of Gagauzia and its population had opposed the central government's decision to sign an association agreement and a free trade agreement with the EU through a non-binding double referendum that Moldova considered illegal. In that referendum, 98% of voters wanted closer ties with the Eurasian Customs Union, led by Russia, instead of with the EU, and supported proclaiming Gagauzia's independence if Moldova were to lose its sovereignty, including scenarios such as a hypothetical union of Moldova and Romania, with which it shares historical and cultural ties.

Fourth, Moldova stands out a place where some dynamics of division and projected layers of external conflict intersect, a situation aggravated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the deterioration of diplomatic relations between Russia and Moldova and the extreme tension in relations between West and Russia stemming from the invasion of Ukraine. There were identified differences in local perceptions towards Russia and in the approach to take in foreign relations. In June 2022, the European Union granted Moldova EU candidate country status. Surveys from 2022 and 2023 indicated that between 50% and 63% of the population was in favour of joining the EU and a third was opposed. On the other hand, in 2022 Russia stepped up pressure on Moldova in strategic areas and those important to the country's human security, such as energy,¹⁴ though Moldova took steps towards energy diversification.

Fifth, the socio-economic situation in Moldova has deteriorated due to the rise in prices, including food, non-food products and services, with severe impacts

on the population of a country considered one of the poorest in Europe. The rise in energy prices affected broad swathes of the population. There is also the challenge of being able to host the Ukrainian refugee population with (726,705 entries in the country between 24 February 2022 and mid-December 2022 and 99,524 refugees from Ukraine at the end of that year, according to UNHCR). On a visit to Moldova in May, the UN Secretary-General described the country as Ukraine's most fragile neighbour.

At the same time, some factors may help to prevent the socio-political and security situation from deteriorating. Having weathered these accumulated challenges in 2022 reveals a certain institutional and social resilience. Other positive signs include Transdnistria and Moldova's expressed desire for a negotiated solution to the conflict and the high level of economic, commercial and family relations between them; an active social fabric, as shown by the anti-corruption demonstrations in recent years; the establishment of an EU civilian mission in 2023 (EUMP Moldova) focused on crisis management, disinformation and cyberattacks; and financial support for the country to face the serious socio-economic crisis, though this is subject to the conditions of the EU and the IMF.

In summary, in the short and medium term, Moldova risks rising or chronically intertwined tensions that require strengthened international support to help to prevent the increase of tension as a result of conflict in Ukraine and to promote democratic cohesion and human security. The intensification of efforts aimed at achieving a negotiated resolution of the war in Ukraine acceptable to Kiev and the future construction of a shared security architecture for Europe could also contribute to a more holistic security situation for Moldova in the medium and long term.

13. Keith Harrington, "Gagauzia's Election Could Help Russia Destabilize Moldova", *Carnegie Europe*, 27 April 2023.

14. See the summary on Moldova in chapter 2 (Socio-political crises) in this report.

5.5. Women's rights under threat: gender apartheid in Iran and Afghanistan

Women's rights in Iran and Afghanistan have recently received special attention. The worsening of discriminatory policies against women and the intensification of attempts to control their lives and bodies in both countries have been in the media spotlight, in part due to protests and demonstrations led by Afghan and Iranian women against misogyny and systematic violations of their rights and freedoms. Initiatives to report extreme, systematic and structural discrimination against women in both countries have even led to a proposal to recognise the situation as a crime of gender apartheid. Many different actors, including organisations, states and civil society groups, have blasted the trend against women in both countries and have expressed their solidarity and alarm at the regimes' repressive response. Despite the loud international reaction, there is a risk that both Tehran and Kabul will persist in their policies and that the situation of women in both countries will drag on or get worse. Added to this is the likelihood that media and political attention paid to women's rights in Iran and Afghanistan will fade over time. It is also possible, especially considering previous experiences, that some actors in the international community take a utilitarian approach to women's rights, promoting or ignoring them based on conjunctural geopolitical and military interests.

The situation of women in Afghanistan has especially deteriorated since mid-2021 following the restoration of the Taliban regime.¹⁵ Their return to power has severely rolled back women's social, economic, political and cultural rights and forcefully excluded them from the public sphere, in line with what happened during the first Taliban regime (1996-2001). The first such actions taken included the dismantling of the Ministry of Women's Affairs in September 2021. The restoration of the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice involved the removal of the institutional structures for promoting women's rights in a government made up entirely of men. The Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) was also abolished, ending any institutional system for monitoring and guaranteeing the rights of women or human rights in general. Other actions with serious impact include restrictions on the free mobility of women and their presence in public spaces. Severe restrictions on education have also been approved, preventing girls and young women from accessing secondary and university education. In addition, care services for female victims of gender violence have been completely dismantled, specialised courts for women have been dissolved and women judges are prevented

from working. The result is the establishment of a complete lack of protection for women and of serious violations of their fundamental rights.

Despite the differences with Afghanistan, such as regarding women's access to education and to the public space, women's rights in Iran have been in the spotlight since September 2022.¹⁶ The death of a young woman after her arrest by the moral police for wearing the veil inappropriately according to the regime's standards triggered massive protests in the country. Considered one of the biggest challenges to the regime since 1979, the protests endorsed the Kurdish women's motto "Woman, Life, Freedom" and exposed the interconnections between different forms of oppression and discrimination in Iran and attempts to control women's bodies in particular. This challenge to the imposition of certain dress codes by the authorities, including the obligatory nature of the hijab, has been interpreted as criticism of one of the clearest and most visible forms of the regime's oppressive and discriminatory policies (non-recognition of the free self-determination of women), but not the only one. Iranian women face multiple forms of gender discrimination, including their marginalisation from spheres of power and decision-making, huge gender gaps in terms of unemployment and wages, a ban on holding certain jobs, the need for male authorisation to work, obtain a passport and travel, limits on access to sexual and reproductive rights and discriminatory provisions on divorce, child custody and even access to sporting events. After the inauguration of President Ebrahim Raisi in June 2021, the moral police stepped up their activities and a series of measures considered especially hostile to women were approved, such as stricter monitoring of women's dress code through digital surveillance systems and social networks.

Despite the displays of resistance from women in both contexts and all the international criticism, both regimes have persisted in their policies and reacted repressively. In Iran, this has entailed the deployment of many different tactics to try to quell the protests, which have included the persecution and death of protesters, including around 100 women by the end of 2022, the intentional use of gender violence, such as the deliberate shooting of women in the face and genitals, mass arrests and other practices. In Afghanistan the protests have been harshly repressed, with arrests and physical mistreatment of the women staging them, who have nevertheless persisted in their actions. The United Nations has reported an excessive use of force in the security forces' crackdown on the women's demonstrations.

15. For further information, see María Villellas, "La situación de las mujeres en Afganistán. Entre la opresión y la resistencia", *Apunts ECP de Conflictes i Pau*, no. 20, November 2022.

16. For further information, see Pamela Urrutia, *La revuelta de las mujeres en Irán: ¿un punto de inflexión? Claves desde el análisis de conflictos con perspectiva feminista*, *Apunts ECP de Conflictes i Pau*, no. 27, March 2023.

A common denominator in both cases has been the special vulnerability of girls. In Iran, the crackdown on demonstrations has affected many minors, some of which were even arrested in raids on schools. According to human rights groups, by the end of 2022, at least 12 girls and 46 boys had been killed in actions by security forces since the protests began. Since early 2023, reports of poisonings of thousands of students have also multiplied in more than 100 schools across the country. Though they have not resulted in death, these poisonings, for which nobody claimed responsibility but which were blamed on extremists, were interpreted as attempts to intimidate girls due to their involvement in the protests and to generate fear in families, seeking to compromise girls' right to education. In Afghanistan, meanwhile, child marriages have multiplied as a result of the serious humanitarian crisis that the country is going through and the rise in poverty. The severe restrictions on education are especially affecting adolescents, who are being deprived of essential education, and girls' schools have been the target of violent attacks. In both countries, the surveillance and repression of women has also been increasingly diverted to the family and the community. In Afghanistan, this has happened by making male relatives responsible for control, as they are the ones who must answer to the authorities if the women in their families break imposed rules. In Iran, it is supported through a system of fines that penalises shops, restaurants and businesses that allow women to enter without a veil.

Initiatives to report extreme, systematic and structural discrimination against women in both countries have even led to a proposal to recognise the situation as a crime of gender apartheid

Faced with this course of events, a coalition led by Afghan and Iranian women has come together around a campaign that seeks to promote the recognition of gender apartheid as a crime in international law.¹⁷ Female human rights activists and experts are demanding that the crime of apartheid, which thus far has only been applied to racial hierarchies, must also be articulated to recognise systematic and structural discrimination based on gender hierarchies. It is therefore a form of apartheid different from the one experienced in South Africa, but with aspects of subjugation and systematic segregation like those observed in Afghanistan and Iran today. In both countries, they stress, the restrictions, prohibitions and legal provisions seek to subject women to men and to the state at the risk of becoming victims of violence, arrest and even death. The promoters of the initiative assure that they do not intend to impose Western values on Muslim societies, but to confront

systematic attempts to subjugate women and turn them into second-class citizens that should have no place in any society, regardless of religion. They aim to provoke an international response, so they call on governments to publicise the experiences of women in Iran and Afghanistan, take action to condemn the apartheid system in both countries and help to expand the crime of apartheid to include institutionalised forms of gender discrimination.

Despite initiatives like this, there is still a risk that media coverage of the issue will fade and/or that signalling related to women's rights will be used cynically. The experience in Afghanistan provides illustrative examples of women's rights repeatedly being used for political purposes by international actors operating there. Thus, under the US military occupation of the country in 2001, a duality was established between the oppression caused by the Taliban regime and the supposed "salvation" provided by the US, reducing the role and agency of Afghan women and their own resistance and coping strategies. In later years, the responsibility of the US and other governments for perpetuating an armed conflict that had serious effects on the lives of women was ignored. More recently, some in Iran have also warned of the dangers of the cynical use of the defence of women's rights and double standard policies. For example, in December 2022

Iran was expelled from the UN Commission on the Status of Women in an initiative promoted by the US on the grounds that its involvement undermined the commission's credibility. This decision by Washington, framed as part of its struggle with Iran, contrasts with its policies (or inaction) towards other countries with similar records of violating women's rights, but which are US allies, such as Saudi Arabia. The US is also in a complex position in this area considering the recent setbacks in terms of reproductive rights by decision of the Supreme Court.

The women of Iran and Afghanistan are going through a situation that different organisations, experts and activists have described as "gender apartheid", given how seriously it impacts their lives. This situation also highlights the risk that the crises and conflicts that these countries are undergoing get even worse. It must not be forgotten that women's rights and gender equality are indicators and preconditions for the development of peaceful societies.

17. End Gender Apartheid campaign.