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Future Trends

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Welcome to this week's Future Trends - the must-read weekly briefing covering the changing face of global politics, economics, development, and conflict.

Here's what you need to know this week:

- Far-right populist leader Geert Wilders wins big in the Dutch elections
- Switzerland moves to ban Hamas and supports Israel's self-defense rights
- COP28: UAE plan to use climate talks to make oil deals
- Protests against mining project continue in Panama
- WHO asks China for more details on unexplained pneumonia outbreak

POLITICS

Far-right populist leader Geert Wilders wins big in the Dutch

elections. European democracies face the possibility of having to deal with the first far-right prime minister of the Netherlands, populist [Geert Wilders](#).

President-Elect Arevalo fights attempts to prevent inauguration. Bernardo Arevalo, the president-elect of Guatemala, rejected accusations of damage to national heritage brought against him by the Public Prosecutor's Office as being an attempt to [prevent his official confirmation](#) as president in 2024.

EU countries agree on new scheme to allocate migrants across bloc. Fourteen member countries of the European Union have agreed to a new "[solidarity mechanism](#)" proposed by Germany and France to allocate migrants across the bloc.

Russia warns of a 'crisis' at Arctic border with Finland. Russia said a [humanitarian emergency](#) was unfolding at one of its checkpoints on the Arctic border with Finland, where it said hundreds of migrants were stranded in freezing temperatures.

Romanian prosecutors ask to investigate former PM over vaccine contracts. Romanian anti-corruption prosecutors asked parliament and the president to allow a [criminal investigation into former prime minister Florin Citu](#) and two former ministers for suspected abuse of office concerning COVID-19 vaccine purchases.

CONFLICT

Chinese military conducts drills near Myanmar border after convoy fire. China's military will begin [combat training activities](#) on its side of the border with Myanmar, a day after a convoy of trucks carrying goods into the neighbouring Southeast Asian nation went up in flames.

Australia and Philippines begin joint patrols in South China Sea as regional tensions rise. The countries say joint patrols is their commitment to closer cooperation and a rules-based order in the region, [in response to China's claim to sovereignty](#) over most of the South China Sea, including areas owned by the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei.

North Korea vows more satellite launches, beefs up military on border. A new North Korean satellite launch prompted South Korea to resume aerial surveillance near the border as [Kim Jong Un broke a military agreement](#) with its neighbour. Ten members of the UN Security Council condemned the satellite launch, while Russia and China declined.

Switzerland moves to ban Hamas and supports Israel's self-defence rights. The Swiss government, which has allocated \$US102 million in humanitarian aid for the region, says it will pass a new law by the end of February to ban any "[Hamas activities](#)" or support for the Palestinian group, which the Swiss Federal Council designated as a terrorist organisation.

Sierra Leone declares nationwide curfew after gunmen attack military barracks. The unidentified gunmen attacked the military's largest barracks in the West African [nation's capital](#), Freetown.

Russia downs 'dozens' of Ukrainian missiles headed for Moscow. Russian authorities claimed [Ukraine attacked Moscow](#) with dozens of drones, a day after Russia launched its most intense drone attack on Kyiv since the start of its full-scale war.

ECONOMICS

China wealth manager Zhongzhi flags insolvency, US\$64 billion in liabilities. The worsening issues at Zhongzhi, a major player in China's US\$3 trillion [shadow banking](#) sector, is set to rekindle economic worries. Analysts expect regulators to step in to stem a wider fallout.

Support for Germany's Greens falls amid budget crisis. The Green Party's popularity with voters has fallen to its [lowest in over five years](#), as Germany's coalition government grapples with a big hole in its budget.

COP28: UAE plan to use climate talks to make oil deals. Leaked briefing documents reveal UAE plans to discuss [fossil fuel deals](#) with nations at the COP28 climate summit. The UN said the summit hosts were expected to act without bias or self-interest.

Malawi criticized for exporting workers to Israel amid Gaza conflict. President Chakwera was [criticized](#) for sending about 200 young people to work on Israeli farms under a labour export deal.

Kenya to privatise 35 state organisations. Kenyan authorities intend to [privatise](#) 35 state-owned companies and are considering opening the capital of 100 others amid liquidity and cost-of-living challenges.

DEVELOPMENT

Protests against mining project continue in Panama. Panamanians are [continuing to protest](#) against Law 406, which grants Minera Panama permission to exploit an open-pit copper mine for 20 years.

Somalia joins East Africa trade bloc. Somalia has become the [8th member of the Community of East African States](#), a single market of 300 million people allowing free movement of goods and people across Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, South Sudan, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

UN vote challenges OECD global tax leadership. The OECD leadership on global tax coordination has been challenged after a majority of [UN members backed an African-led initiative](#) to switch international tax cooperation to the UN, in the wake of frustration among developing countries with the OECD.

Cameroon receives 300,000 doses of Malaria vaccine. The life-saving drug is the first approved for this use by the [WHO](#), with 1.7 million more doses being delivered in coming weeks to Burkina Faso, Liberia, Niger, and Sierra Leone.

Iran sues newspaper for publishing morality guard documents. Iranian public prosecutor's office has brought charges against a prominent newspaper for [publishing a top-secret government document](#) about the country's volunteer morality guards and their deployment to enforce the country's strict Islamic dress code for women.

SOCIAL

WHO asks China for more details on unexplained pneumonia

outbreak. The World Health Organization has asked Beijing for more information on an outbreak of mysterious pneumonia in northern China that appears [mostly to be affecting children](#). Reports state children's hospitals in several regions are overwhelmed with sick children.

An AI system self-organises to develop features of brains of complex

organisms. Scientists have shown that placing physical constraints on an artificially-intelligent system – similar to the way the human brain works within constraints – allows it to develop [features of the brains of complex organisms](#) in order to solve tasks.

A23a: World's biggest iceberg on the move after 30 years. The [world's biggest iceberg](#), at almost 4,000 square km (1,500 sq miles), is on the move after more than 30 years being stuck to the ocean floor and is set to spill beyond Antarctic waters.

Sugar prices are rising worldwide. Sugar worldwide is trading at the highest prices since 2011, mainly due to lower global supplies after [unusually dry weather damaged harvests in India and Thailand](#), hitting developing nations the hardest and contributing to food insecurity.

Study finds bacteria's unique ability to store and transfer 'memories'. A study discovered that brainless bacteria may have ["memory" from previous experiences](#). Researchers said E. coli has created a natural biological system in which iron levels function as a trigger, creating a type of memory in bacteria that regulates their behaviour.

PEACEBUILDING

[Houston has cut homelessness](#) by more than 60 percent since 2011. The city has had strong political leaders who persuaded local service providers, corporations and charities to work together, while Houston's lack of regulation makes it quick and relatively cheap to build new apartments. The city focused on moving people into apartments and supplying ongoing services to keep them housed. As a result, Houston has moved more than 25,000 people into housing, and the overwhelming majority have remained housed after two

years. The [city has unveiled a \\$100 million plan](#) that would use federal, state, county, city, and corporate funds to cut the homeless count in half again by 2025.

The Mechai Viravaidya Foundation has started a [Homeward Bound program in Thailand](#) aimed at helping internal migrants who sought more lucrative jobs in cities return to their homes in the countryside. The program provides small loans and training to help returnees learn how to build and run small businesses, grow profitable crops in small spaces and market them to schools, temples, hospitals and local markets. The next step is to scale up, through access to training and credit from the government's Bank of Agriculture and Cooperatives. A world-renowned social innovator, Viravaldya started a Bamboo School to inspire entrepreneurship and has been credited with designing Thailand's successful family planning campaigns.

Scientists have determined that small as well as large [acts of kindness can have a major impact](#) on both recipients and givers. Researchers at UCLA, the University of Texas and elsewhere have shown that acts of kindness [raise the oxytocin levels](#) of both givers and receivers and that both feel happier. One cancer patient put this information into practice by starting the Chemo to Kindness Challenge on her first day of treatment, prompting 1,127 acts of kindness around the world over the past two years.

The Asia Foundation has introduced the first cohort of the [2030 Climate Champions Fellowship](#). Ten young environmental leaders --- five each from the US and China -- will work together over four months through a peer-learning platform and engage with broad networks in both countries. The fellowship aims to promote greater cross-cultural dialogue between youth in the two countries through a partnership with the US Mission to China and the [China Association for NGO Cooperation](#).