



Commentary

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By International Crisis Group

10 Conflicts to Watch in 2023

Russia's invasion of Ukraine sent shock waves round the world. As our look ahead to 2023 shows, several other crises loom as well.

Will he or won't he? This time last year, that was the question. Russian President Vladimir Putin had massed almost two hundred thousand troops on Ukraine's borders. U.S. intelligence warned that Russia was preparing for all-out war. All the signs pointed to an assault, bar one: it seemed unthinkable.

True, Russia had attacked Ukraine in 2014, and in the spring of 2021 had staged a dress rehearsal for an invasion, building up forces on the frontier before sending them home. Putin seemed ever angrier at Kyiv's refusal to bow to his will. He openly derided Ukrainian national identity and sovereignty. Still, it was shocking, when Russian forces did roll in, that a nuclear-armed power in 2022 would seek to conquer a neighbour in an act of unprovoked aggression. Beyond the devastation in Ukraine, the war has cast a long shadow over global affairs.

For Russia, so far it has been disastrous. An offensive that was supposed to subjugate Ukraine, weaken the West, and strengthen the Kremlin has, up to now, done the opposite. It has turbo-charged Ukrainian nationalism and pushed Kyiv closer to Europe. It has breathed new purpose into a previously adrift NATO. Finland and Sweden joining the alliance, which seems on track, will dramatically shift the balance of force in Northern Europe, more than doubling the length of Russia's borders with NATO states. The war has laid bare weaknesses

in Russia's military that operations in Syria (2015) and Ukraine (2014 and 2015) had disguised. It has revealed resolve and competence in the West that fiascos in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya had obscured (though admittedly things might have been different had the U.S. been under other leadership).

Still, the war is far from over. Russia's economy has adapted to massive Western sanctions. The Kremlin appears convinced that Russia has staying power. Moscow might yet force an ugly settlement and set a troubling precedent for aggression elsewhere. If, on the other hand, Putin feels truly in peril, due to Ukrainian advances or other reasons, it is not impossible – unlikely, but hard to completely rule out – that he will use a nuclear weapon as a last roll of the dice. Whatever happens in Ukraine, the West and Russia will likely remain a miscalculation away from confrontation.

For China, the war has been mostly a headache. Despite Chinese President Xi Jinping's public embrace of Putin and continued trade between the two countries that has helped Russia weather sanctions, Beijing's material support has been lacklustre. Xi Jinping has not sent weapons. He appears disturbed by Putin's travails and nuclear bluster. Beijing does not want to undercut Moscow and is unlikely to compel Putin to reach a settlement. But neither does it wish to provoke Western capitals by abetting the invasion. It watches warily as U.S.

allies in Asia bolster defences and seem even keener to keep Washington around, even as they still want access to Chinese markets. The war has heightened fears of a Chinese assault on Taiwan. But an invasion that seemed too risky for Beijing in the near term even before the war seems – at least for now – even less likely. The massive sanctions imposed on Russia are not lost on China. Nor are Moscow’s battlefield failures.

As for the relationship – between the U.S. and China – that will dominate the coming decades, the Russia-Ukraine war has not changed the fundamentals. U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s August visit to Taiwan riled Beijing, but the meeting three months later between U.S. President Joe Biden and Xi promised a resumption of dialogue. Competition is still baked into the two countries’ foreign policies, however. Chinese designs upon Taiwan are not going anywhere. Though the world’s two biggest economies remain entwined, technological decoupling is underway.

The war has shone light on non-Western middle powers’ influence and autonomy. Turkey, long walking a tightrope between NATO membership and ties to Moscow, has brokered, with the United Nations, a deal to get Ukrainian grain onto global markets via the Black Sea. The initiative follows years of Turkish assertiveness abroad, including tipping the battlefield

balance in Libya and the South Caucasus and expanding drone sales. For Saudi Arabia, the abrupt removal of Russian oil from the market was a boon. It forced a visit from Biden, who had entered office promising to shun Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Riyadh decided, with other oil producers, to keep prices high, much to Washington’s fury. India, at once a U.S. security partner and major purchaser of Russian arms, has both bought knock-off Russian oil and chided Putin for his nuclear sabre-rattling. This is no coordinated non-aligned movement. But activist middle powers feel space to chart their own course and, while few welcome big-power rivalry, will seize the opportunities that multipolarity brings.

Elsewhere in the global south, the war exposed raw nerves. Most non-Western capitals joined in UN General Assembly votes against Russia’s aggression. But few have condemned Putin publicly or imposed sanctions. Many have reason – trade, mostly, but also historical ties or reliance on Kremlin-linked Wagner Group mercenaries – not to break with Moscow. They see picking a side or incurring costs for a war many believe is Europe’s problem as against their interests. Frustration with the West plays a role too, whether over COVID-19 vaccine hoarding, migration policy or climate injustice. Many see a double standard in outrage over Ukraine given the West’s interventions elsewhere and

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colonial record. Many global south leaders also believe, particularly when it comes to sanctions, that Western governments have put fighting Russia over the global economy.

Indeed, outside Europe, the war's biggest ramifications are economic. Financial jitters triggered by the invasion and announcement of sanctions roiled markets that COVID-19 had already shaken. Food and fuel commodity prices shot up, sparking a cost of living crisis. Though prices have since come down, inflation remains rampant, magnifying debt problems. The pandemic and economic crisis are two among several mutually reinforcing threats, notably also including climate change and food insecurity, that can beset vulnerable countries and fuel unrest. On this year's list, Pakistan is a prime example. Many countries are in similar boats.

Did 2022 give any cause for optimism for the year ahead? Given Ukraine's anguish, finding good in the war might seem perverse. But had Kyiv put up less of a fight, had the West been less united than it was under Biden's leadership, and had Russia prevailed, Europe, and arguably the world, would be in a more dangerous place. Nor was Putin the only strongman who had a bad year. Several populists, whose politics have recently sown much discord, also lost out. Jair Bolsonaro was defeated in Brazil. Former U.S. President Donald Trump appears, for now, a diminished figure. Marine Le Pen failed to win the French presidency. In Italy, where populists did win power, they mostly tacked centre once in office. Far-right populism

is not a spent force, but some of its champions suffered setbacks. Plus, multilateral diplomacy largely muddled through. Notwithstanding their bitter differences, China, Russia and Western powers still mostly saw the UN Security Council as a venue to manage crises outside Ukraine. A deal that could end Ethiopia's horrific war and warmer Colombia-Venezuela ties show that peacemaking elsewhere can trundle along despite conflict in Europe.

Overall, though, it was an unsettling year, all the more so given that it's the latest in a string of them. The pandemic upended much of the globe. An angry mob stormed the U.S. Capitol. Temperatures in parts of the world threaten human survival. Now, a major war rages in Europe, its architect invokes nuclear escalation, and several poor countries face debt crises, hunger and extreme weather. None of these events arrived without warning, and yet a few years ago they would have boggled the mind. They also come as the number of people [killed](#) in conflicts is ticking up and more people are displaced or hungry, many due to war, than at any time since World War II.

So, will 2023 see major powers go to war or break a nearly 80-year nuclear taboo? Will political crises, economic hardship, and climate breakdown cause social meltdown in not just individual countries but a swath of the world? Worst-case answers to this year's big questions seem far-fetched. But after the past few years, it would be complacent to dismiss the unthinkable.

1. Ukraine

Thus far, Ukraine has resisted Russia's assault, thanks to Ukrainians' valour and Western aid. But after nearly a year of fighting, there's no end in sight.

When the Kremlin launched its all-out invasion in February, it seemingly expected to rout Ukraine's government and install a more pliant regime. It miscalculated. Ukraine's resistance

was as fierce as Russia's planning was inept. Driven back from around Kyiv in the spring, Moscow concentrated forces in the east and south. Then, in late summer, Ukrainian troops, now armed with more powerful Western-supplied weapons, advanced there, too.

Yet Moscow has upped the ante. It mobilised perhaps 300,000 additional men, although

data is unreliable. At least as many Russians fled the country and shortages of personnel and gear still plague the army. The Kremlin also announced the annexation of parts of Ukraine, including territory it does not control. It began a punishing campaign of airstrikes on Ukrainian infrastructure. The resulting power outages have rendered many areas nearly unlivable. As many as one in three Ukrainians have been displaced over the past year.

Thus far, little suggests either Kyiv or Moscow will back down. Ukrainians see each new attack and revelation of Russian abuses (including summary executions and sexual abuse) as more reason to fight. In Russia, propaganda and oppression deter opposition. Neither side shows genuine appetite for peace talks. Ukrainians are understandably loath to give up land when they've been winning it back. Moscow, despite saying it is [open](#) to diplomacy, still demands that Kyiv capitulate, scorning the Ukrainian government as [Nazis](#) controlled by a degenerate West. By escalating after each setback, Putin seems to be blowing up his own off-ramps.

Stalemate is setting in, though how long it will last is anyone's guess. Dug in, both sides probe for openings to inch forward. A new attack on central Ukraine from Belarus, though much hyped, seems improbable given low odds of success. Moscow hopes that winter cold and high gas prices, brought about by Western boycotts of Russian hydrocarbons, will sour Europeans on supporting Ukraine. But

“Both Moscow and Western capitals have taken pains to avoid direct clashes.”

Western unity thus far shows few cracks. Many European capitals believe Ukraine's defeat, in emboldening Moscow, would endanger them. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's visit to Washington at the end of 2022 confirmed bipartisan support there, despite [grousing](#) from the Republican Party's right flank.

As for the truly cataclysmic scenario – a potentially nuclear escalation between NATO and Russia – both Moscow and Western capitals have taken pains to avoid direct clashes. The West has rejected ideas of no-fly zones, for example, and drawn a line at supplying some advanced weaponry. Russia has avoided strikes on NATO territory. Putin has repeatedly referenced Russia's nuclear capacity, seemingly aiming to warn off the West, though has recently walked back his rhetoric. A nuclear strike would serve little military purpose and could trigger precisely the direct NATO involvement Moscow hopes to avoid. Still, the possibility cannot be dismissed, particularly if Putin feels his grip on power slipping. Indeed, the war has created probably the highest risk of nuclear confrontation in sixty years. It also sets the stage for what could be a long standoff, with Europe poised for ever-more dangerous showdowns, whatever happens in Ukraine.

Certainly, Western leaders should keep the door open to a settlement by making clear to the Kremlin the benefits, particularly in sanctions relief, that would follow a deal Ukraine can live with. For now, though, they judge that, for all the war's horrors, backing Ukraine, even at some risk of nuclear escalation, is better than allowing Russia to prevail through a brutal military campaign and nuclear menacing. That's a tough calculation to make; to some degree, it disconcerts other parts of the world. Thus far, though, it's the right one.

2. Armenia and Azerbaijan

If the war in Ukraine has reverberated across crises worldwide, its impact has been especially acute in the South Caucasus. Two years after their latest war over Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia and Azerbaijan appear headed toward another confrontation. Russia's travails in Ukraine have upset calculations in the region.

A new war would be shorter but no less dramatic than the six-week conflict in 2020. That war, which killed more than 7,000 soldiers, saw Azerbaijani forces rout Armenians from parts of the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave and nearby areas, all of which had been held by Armenian forces since the early 1990s. Moscow eventually brokered a ceasefire.

Since then, the balance has shifted further in [Azerbaijan's favour](#). The Armenian army has not replenished its troops or weapons, as Russia, its traditional [arms broker](#), is short on supplies. Azerbaijan, by contrast, has been ramping up. Its army outmatches Armenia's several times over, is far better equipped, and is backed by Turkey. Heightened European demand for Azerbaijani gas has also emboldened Baku.

Russia's travails in Ukraine matter in other ways too. As part of the 2020 ceasefire, Russian peacekeepers deployed to areas of Nagorno-Karabakh still settled by Armenians. Russia has beefed up its border guards and military personnel along parts of the Armenia-Azerbaijan border that, since the war, have become new front lines. The idea was that the contingents, though small, would deter attacks because Baku would be wary of needling Moscow.

But Russian forces have not stopped several flare-ups this past year. Azerbaijani troops in March and August captured more territory in Nagorno-Karabakh, including strategic mountain positions. In September, Azerbaijani forces

seized territory inside Armenia proper. Each bout of attacks was progressively bloodier.

The war in Ukraine has also overshadowed peace talks. Moscow has historically tended to lead peacemaking efforts over Nagorno-Karabakh. The 2020 ceasefire was supposed to open up trade in the region, including by reestablishing a [direct route](#) through Armenia from Azerbaijan to its exclave Nakhchivan on the Iranian border. Improving trade would pave the way to compromise on the thorny question of Nagorno-Karabakh's future. (After the 2020 war, Yerevan dropped its decades-long demand for a special status for Nagorno-Karabakh, but it still wants special rights and security guarantees for Armenians living there; Baku argues that local Armenians can enjoy rights like any Azerbaijani citizens.)

In late 2021, Moscow accepted new European Union-led mediation between Armenia and Azerbaijan, hoping that it would reinforce Russia's peacemaking, which had been making little headway. Since the war in Ukraine began, however, Moscow views the EU's diplomacy as part of wider efforts to curb Russia's influence. Despite attempts by Western capitals, the Kremlin refuses to engage.

As a result, there are two draft agreements floating around – one prepared by Russia and another Armenia and Azerbaijan themselves have developed with Western backing (many sections of which have contrasting text proposed by the two sides). Each draft tackles trade and stabilisation of the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, with the fate of Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh left to a separate and so far uninitiated process. The bilateral track supported by the West is probably more promising, in part because it's home-grown, though how Moscow

would respond if it yields an agreement is unclear. In any case, the two sides are far apart. Baku holds all the cards, and it would gain more from a deal, notably in terms of trade and foreign relations, than it would militarily.

The danger is that the talks go nowhere or another flare-up sinks both the Moscow-led and West-backed tracks, and Azerbaijan takes what it can by force.

3. Iran

Massive anti-regime protests, Iran's merciless crackdown and its supply of weapons to Russia have left the Islamic Republic more isolated than at any point in decades just as a crisis over its nuclear program is brewing.

The protests rocking the country have posed the most durable and determined threat to the Islamic Republic's authority since the 2009 Green Movement. Tens of thousands of mostly young people, fronted by women and schoolgirls who reject the compulsory hijab as a symbol of misogyny and broader oppression, have taken to the streets in acts of raw defiance against the regime.

The Iranian government has killed hundreds of people in response, including dozens of children. Formal executions of protesters follow trials human rights groups regard as shams. Thousands are in jail, many subject to horrific torture. The regime paints what is an emphatic grassroots expression of popular anti-government sentiment, particularly among youth and in long-neglected peripheries, as a foreign plot. Few buy it.

The challenge for Iran's heroic young protesters is to win over older middle-class Iranians, many of whom sympathise but fear the regime's violence or radical change. More of them might join were the protests to reach a critical mass, but without their joining that

seems unlikely to happen – at least not unless another trigger tips the balance or leaders emerge from among protesters. Nothing, as yet, suggests the regime will splinter. But nor can a crackdown quell deep societal anger. Something has broken. The regime cannot turn the clock back.

Meanwhile, talks to revive the 2015 nuclear deal, stalled since early September, are now in deep freeze. Tehran's nuclear capability has advanced leaps and bounds over the past few years. Its uranium enrichment capacity has expanded, its breakout time is down to almost nil. Monitoring by the International Atomic Energy Agency is severely curtailed. The moment the U.S. and its allies have long hoped to avoid – when they must choose between the possibility of Iran acquiring a nuclear bomb or using force to prevent that happening – seems to be coming into view.

Even if they can muddle through for some months, October 2023, when UN restrictions on Iran's ballistic missiles lapse, is a flash point. Viewing those restrictions as crucial to containing Iran's proliferation of missiles and drones, especially to help Russia in Ukraine, Western leaders' only option for stopping them from expiring is to snap back UN sanctions. That will likely prompt Iran to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty – a potential casus belli for the U.S. and Israel. Any strike by them on Iran's nuclear program would risk setting off a tit-for-tat escalation across the region. With Iran furious at Saudi Arabia for its support for satellite channels that Tehran blames for fuelling protests to a multifaceted confrontation

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between Iran and Israel that could heat up with Israel's new far-right government, risks abound.

In this light, keeping the door open to diplomacy makes sense. Western capitals, revulsed by the Islamic Republic's repression at home, incensed by its arms supplies to Russia, and under pressure from vocal domestic constituencies who savage [anyone](#) who recommends talking, understandably worry that engaging Tehran could throw the regime a lifeline. Thus far, however, they have opted not to totally sever contacts – partly because some need to negotiate hostage releases but mostly with the

nuclear threat in mind. Given today's poisonous relations, prospects for talks to defuse the nuclear crisis appear dim. But at least gaining an understanding over each other's red lines could help keep a lid on tensions until there is more space for de-escalation and substantive diplomatic engagement. It's hard to see protesters gaining were the nuclear crisis to come to a head – more likely the embattled regime could change the subject at home and exert an even tighter grip.

4. Yemen

Yemen is in limbo. A [truce](#) in April between Houthi rebels and the country's internationally recognised government, backed primarily by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), lapsed in October. Major fighting has not resumed, but both sides are preparing to go back to war.

The UN-brokered truce was an unexpected bright spot in a brutal eight-year conflict. In November 2021, Houthis, who control much of Yemen's north west, seemed to be nearing victory. Had they taken the city of Marib and nearby oil and gas facilities, that would have won them the war for the north, bought their quasi-state badly needed funds, and spelled the end for then-President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi's government. Their offensive was averted when UAE-affiliated forces pushed the Houthis out of strategic territory in Marib and neighbouring Shabwah in January 2022. The Houthis responded with cross-border missile and drone strikes on the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Then the Ukraine war prompted global food

and fuel shortages that placed new pressures on all parties.

The resulting stalemate created space for mediation. In early April, the UN announced a two-month truce between Hadi's government and the Houthis. Riyadh, increasingly disillusioned with the war, backed the deal. Several days later, Hadi resigned. He was replaced by an eight-man presidential leadership council (PLC), handpicked by the Saudis and Emiratis, which is more representative of the coalition of Yemeni factions fighting the Houthis and, almost as often, each other.

Initial hopes that a broader settlement would follow have dimmed. After two extensions, UN-led negotiations over an expanded truce collapsed in early October, scuttled by the Houthis' demand that the government pay rebel military and security force salaries. (According to sources on both sides and in the UN, the government and Saudis had agreed to pay civilian salaries but drew the line at covering the cost of forces fighting against them on the ground.)

Fighting is mostly on hold even without the

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truce. Major ground offensives and cross-border attacks have not resumed, and talks continue, mostly now through bilateral Saudi-Houthi channels. But tensions are rising. The Houthis have launched what they call warning shots at PLC-controlled oil and gas infrastructure, leading to a halt in oil exports. They say oil sales can resume when they and their forces are paid their share of revenues. In retaliation, the government sought to halt fuel imports into the Houthi-controlled Red Sea port of Hodeidah, but Riyadh stopped it. Both sides are reportedly building up forces and military equipment around key front lines.

The risk of renewed war is uncomfortably high. Some within the Houthi camp lean toward another offensive, though for now, while probably stronger than their rivals, the Houthis are starved of funds and their forces are weakened. Alternatively, they might strike a deal with the Saudis on salary payments, extend the truce,

and use the money and time to regroup. Some Houthi leaders hope for a wider agreement with Riyadh that entails a Saudi exit from the conflict and cements the Houthis' status as Yemen's dominant force. But such an arrangement, by ignoring the interests of many anti-Houthi factions that already chafe at being left out of bilateral talks, would likely plunge Yemen into a new phase of war. Even with the Saudis out, it seems unlikely that the Houthis could easily overrun all of Yemen, as the Taliban did in Afghanistan.

Better would be an extended truce that paves the way to [intra-Yemeni talks](#). A genuine settlement has to meet all major Yemeni factions' requirements and probably requires UN mediation. But with the Houthis sensing that they get more through intransigence and Iran, the one outside actor with some influence over the group, in no mood to help, such a settlement is perhaps the least likely scenario.

5. Ethiopia

One of 2022's deadliest wars, in and around Ethiopia's Tigray region, has for now ground to a halt. Two of the main belligerents – Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which dominated Ethiopian politics for decades before Abiy assumed power in 2018 and then fell out with him – signed a deal on 2 November in Pretoria, South Africa, and, 10 days later, a follow-up agreement in Nairobi. But the calm is fragile. Key questions remain unsettled, notably whether Tigray's forces will disarm and whether Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki, whose army has been fighting alongside Ethiopian troops, will withdraw his troops to the internationally recognised border.

Hostilities broke out in late 2020 when Tigray's forces seized a series of national military bases in the region, claiming to be pre-empting a federal intervention. Over two years of fighting, the advantage tipped back and forth. A March 2022 truce offered some respite. In late

August, it broke down, and full-fledged war resumed. Federal, Amhara, and Eritrean forces again overwhelmed Tigray's defences.

The toll has been staggering. Researchers in Belgium's Ghent University estimate that [385,000 to 600,000](#) civilians had died of war-related causes as of August 2022. Sources from both sides say hundreds of thousands of combatants have died in fighting since August 2022. All parties stand accused of atrocities, with Eritrean forces leaving a trail of particularly cruel devastation. [Sexual violence](#) has been rampant, seemingly used strategically to humiliate and terrorise civilians. For most of the war, Addis Ababa blockaded Tigray, cutting off electricity, telecommunications, and banking and constricting food, medicine, and other supplies.

The Pretoria agreement was a victory for Abiy. Tigray's leaders conceded to restoring federal rule and disarming within a month. Addis Ababa said it would lift both the blockade and a

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terrorism designation on the TPLF. In Nairobi, Abiy’s commanders appeared to offer a more flexible timeline for disarmament, agreeing that Tigrayan forces would give up heavy weapons as Eritrean and Amhara regional fighters withdraw. Since then, the truce has held. Aid has surged, and federal authorities have reconnected Mekelle, the Tigrayan capital, to electricity.

But plenty could go wrong. A dispute over Western Tigray’s fertile borderlands, which the Amhara call Welkait and claim as their own, is especially thorny. The Eritreans, for their part, have not pulled out, though reports suggest some of their troops have begun withdrawing. Nor have Tigrayans handed over weapons. The parties need to coordinate a delicate sequencing, lest each side blame the other for delays.

It’s Abiy’s battlefield ally, Isaias, who could

end up his biggest headache. In 2018, Abiy’s peace deal with Isaias ended decades of hostility between the two countries, even if to some degree also paving the way for the joint Ethiopia-Eritrea offensive against Tigray. Abiy has come out on top in his struggle with the TPLF. But despite all the bad blood, he probably needs some form of accommodation with Tigray’s leaders to avoid sowing the seeds of another insurgency. His government needs to determine the TPLF’s role in any interim regional administration and whether to permit some Tigrayan soldiers to become regional forces or re-enter the federal army. Whether the Ethiopian prime minister recognises the need for magnanimity is unclear. Equally critical, though, is whether, if he does, he can sell that to Isaias, who joined the war hoping to kill off his archenemy, the TPLF.

6. Democratic Republic of Congo and the Great Lakes

M23, a previously dormant rebel group, which UN reports suggest is backed by Rwanda, is wreaking havoc in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. Fighting has driven tens of thousands of people from their homes and could spiral into a wider regional proxy war.

M23 holds several towns and surrounds the provincial capital of Goma. In 2013, the group was beaten back by a ramped-up UN force but now appears well-armed and organised. It includes ex-Congolese soldiers, many of whom are Tutsis, an ethnic group spread across Africa’s Great Lakes, and profess to champion communal interests.

M23’s sudden re-emergence owes as much to tensions among Great Lakes states as it does

to local dynamics. The Congolese government had been trying to reassert its authority in the troubled east, home to dozens of rebel groups, including some from neighbouring countries. Last year, Congolese President Félix Tshisekedi invited in Ugandan troops to fight the Allied Democratic Forces, a mostly Ugandan group that declares itself part of the Islamic State. The Congolese president appears to have quietly approved Burundian operations on Congolese soil, too. That irked Rwandan President Paul Kagame. He saw his neighbours’ presence as potentially depriving Rwanda of influence in eastern Congo, where it has economic interests, like Burundi and Uganda, and has long fought insurgents of the Democratic Forces for the

Liberation of Rwanda (known by the French acronym FDLR), a remnant of the Hutu militia responsible for the 1994 genocide.

Tshisekedi accuses Kagame of backing M23 as a way to extract Congolese resources. UN experts also point to Rwandan support for the rebels, with one leaked UN report in December 2022 saying there was “[substantial evidence](#)” that the Rwandan army directly intervened in Congo’s fight against M23 and backed the group with weapons, ammunition and uniforms. Kigali rejects the allegations. In turn, it accuses the Congolese army of working with the FDLR (which Tshisekedi denies, though UN reporting also largely [confirms](#)).

An added complication is Congo’s general election in 2023. The vote could mark for the country another step away from its disastrous civil wars two decades ago. But suspended registration or voting in the east due to violence would cast a shadow over the results. Tshisekedi might also want to turn up the anti-Rwanda rhetoric when campaigning, which would endanger minorities that some Congolese already paint as M23 supporters.

An East African military mission – minus Rwanda, whose contingents Kinshasa rejected – has a mandate to restore calm to eastern Congo. The UN has a 14,000-strong peace-keeping force, with many housed in Goma, but

it appears reluctant to take on insurgents and is deeply unpopular among many Congolese. Instead, Kenya, as part of the regional force, has the unenviable task of taking the fight to M23.

Long-suffering locals have high hopes that Kenyan troops can beat back rebels, but Kenya sensibly views the goal more as securing Goma and its surrounding main roads and pushing M23 into a ceasefire. The group might then rejoin peace talks between the Congolese government and dozens of eastern armed groups from which it had been expelled due to the fighting.

Getting Rwanda on board will be crucial, given its influence on M23 leaders. The best shot to achieve that lies in concerted diplomacy by East African leaders aimed at repairing relations between Kagame and Tshisekedi, which has shown some initial signs of [progress](#), alongside efforts to curb collaboration between the Congolese military and the FDLR. The East African force is an opportunity, in other words, to make space for diplomacy as much as it is to fight M23.

If that diplomacy fails, Kenyan troops could get bogged down in eastern Congo’s treacherous terrain. Already, the deployment of so many neighbours’ forces in eastern Congo runs the risk of a return to the proxy wars that tore the region apart in the 1990s and 2000s.

7. The Sahel

Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger show no signs of beating back stubborn Islamist insurgencies. Western leaders, whose military involvement over the past decade has done little to stem violence, seem at a loss at how to respond to coups in Burkina Faso and Mali.

Burkina Faso is in the direst straits. Jihadi groups control an [estimated 40 percent](#) of its territory, including vast rural areas in the north and east. Militants have laid siege to a major northern town, Djibo, for months. Fighting has killed thousands of people and driven nearly 2 million from their homes. As the losses mount,

so does finger-pointing within the army. Two coups this past year, both triggered by massacres of troops by militants, have seen a lieutenant colonel, Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, seize power in January, only to be ousted in September by a previously unknown captain, Ibrahim Traoré. Traoré himself is struggling to unify divided security forces. He may follow the lead of his Malian counterparts by playing to populist sentiment, criticising France, and drawing closer to Russia. Most worryingly, Traoré is recruiting volunteers to battle jihadis, which could send ethnic bloodshed spiralling.

Mali suffered two coups of its own, in 2020 and 2021. The state is virtually absent in the far north. There, Islamic State- and al-Qaeda-linked militants fight one another and battle non-jihadi rebels, who are predominantly Tuareg, a community that spans much of the Sahel. Tuareg rebels inked a deal with Bamako in 2015, hoping to win army positions and devolution. But now, feeling abandoned, some rebels may see benefit in again uniting with jihadis. (Al-Qaeda-linked militants joined and then usurped a Tuareg-dominated separatist rebellion that captured northern Mali about a decade ago.) Farther south, in central Mali, fighting that pits Malian forces and Russian Wagner Group mercenaries against militants seems stalemated and marked by both sides' rampant human rights abuses.

Niger is in better shape, though there are worrying signs there, too. The government

Benin borders, drawing closer to the capital, Niamey.

Outside involvement in the Sahel is evolving fast. France, which intervened to oust militants from northern Mali in 2013, has ended its operations in that country, given fraught ties with Bamako, though it retains bases in Niger. A UN mission, in Mali since April 2013, has also struggled to make headway. The West now seems most concerned with preventing jihadis from spreading southward to the Gulf of Guinea. Regionwide anger against the French is rising, thanks in large part to a decade of Western failures to check militants' advances but also to Russian disinformation. Wagner's brutal guns for hire are hardly likely to do better, but many locals chafe at criticism of the Russian group given past the West's legacy.

Most vital at a moment of inflection for the region is that leaders rethink what has been a

“Aid workers’ struggles to reach health clinics combined with clean water shortages have given rise to resurgent cholera.”

has either integrated civilian militias into the security forces or refused to arm them. Its readiness to engage jihadi groups may also have contributed to a lull in violence. Still, President Mohamed Bazoum survived a coup attempt in March 2021, and subsequent arrests, including among high-ranking officers, may have fuelled hostility within the army. Jihadis have entered parks and forests along the Burkina Faso and

predominantly military-centric approach to tackling Islamists. Military operations play a role, but must be subservient to efforts to mend intercommunal relations, win over people in the hinterlands and potentially even talk to militant leaders. Western governments should feel chastened by their record over the past decade. But as some Sahelian leaders turn to Moscow, it would be a mistake to cut ties and try to force them to pick sides.

8. Haiti

Since the murder of President Jovenel Moïse in July 2021, Haiti has been paralysed by political gridlock and rampant gang violence. Public services have collapsed and cholera is spreading. Things are so bad that some Haitians now pin their hopes on foreign troops, despite the dismal legacy of earlier interventions in Haiti.

Ariel Henry, Haiti's interim prime minister who took over from Moïse, enjoys support from influential foreign powers but faces stiff Haitian resistance. Since he assumed power, Henry's rule has been opposed by the Montana Accord, a group of opposition politicians and civil society representatives. Henry was supposed to steer a transition to elections, but rampant insecurity has prevented a vote, and Henry also disbanded the election commission.

Hundreds of gangs control more than half of the country. They suffocate the capital, Port-au-Prince, by blocking roads and imposing a reign of terror, including [using rape to punish and intimidate people](#), sometimes targeting children as young as ten. The biggest coalition, the G9, is headed by notorious gang leader Jimmy "Barbeque" Chérizier. Haiti's gangs have existed for decades, often with ties to politicians. But their power has ballooned since Moïse's murder.

Things have come to a head over the past six months. In July, battles between the G9 and another gang over Cité Soleil, a slum near Port-au-Prince, killed more than 200 people in a little over a week. Two months later, Henry lifted fuel subsidies, sending prices spiralling and causing mass protests, which gang members joined. The G9 then seized a major oil terminal, leaving almost the entire country with shortages of fuel, which has, among other things, disrupted access to clean drinking water. Chérizier said he would only give the terminal back once Henry

stepped down, though Haitian police forces were able to recapture it some months later.

The result has been humanitarian catastrophe. Half the population, 4.7 million people, faces acute hunger, and almost 20,000 are thought to be at risk of starving. Aid workers' struggles to reach health clinics combined with clean water shortages have given rise to resurgent cholera. A recent World Health Organization [report](#) said there were more than 13,000 cases between early October and early December, with 283 recorded deaths – but these are likely huge underestimates.

Faced with these challenges, Henry in October [called](#) for foreign military support. Any such mission will have its work cut out fighting gangs of young men and children embedded in densely populated urban areas. There's political opposition, too: the Montana group largely opposes any mission, believing the interim prime minister will use it to prop up his rule. Many other Haitians are wary, given the island's subjugation by outside powers and the troubled record of previous foreign deployments. Yet an increasing number of people, especially in areas that suffer the worst gang violence, have expressed support out of sheer desperation.

U.S. and Canadian sanctions on several sitting and former top politicians, alongside Chérizier, have sent shockwaves through Haitian elites and might give them some pause to think about future ties to gangs. But few foreign countries are champing at the bit to deploy troops. That said, if Henry and his rivals were to agree on the role of such a mission and on a transitional road map, foreign forces could be Haiti's best hope. Even their arrival and the threat of operations might lead gangs to abandon main roads and loosen their chokehold on the capital.

9. Pakistan

Pakistan is entering an election year with a deeply divided body politic, as former Prime Minister Imran Khan whips up populist support against the government and the all-powerful military.

Khan's exit from office last spring came alongside his fall from the Pakistan Army's grace. Having won office backed by the top brass, relations deteriorated due to Khan's inept rule, fiery anti-U.S. rhetoric, and attempts to plant loyalists in top army positions. As support for a [no-confidence vote](#) grew, Khan claimed that Washington was behind a plot to oust him. Army chief Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa rejected the conspiracy, concerned about the impact it might have on relations with the U.S., and rebuffed Khan's last-ditch effort to win him over with an indefinite extension as chief. In April, Khan was ousted. A coalition government headed by Shehbaz Sharif took over.

Khan and his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party then quit Parliament and took to the streets. Countrywide, violent protests intensified when Sharif's government rejected Khan's demand for snap polls. His supporters also slammed the top brass, particularly Bajwa. Anti-Western rhetoric has whipped up anger among a receptive public. Khan's claims that Sharif is mismanaging the economy also strike a chord as living costs rise.

On Nov. 3, during a weekslong anti-government march on the capital, Islamabad, Khan was [shot and wounded](#). The would-be assassin, apprehended on the spot, insists he acted alone.

But Khan accuses Sharif, a cabinet minister, and a senior military intelligence official of conspiring to murder him.

All this bodes poorly for elections, due before October 2023. Already the main contenders disagree on the rules of the game, with Khan accusing top election officials of backing Sharif's government. He looks set to reject the outcome if his party loses. Now under new command, the military vows to stay out of the political fray. But the generals may find it hard to stand by if things fall apart or head in a direction they perceive as threatening.

Another political crisis is the last thing Pakistan needs atop many other challenges. This year, [devastating floods](#) submerged a third of the country, affecting one in seven Pakistanis; 20.6 million people still require humanitarian aid. Credible estimates put total damages and economic losses at \$31.2 billion, with at least another \$16.3 billion required for recovery. The most vulnerable segments of the population, women and girls, are among the worst affected, seeing their limited access to education, income, and health care further decrease.

“Thanks to the floods, Pakistan now requires even more aid.”

10. Taiwan

The biggest flash point between the U.S. and China looks increasingly unstable, as Washington seeks to maintain primacy in the region and Beijing pursues unification with the island.

Unification has long been China's objective. Beijing says it hopes this happens peacefully, but it will not rule out force. Washington's

assessment is that Xi Jinping has set 2027 as the date by which China's military should be [capable of seizing Taiwan](#). For its part, the U.S. maintains a “One China” policy – aiming for a peaceful resolution of Taiwan's status without prejudging the outcome – and a posture of “strategic ambiguity” about whether it would come

“Breaching Taiwan’s defences would be a slog and ... Beijing likely grasps the international opprobrium and economic cost an offensive could trigger.”

to Taiwan’s defence. But with Beijing increasingly powerful and assertive, Washington shows signs of hardening policies adopted when China’s military was weaker.

Things heated up last summer, when outgoing U.S. House Speaker [Nancy Pelosi](#) visited Taipei, Taiwan’s capital. As a legislator, Pelosi does not report to U.S. President Joe Biden (whose administration reportedly discouraged the visit). But Beijing unsurprisingly saw her visit as a powerful signal of support to Taipei and a harbinger of eroding U.S. commitment to the “One China” policy. In response, it staged unprecedented military exercises around Taiwan and deployed warships and aircraft across the “median line”, which has served as the tacitly agreed upon edge of Chinese military activity in the Taiwan Strait for decades.

Growing concern about China’s rise, its assertiveness in the Asia-Pacific, and its commitment to build its military capabilities have become a core preoccupation of U.S. policy. Hawkishness on China – including related to Taiwan – is a rare issue enjoying [bipartisan consensus](#) in Washington. Both the Biden administration and Congress believe that the U.S.’ ability to deter a Chinese invasion has slipped, and they want to build it back.

For the U.S. government, the challenge is to make credible both the costs that China would incur should it launch a military campaign and the assurance that if it desists, Washington will not seek Taiwan’s permanent separation.

China seems unlikely to invade any time soon. Breaching Taiwan’s defences would be a slog and, having seen the West’s response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Beijing likely grasps the international opprobrium and

economic cost an offensive could trigger – even if the U.S. opts not to intervene militarily.

Still, credible U.S. threats – continuing to strengthen Taiwan’s self-defence capabilities, making its Asia-Pacific military posture less vulnerable to Chinese attack, and identifying punitive economic measures with allies and partners – can help deter Beijing. But such steps must go hand in hand with assurances that U.S. policy remains unchanged. If Beijing believes that refraining from attacking gives Washington and Taipei space to create conditions for Taiwan’s permanent separation, then its calculus will lean toward war.

Biden seems aware of the danger. Although he has a troubling tendency to commit to aiding Taiwan militarily (aides have [walked back his comments](#) quickly each time), he was on script when he met Chinese President Xi Jinping face to face during the [G-20 meeting](#) in November. He assured Xi Jinping that U.S. policy remains unchanged. Xi Jinping, in turn, told Biden that China continues to pursue peaceful unification.

Still, near-term hazards could increase tensions. On the U.S. side, Kevin McCarthy, who led the Republicans while they were in the House minority, has already said he will visit Taiwan if he succeeds Pelosi as speaker. At a minimum, China would respond with shows of military strength on par with its exercises in response to Pelosi. Should Beijing’s internal economic and political woes mount, a more forceful show of resolve is possible, particularly if the U.S. is seen to be pressing its advantage at a time of perceived Chinese weakness.

Such an escalation would not spell war right away, but it could inch the world’s mightiest economic and military powers closer to it. ●