

ZeroFox Intelligence Geopolitical Brief for May 2024

TLP: CLEAR

B-2024-05-03a



Executive Summary

May 2024 looks to be another eventful month for the Middle East after an incident-laden April. In April, Israel and Iran exchanged direct attacks for the first time, and U.S. college campuses erupted in protest—largely in support of Palestinians. Both matters could escalate if a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas is not agreed upon and Israel invades Rafah instead, which looks likely. An incursion into Rafah will likely worsen anti-Israel protests in the United States and Europe, given the high number of expected civilian casualties from such an operation.

Although tensions between Iran and Israel have cooled in recent weeks, the unprecedented tit-for-tat attacks may herald the onset of a dangerous norm in which the two countries undertake direct attacks against one another regularly. A military response from Hamas' allies across the Middle East in the event of an invasion of Rafah could lead to more direct attacks between Israel and Iran.

With the approval of a major U.S. military aid package in April, May could also see a shift in the war in Ukraine. In 2024, Ukraine has slowly lost ground to Russian troops, who were likely planning a major offensive in May or June. Russia may still be planning a short-term military burst while aid remains in transit, but the aid package should allow Ukraine to resist Russia's advances in the medium term. Longer term, the aid package likely means that Russia's plans have been delayed until 2025 but not significantly altered. Ahead of the March 2024 elections in Russia, ZeroFox predicted a more aggressive Russian foreign policy. This includes continuing to target Ukraine aggressively but also targeting Ukraine supporters in the West. This forecast is unchanged, especially with important European Union (EU) elections in June followed by U.S. general elections in November, where Russia will be pushing to elect candidates who support its position in Ukraine.

May 2024 will be a busy month for campaigning ahead of major elections in South Africa, Mexico, and across the EU in late May and early June. General elections in Panama and Chad and local elections in the United Kingdom (UK) and Spain will also be held in the early part of May, and new president will be inaugurated in Taiwan in mid-May. China may use the opportunity to escalate its military activity around the island.

Key Findings

- A U.S. military aid package should allow Ukraine to better resist Russia militarily until late 2025, after which the question of Western resolve to back Ukraine will re-emerge.
- An Israeli incursion into Rafah could worsen anti-Israel protests in the United States and see Hamas' allies escalate their military activity in the region.
- A ceasefire between Israel and Hamas will likely assuage protesters somewhat and calm tensions in the region, which escalated after Israel and Iran broke historic norms by directly targeting each other in April.
- Expect widespread protests in Argentina in the first half of May, where protesters are seeking to block the senate from approving a key austerity bill.
- Protests in Georgia are pitting EU supporters against those who wish for closer ties with Russia.
- Chad is holding elections while trying to balance its historic reliance on Western military support with local support for greater ties with Russia.
- South Africa will hold its most contentious elections since apartheid, and the fight for votes could turn violent.
- A presidential inauguration in Taiwan presents China with another opportunity to threaten the island militarily.
- Panama's presidential elections look like a foregone conclusion unless the Supreme Court bans the leading candidate, which could lead to social unrest.
- Haiti's Transitional Council already looks inadequate, and its political future will likely be determined by an international police mission.
- The Singapore leadership transition taking place in mid-May is the most significant in decades, with locals uncharacteristically angry over perceived political corruption.
- Fuel shortages and a consistently high cost of living could trigger violent protests in Nigeria

Key Threats and Developments

 China will likely time military drills to interrupt the inauguration of a new president in Taiwan.

 Pro-Palestinian protests in May could escalate if Israel invades Rafah.

 South Africa's contentious elections pose security risks during the campaign.

 Improving EU economic competitiveness is the likely mandate of the new EU parliament following June elections.

 Protests against a law that brings Georgia closer to Russia could escalate in May.

 A deal between Israel and Saudi Arabia looks possible as the United States seeks alternative ways to end the Israel-Hamas war.

 Panama's elections are unlikely to resolve the cost-of-living crisis.

 Chad holds elections amid a power struggle for influence between the United States and Russia.

SCOPE NOTE: ZeroFox Intelligence is derived from a variety of sources, including—but not limited to—curated open-source accesses, vetted social media, proprietary data sources, and direct access to threat actors and groups through covert communication channels. Information relied upon to complete any report cannot always be independently verified. As such, ZeroFox applies rigorous analytic standards and tradecraft in accordance with best practices and includes caveat language and source citations to clearly identify the veracity of our intelligence reporting and substantiate our assessments and recommendations. All sources used in this particular intelligence product were identified prior to 3:00 PM (EDT) on May 2, 2024; per cyber hygiene best practices, caution is advised when clicking on any third-party links.



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Russia-Ukraine War Update

- On April 24, U.S. President Joe Biden approved legislation authorizing USD 61 billion in military assistance for Ukraine.[1] President Biden had first requested these funds in October 2023, however, Republicans in the House of Representatives delayed voting on the measure due to domestic political considerations. The United States has been Ukraine's largest source of military assistance since Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, and Ukraine accordingly faced significant military supply shortages during the six-month delay. Ukraine particularly lacked artillery ammunition and air defense components, which allowed Russia to capture Avdiivka and other marginal gains. The situation was beginning to look especially dire, as Ukraine lacked the supplies necessary to defend against a Russian offensive expected to begin in May or June.
- The U.S. assistance, combined with several other smaller European military aid pledges to Ukraine, should allow Ukraine to blunt Russia's upcoming counteroffensive, provided it arrives quickly. Some of the equipment has already begun arriving in Ukraine; however, it must then be distributed to frontline positions.[2] Troops should receive sufficient equipment levels sometime in mid-May, after which they should be able to stabilize Ukrainian positions.
- Russian troops will therefore likely try to take advantage of this period - while Ukraine still lacks weapons - to advance as far as possible, specifically in Donetsk Oblast. While the Russian military is historically poor in maneuver warfare, it has recently proved it can make continuous advances while Ukraine has lacked Western equipment. Shortly after the U.S. House voted to approve the aid package, Russia began increasing attacks west of Avdiivka and has made moderate gains over the past week.[3] Russian troops are also pushing towards Chasiv Yar, a strategic city located west of Bakhmut. Capturing the city would allow Russia to threaten a line of Ukrainian strongholds crucial to the defense of central Ukraine. Given its strategic importance, Russian troops will likely increasingly target Chasiv Yar before aid arrives.

Spain - Catalan Regional Election

- On May 12, 2024, the autonomous community of Catalonia is scheduled to hold a regional election. A total of eight parties are vying for 135 seats in parliament.

Forward Look:

- Internal disputes between the three Catalan separatist parties (Junts, ERC, and CUP) have allowed the Socialists (PSOE) to take a lead in the polls heading into the election.[4] However, the Socialist Party is projected to win 38 seats—far short of the 68 needed to achieve governing majority—and will likely need to enter into difficult negotiations to form a coalition.
- On March 14, 2024, Spain's Lower House of Parliament passed a controversial amnesty bill for politicians and activists implicated in the unsuccessful effort to achieve Catalan independence in 2017. The legislation is currently stalled in the senate, but will take effect over the summer if it is not overturned by the constitutional court. This would allow key Catalan leaders such as Carles Puigdemont to return to Spain and may lead to a renewed push for independence.[5]

Israel-Hamas War Update

- Following an Israeli strike on April 1, 2024, that killed several senior Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) officials in Damascus, Iran and Israel traded direct strikes on each other's territory for the first time. On April 13, 2024, Iran launched more than 300 drones, ballistic missiles, and cruise missiles at Israeli territory.[6] While reportedly 99 percent of the projectiles were intercepted and no major damage or casualties resulted from the attack, Israel responded by targeting an Iranian military facility in Isfahan with a small-scale barrage on April 19, 2024.[7] Both attacks appeared designed to avoid escalation, and no further exchanges have occurred since the Israeli response.
- On April 8, 2024, the Israeli military stated that it had withdrawn the majority of its combat troops from the Gaza Strip, leaving only one brigade (approximately 2,000-3,000 soldiers) in the central portion of the enclave. However, shortly after this was announced, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) called up and deployed two reserve brigades for upcoming "operational missions" in Gaza, leading to speculation that these troops will allow for an invasion of Rafah.[8]
- The past several weeks have also witnessed an uptick in violence in the West Bank. On April 21, 2024, the IDF concluded a multi-day operation in Tulkarm, which saw the deaths of over a dozen suspected Palestinian militants. Following the killing of an Israeli 14-year-old on April 12, 2024, settlers rampaged through several Palestinian towns, including al-Mughayyir, Beitun, Duma, and as-Sawiya, among other municipalities. In the resulting violence, at least four Palestinians were killed and dozens injured. To date, more than 460 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli military forces and settlers in the West Banks since Hamas' attack on October 7, 2023.[9]
- Continuing violence in the Palestinian territories has triggered weeks of intense protests in the Jordanian capital of Amman, particularly surrounding the Israeli Embassy. Seeking to capitalize on this unrest, Iraqi Shi'a special groups (specifically Kata'ib Hezbollah) claimed to be ready to arm 12,000 fighters in Jordan to help "defend our Palestinian brothers." On April 23, 2024, Hamas spokesman Abu Obeida also called for an escalation of protests in Jordan.[10]

Forward Look:

- Although tensions between Iran and Israel have cooled in recent days, the unprecedented tit-for-tat attacks may herald the onset of a dangerous norm in which the two countries undertake direct attacks against one another.
- Recent satellite imagery revealed that Israel is constructing a large-scale tent encampment outside Rafah.[11] This, along with ongoing troop rotations and comments from senior figures, indicates that authorities are still planning on conducting an offensive against the city in the near- to medium-term, regardless of persistent international opposition.
- Despite recent calls for increased unrest in Jordan, anti-Israel protests in Amman appear to have waned in recent days and will likely continue to lose steam. However, this could change, particularly in response to a major Rafah offensive. Threats from groups like Kata'ib Hezbollah to arm Jordanian citizens against Israel are also far-fetched for ethnic reasons (Jordanians are almost exclusively Sunni) and unlikely in the face of Jordanian security forces, which are widely seen as well-trained and competent.
- Saudi Arabia and the United States are reportedly close to entering a new security agreement, but it excludes cooperation with Israel. This demonstrates the U.S. frustration with Israel's intransigence regarding the establishment of a Palestinian state.

FOOTNOTES

[1] <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3754238/biden-administration-announces-significant-new-security-assistance-for-ukraine/>
[2] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/ukraine-conflict-updates>
[3] <https://euromaidanpress.com/2024/04/30/white-house-says-us-aid-arriving-in-ukraine-but-provides-no-further-details>
[4] <https://apnews.com/article/spain-catalonia-regional-election-amnesty-law-34fce0563b8ff7f120933de6d5addeb>
[5] https://www.eldiario.es/catalunya/primer-debate-electoral-catalunya-evidencia-vetos-cruzados-complicar-an-gobernabilidad_1_1137593.html

[6] <https://apnews.com/article/strait-of-hormuz-vessel-33fcffde2d867380e98c89403776a8ac>
[7] <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68866548>
[8] <https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-deploying-two-reserve-brigades-to-gaza-as-israel-girds-for-rafah-offensive/>
[9] <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68873279>
[10] <https://twitter.com/criticalthreats/status/1782928743394082892>
[11] <https://apnews.com/article/israel-iran-hamas-latest-04-23-2024-7eb0c352bd4b9f7f87f197be77d70d1>



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Geopolitical Brief for May 2024

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Latin America Updates

- **Panama:** General elections on May 5, 2024
- **Argentina:** Protests on May 6 and 9 as Senate debates key bill
- **Haiti:** Transitional government approved ahead of deployment of international security force

Forward Look:

- On May 5, 2024, Panama holds general elections to determine the president and composition of the 71-member National Assembly. Former security minister José Raúl Mulino, who replaced former president Ricardo Martinelli on the ticket of the right-wing Realizing Goals (RG) party, is the frontrunner.[12] Martinelli was convicted by both Panama and the United States of money laundering and is living at the Nicaraguan Embassy. However, he was the RG candidate until the Supreme Court banned his participation due to the conviction. Despite his conviction, Martinelli is still by far the most popular politician in the presidential race, and the high level of support for Murillo is largely a reflection of public backing for Martinelli.
- The high cost of living and corruption are the main campaign issues. Panama's economy has been hurt by both drought affecting the Panama Canal and the closure of a Canadian-owned copper mine that was a key contributor to the economy. Expect a Murillo victory, but there are still legal disputes over his candidacy that could see him disqualified. While his disqualification is unlikely, it could prompt protests from Martinelli supporters.
- On April 30, 2024, the Chamber of Deputies passed an omnibus bill of 230 measures designed to improve Argentina's economy. The bill narrowly passed after hundreds of amendments were removed from the original version, which was rejected. Expect large-scale protests in the coming days by powerful unions hoping to dissuade the Senate from passing the bill. A nationwide strike is planned for May 9, and a transportation strike is planned for May 6.[13] Expect smaller protests, especially in the capital of Buenos Aires, on days the Senate is in session. President Javier Milei is relying on center-right lawmakers to approve his bills as he has little traditional support in Congress. However, his number of political allies in the Senate is even smaller than in the Chamber of Deputies, and protesters will be hoping to influence politicians in the Senate to vote against the bill.
- The bill is a key part of President Milei's effort to decrease inflation and stabilize the economy. However, the measures will worsen unemployment and temporarily cause an increase in inflation, as they entail firing thousands of state employees, disbanding indebted nationalized companies, and privatizing others. The measures also include incentives for foreign investment.
- On April 25, 2024, Haitian Prime Minister Ariel Henry officially resigned, paving the way for a newly created Transitional Council (TC).[14] TC has nine members and nominated a relative unknown, Fritz Belizaire, to lead the country until new elections on February 7, 2026. The key tasks of the TC will be to restore order in Haiti, which has become overrun by gangs that control most of the capital of Port-au-Prince. Haiti is looking for an international security force to enter the country and regain control. However, as time has passed, Haiti's security situation has worsened, and it is unclear if the Kenyan-led police security force has the capabilities to wrest control back from the well-armed gangs. The gangs argue the foreign-based TC is illegitimate and have threatened strong resistance against any intervening force. If Haiti's security situation continues to spiral, there will likely be a mass migration crisis across the region, which could also see criminal gangs establish a base in Haiti that further destabilizes the region. In the longer term, the TC will be tasked with creating the conditions for Haiti to hold new elections. Haiti has not held elections since 2016 due to insecurity.

Georgia Foreign Agent Legislation

- In early April, Georgia's ruling Georgian Dream party re-introduced its "foreign agent" law. The bill would require non-governmental organizations to register as foreign agents if more than 20 percent of their funding comes from foreign sources.[15] Georgian Dream previously tried to pass this legislation in 2023 but withdrew the bill from consideration after it prompted mass protests throughout the country.
- The reintroduction of the bill again sparked mass protests in Tbilisi, which continued throughout April. Protests grew especially tense at the end of the month, with clashes between protesters and police.[16] These protests are likely to continue and escalate if the bill is enacted into law.
- Georgian Dream likely wants to approve this legislation to consolidate power and limit criticism ahead of Georgia's October parliamentary elections. Thus, the party is unlikely to back down amid mass protests as it did in 2023.
- Georgian Dream will highly likely pass the bill in its third and final reading scheduled for May 17. Georgia's largely figurehead President Salome Zourabichvili has vowed to veto the law, but Georgian Dream has enough votes in parliament to override her veto.

Forward Look:

- Critics say the law resembles Russia's foreign agent law and would similarly restrict press freedoms and civil society organizations. Many in Georgia view Georgian Dream's repeated attempts to enact the law as a broader push to shift the country away from closer ties with Europe and towards its past with Russia.
- On April 29, the founder of Georgian Dream, Bidzina Ivanishvili, claimed a "Global Party of War" in the West pushed Georgia to war with Russia in 2008. This revisionist view again reflects Georgian Dream's shift away from the West.

EU Competitiveness Council

- On April 18, 2024, EU leaders announced a new Competitiveness Council based on a 147-page report by former Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta highlighting the EU's lack of competitiveness across sectors. The EU's expensive operating environment and dependence on energy, clean technology, and advanced technology imports have become especially apparent since COVID-19.[17]
- Key to the council's success, is gathering funds from across the 27 EU member states to invest in clean technology manufacturing, clean energy systems, and advanced technology production. Any new developments are unlikely before the EU elections in June; after that, expect issues related to the competitiveness council to be the key driving force behind EU commission policies, as the EU Green New Deal was for the last EU parliament. However, divisions between EU states will make passing bills difficult.
- Among the policy proposals are efforts to bring all EU members under one system for energy, telecommunications, and finance. Previously, those sectors were decided by individual states, but that has reportedly contributed to the EU's expensive operating environment, with many companies finding it easier and cheaper to operate elsewhere. At the same time, geopolitical issues must also be addressed. The EU will want to make these competitiveness improvements while also reconfiguring their supply chains away from China and Russia. This will be costly and difficult, as Russia has historically provided the bulk of the region's energy supplies, and China is the EU's primary trade partner. The competitiveness issues will likely run alongside other EU policies like the Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA), which aims to source key materials from countries that are not China.

FOOTNOTES

- [12] <https://apnews.com/article/panama-candidate-mulino-martinelli-elections-2305f2aab92ff83a5f47a540cbdd1da>
- [13] <https://www.infobae.com/politica/2024/05/01/el-gobierno-busca-replicar-el-triunfo-de-la-ley-bases-en-el-senado-con-miras-al-pacto-de-mayo/>
- [14] <https://en.mercopress.com/2024/04/25/haiti-henry-resigns-transitional-council-sworn-in>
- [15] <https://www.ekhoavkazal.com/a/3268946.html>
- [16] <https://www.euronews.com/2024/04/29/thousands-protest-in-georgia-against-controversial-foreign-influence-law>
- [17] <https://www.foxnews.com/economy/eu-competitiveness-council>



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Geopolitical Brief for May 2024

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B-2024-05-03a



Asia Updates

- Lawrence Wong to become **Singapore's** Prime Minister on May 15, 2024.[17]
- **Australia:** Large-scale domestic violence protests
- **Taiwan:** High risk of Chinese military drills during Presidential inauguration on May 20, 2024

Forward Look:

- On April 15, 2024, Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced that he would hand over power to his successor, Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong, on May 15, 2024, ahead of an election to be held by November 2025. Wong is expected to lead the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) into the elections. The PAP has governed Singapore uninterrupted since 1959, but the next election is expected to be the most contentious. The leadership transition from Lee to Wong—part of a younger cohort of leaders known as the fourth generation team called 4G—is considered significant for Singapore's long-term development amid a more volatile geopolitical environment. Singapore is considered a safe financial alternative to Hong Kong, but political tensions could harm the investing environment.
- Major protests in Australia over domestic violence occurred over the weekend of April 27-28, spurred by recent incidents of gender-based violence. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese announced on May 1 that the government would provide AUD 925 million to support women leaving abusive relationships.[18]
- Taiwan is concerned China is planning military exercises to coincide with the inauguration of President-elect Lai Ching-te on May 20, 2024.[19] China has already increased military maneuvers around the Taiwan Straits since Lai was elected in January. For example, China has conducted joint combat readiness patrols at night and used in-flight refueling aircraft during the patrols to extend the time combat aircraft can remain in the air; it has also increased coast guard patrols and opened new air routes unilaterally. China sees Taiwan as its territory and pro-independent Lai as a dangerous separatist, rejecting repeated offers of talks. In the run-up to the elections, there were incidents of cyberattacks and economic coercion, such as increasing extra tariffs on Taiwan's polycarbonate exports to China. China may increase its military activities as the inauguration approaches and in the immediate aftermath of the ceremony.

Africa Updates

- Nearly a year after President Bola Tinubu initiated an aggressive set of reforms, fuel shortages and dwindling foreign reserves in Nigeria risk sparking protests that could derail his government.[20]
- Togolese elections were held on April 29. President Faure Gnassingbe, part of a dynasty that has led the country for more than 50 years, has attempted to pass constitutional modifications that would allow him to skirt presidential term limits by empowering a prime ministerial position into which he could step. The election is, in effect, a referendum on these changes.[21]
- Chad will go to the polls on May 6 to legitimize the rule of Mahamat Idriss Deby. Deby came to power in 2021 when his father, Idriss Deby Itno, was killed while fighting rebels—an incident many believe was masterminded by the son. This election has been similarly arranged, with leading opposition figures either disqualified, politically neutralized, or even killed. Former opposition leader Succes Masra is the only notable opposition candidate, but many fear that he has been compromised since he took a deal to become Prime Minister.[22]
- Chad is balancing its historic ties with the United States and France, both of which maintain large military positions in Chad, with growing support for Russia inside Chad. Ahead of the election, Chad publicly asked U.S. forces to leave, but it is widely believed that this is a political maneuver that will be disregarded following the elections.

South Africa Elections

- South Africa is set to hold its most competitive national elections so far on May 29, 2024. The African National Congress (ANC) has ruled South Africa since the country's democratic transition in 1994. The upcoming elections will decide what parties control Parliament and choose the president. The heightened competitiveness of the elections comes from a decline in the ruling party's popularity due to a host of factors, including worsening economic conditions, widespread power outages, and alleged corruption.
- The ANC's popularity has declined steadily over the past 30 years. Polls are forecasting that the party will lose its majority in the upcoming election—meaning that its share of votes will dip below 50 percent for the first time since beginning of its rule.[23]

Forward Look:

- If the ANC loses its majority in Parliament, the party is expected to lobby to opposition parties in order to maintain dominance in South Africa. The main opposition party, the Democratic Alliance (DA), is expected to garner around 20 percent of the vote, with smaller opposition parties obtaining less than 10 percent. Meanwhile, a recent poll showed the ANC's popularity dipping below 40 percent—meaning that it is increasingly likely the party will have to form a coalition with other opposition parties. This outcome could result in slower legislation, domestic and foreign policy changes, and heightened political tensions.[24]
- Former President Jacob Zuma's decision to run in the May 29 elections for the newly created uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK) Party is also expected to pose a threat to the ruling party's majority. Zuma was previously ousted as president in 2018 from the ANC Party due to corruption allegations.[25]

FOOTNOTES

- [17] <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/singapore-pm-lee-hand-over-power-successor-wong-may-15-2024-04-15/>
- [18] <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-68915018>
- [19] <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/news/5669464>
- [20] <https://www.africanews.com/2024/05/02/faced-with-a-shortage-nigerians-queue-for-hours-for-petrol-as-prices-soar/>
- [21] <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20240429-togo-votes-in-key-legislative-elections-after-divisive-constitutional-reform>
- [22] <https://www.dw.com/en/chad-prepares-for-election-of-shattered-dreams/a-68982824>
- [23] <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/support-south-africas-anc-near-40-weeks-before-election-ipsos-poll-shows-2024-04-26/>
- [24] *Ibid.*
- [25] <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-68873295>



APPENDIX A:
ZeroFox Intelligence Probability Scale

All ZeroFox Intelligence products leverage probabilistic assessment language in analytic judgments. Qualitative statements used in these judgments refer to associated probability ranges, which state the likelihood of the occurrence of an event or development. Ranges are used to avoid a false impression of accuracy. This scale is a standard that aligns how readers should interpret such terms.

Almost No Chance	Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Roughly Even Chance	Likely	Very Likely	Almost Certain
1-5%	5-20%	20-45%	45-55%	55-80%	80-95%	95-99%

APPENDIX B:
Traffic Light Protocol for Information Dissemination

TLP:RED

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Sources may use **TLP:RED** when information cannot be effectively acted upon by additional parties and could lead to impacts on a party's privacy, reputation, or operations if misused.

HOW IT IS SHARED

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Note that
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HOW IT IS SHARED

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