



Commentary

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# 10 Conflicts to Watch in 2024

*More leaders are pursuing their ends militarily. More believe they can get away with it.*

**C**an we stop things falling apart? 2024 begins with wars burning in Gaza, Sudan and Ukraine and peacemaking in crisis. Worldwide, diplomatic efforts to end fighting are failing. More leaders are pursuing their ends militarily. More believe they can get away with it.

War has been on the rise since about 2012, after a decline in the 1990s and early 2000s. First came conflicts in Libya, Syria and Yemen, triggered by the 2011 Arab uprisings. Libya's instability spilled south, helping set off a protracted crisis in the Sahel region. A fresh wave of major combat followed: the 2020 Azerbaijani-Armenian war over the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave, horrific fighting in Ethiopia's northern Tigray region that began weeks later, the conflict prompted by the Myanmar army's 2021 power grab and Russia's 2022 assault on Ukraine. Add to those 2023's devastation in Sudan and Gaza. Around the globe, more people are dying in fighting, being forced from their homes or in need of life-saving aid than in decades.

On some battlefields peacemaking is non-existent or going nowhere. The Myanmar junta and the officers who have seized power in the Sahel are bent on crushing rivals. In Sudan, perhaps today's worst war in sheer numbers of people killed and displaced, U.S.- and Saudi-led diplomatic efforts were muddled and half-hearted for months. Russian President Vladimir Putin, banking on dwindling Western

support for Kyiv, seeks to force Ukraine to surrender and demilitarise – conditions that are understandably unpalatable for Ukrainians. In all these places, diplomacy, such as it is, has been about managing the fallout: negotiating humanitarian access or prisoner exchanges, or striking deals such as the one that got Ukrainian grain onto global markets via the Black Sea. These efforts, while vital, are no substitute for political talks.

Where fighting has ended, the quiet owes less to dealmaking than battlefield victory. In Afghanistan, the Taliban seized power as U.S. troops left, without bargaining with Afghan rivals. Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed struck a deal in late 2022 with rebel leaders that ended the Tigray war, but it was more a cementing of Abiy's victory than an accord about the region's future. This past year, Azerbaijan took back control of Nagorno-Karabakh, its September offensive finishing off what its victory in the 2020 war started, ending a 30-year standoff over the enclave and forcing an exodus of ethnic Armenians.

Wars in Libya, Syria and Yemen have also wound down but without lasting accommodation among the parties or even, in Libya and Syria, a political track worth the name. In fact, belligerents are mostly waiting for a chance to seize more land or power.

It is hardly news that warring parties want to vanquish rivals. But in the 1990s, a flurry

of agreements ended conflicts in places from Cambodia and Bosnia to Mozambique and Liberia. The deals were imperfect and often entailed ugly concessions. A period scarred by the Rwandan genocide and Balkan bloodletting can hardly be romanticised as a golden era of peacemaking. Still, the string of accords appeared to signal a future in which calmer post-Cold War politics opened room for diplomacy. Over the past decade or so, such deals have been few and far between. (Colombia's 2016 settlement of its decades-long civil war and the Philippines' 2014 deal with rebels in its Bangsamoro region are outliers and, in some ways, legacies of another era.)

The past few months' ghastly turn in Israel-Palestine is perhaps the trend's starkest illustration. Peacemaking efforts there petered out years ago, and world leaders largely looked away. Several Arab governments struck U.S.-brokered deals with Israel that mostly ignored Palestinians' plight. Israel ate up more Palestinian land, with settlers acting ever more brutally, often in concert with the Israeli army. The occupation became ever crueller. Palestinians' hopes of statehood withered, as did the credibility of their leaders who had banked on cooperation with Israel. Nothing can justify Palestinian militants' murderous rampage on 7 October. But the Israeli-Palestinian conflict did not start that day. Now, the Hamas-led attack and Israel's retribution in Gaza – an assault that has razed much of the strip and could plausibly expel many of its inhabitants – may well erase hope for peace for a generation.

So, what is going wrong? The problem is not

primarily about the practice of mediation or the diplomats involved. Rather, it lies in global politics. In a moment of flux, constraints on the use of force – even for conquest and ethnic cleansing – are crumbling.

The collapse of the West's relations with Russia and China-U.S. competition shoulder much of the blame. Even in crises in which they are not directly involved, big powers dispute what diplomacy should entail and whether or how to throw their weight behind it.

Uncertainty about the United States contributes, too. U.S. power is not in freefall, and its decline relative to that of other countries does not necessarily herald disorder. Indeed, it would be misleading to overstate the sway the United States ever enjoyed as a hegemon; overlook its destabilising misadventures in Iraq, Libya and other places; or underplay its military strength today. The past two years offer plenty of evidence of U.S. clout – both for good, in helping Ukraine defend itself, and for ill, in lending Israel's ruin of Gaza near unconditional support. The problem is more the United States' political dysfunction and seesawing, which brings volatility to its global role. A potentially divisive 2024 vote and the possible return of former U.S. President Donald Trump, whose fondness for strongmen and disdain for traditional allies already rattle much of Europe and Asia, make for an especially uneasy year ahead.

Several non-Western middle powers have become more assertive. That Brazil, the Gulf monarchies, India, Indonesia and Turkey (to name just a few) enjoy more influence is in itself no bad thing. To some degree, middle powers'

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refusal to line up tidily behind competing big powers serves as something of a restraint on those capitals. But especially in the Middle East and parts of Africa, regional powers have gotten more active in wars – as, they would argue, big powers have long done – and prolonged fighting. Warring parties today have more places to turn for political backing, funds and weapons. Peacemakers have to reckon with not only belligerents on the ground but also outside sponsors who see local fights through the prism of wider rivalries.

Hazards go beyond the wars' human toll. Leaders emboldened by wins at home may not stop there. Diplomats in the Caucasus region fear that Azerbaijan, having prevailed in Nagorno-Karabakh, might now seek to challenge Armenia's borders in an attempt to wring concessions from its government over a transit route through the country's south. Horn of African leaders fret that Abiy, fresh from his Tigray triumph, might use force to seek a renewed route for his landlocked country through Eritrea to the Red Sea. Odds of either happening, while still low, are high enough for discomfort. The norm of non-aggression that for decades undergirded global order is already fraying thanks in part to Russia's attempt to annex more of Ukraine. In 2024, the risk that leaders move beyond quashing dissent at home or meddling abroad through proxies to actually invading neighbours is graver than it has been in years.

The danger of wider conflagration also overshadows this year's list. Major powers have strong incentives not to fight each other, but more conflicts are raging and tensions mounting along the world's most perilous fault lines – Ukraine, the Red Sea, Taiwan and the South China Sea among them. Loose talk of war in Beijing, Moscow and Washington risks normalising the almost incalculable cost of a clash involving the United States and either China or Russia.

It seems unlikely that world leaders, given their divisions, will recognise how perilous things have become, collectively reaffirm their belief in not changing borders by force, and put more energy into forging deals in war-torn places that see belligerents brought to justice and civilians without blood on their hands take over.

Probably the best we can hope for this year is muddling through. Diplomacy away from war zones can help. A bright spot in 2023 was Iranian-Saudi rapprochement – the result of Iraqi, Omani and Chinese mediation – which dials down a rivalry that for years has fuelled Arab wars. Turkish and Greek leaders, both fresh from elections and spooked by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, have sought to mend ties strained by the two countries' long dispute over the Aegean Sea. A well-coordinated summit between U.S. President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping in late 2023 took some of the heat out of the world's most important bilateral relationship. Even amid disorder, leaders can see benefit in calming waters and strengthening guardrails in the world's riskiest areas.

On battlefields, though, it's tougher – more a matter of spotting opportunities to halt fighting and mitigate suffering as they arise and redoubling efforts to stop conflicts spreading. That almost certainly means accepting flawed bargains between belligerents as better than protracted war-making and working with those involved to make agreements more likely to endure. It makes little sense today to shut out those who, whether on the ground or from afar, are behind violence but also essential to winding it down. Ideally, world leaders would also give supposedly frozen conflicts the attention they need before it's too late, as the tragedy in Gaza illustrates.

Hope for the best, in other words, but peacemaking today is mostly about stopping the worst. As this year's list shows, that in itself would be no small thing.

## Gaza

The Hamas-led attack on 7 October and Israel's subsequent destruction of Gaza have taken the decades-old Israeli-Palestinian conflict into an awful new chapter. Nearly three months in, it is ever clearer that Israel's military operations will not finish off Hamas, as Israeli leaders argue, and that trying to do so could finish off what remains of Gaza.

The horror and scale of 7 October, which saw Palestinian militants massacre more than 1,100 people, mostly civilians, in Israel and seize more than 200 captives, have left Israelis traumatised, their sense of security shattered. The distrust many felt toward Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu before the attack has deepened due to his government's failure to prevent it. Still, Israelis overwhelmingly agree with Netanyahu that they cannot live alongside Hamas. They consider the threat it poses too severe.

Israel's campaign in Gaza, a densely populated coastal enclave ruled by Hamas and blockaded by Israel and Egypt for sixteen years, started shortly after the 7 October attack. Israel besieged the strip for weeks before allowing limited aid in. Heavy bombardment and calls for residents of the enclave's north, including Gaza City, to evacuate south paved the way for ground operations that saw troops encircle then move into Gaza City. In late November, a short pause, mediated by Qatar with U.S. and Egyptian support, saw Hamas free 105 hostages (81 Israelis and 24 others) and Israel release 240 Palestinians held in its prisons. On 1 December, the assault resumed, with ground operations also in Gaza's south. Fierce bombing and fighting continue throughout the strip.

Israeli operations have been devastating, levelling much of the strip; killing upward of 20,000 Palestinians; wiping out generations of families; and leaving untold numbers of children dead, maimed or orphaned. Israel has dropped massive payloads – including 2,000-pound bombs – on packed areas. (For

comparison, the coalition fighting the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria hesitated before dropping bombs a quarter of that size on areas more sparsely populated.) Reports suggest that the destruction is of a pace and scale unparalleled in recent history. More than 85 per cent of Gaza's 2.3 million inhabitants have left their homes, according to the UN, which also warns of a public order collapse, famine and infectious disease, which aid agencies say could soon claim more lives than military operations. Many Palestinians, some already displaced several times, have fled farther south to makeshift camps along the Egyptian border. Some Israeli officials openly say they hope conditions in Gaza will lead Palestinians to leave; Israel denies this is official policy.

Israel has also locked down the occupied West Bank. It has stepped up the pace and aggressiveness of its security operations there, whether out of retaliation for the October attack or to forestall attacks by Palestinians as Israeli officials argue. Israeli settlers (backed and armed by Netanyahu's government, which features several ministers who are themselves settlers) have escalated violence against Palestinians, forcing out the inhabitants of several villages, in what Israeli and international human rights groups are calling acts of forcible transfer.

The U.S. government has so far backed Israel virtually without condition. U.S. officials argue that Washington is employing a "bear hug" strategy to marshal influence: support in public to sway Israeli leaders in private. U.S. diplomacy helped deliver the November pause in fighting and has perhaps tempered some Israeli tactics, though the toll in Gaza suggests not much. In recent weeks, U.S. officials have started questioning the campaign's cost and duration more openly. But Biden has refused to call for a ceasefire, and in early December the United States vetoed a UN Security Council resolution demanding one (two weeks later, the

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council passed an opaque text mentioning a cessation of hostilities without entreating the parties to seek one). Biden also rejects conditioning U.S. military aid to Israel. Most of the world sees Washington as complicit in the strip’s devastation.

Netanyahu has given little detail on his endgame for Gaza, except that Israel will retain security control over the strip. He dismisses the idea, which Washington promotes, that the Palestinian Authority (PA), which governs some of the West Bank and is dominated by Fatah, Hamas’s main Palestinian rival, can play a role in Gaza’s post-war governance. He maintains Israel will fight until it eliminates Hamas. (A cabinet decision early in the war specified narrower war aims: destroy Hamas’s military and governing capabilities.) Military gains, Netanyahu says, help secure hostage releases. But his government is evidently putting the gains before the hostages. On 15 December, three Hamas-held civilian hostages, who were half-dressed and raising a white flag, were shot by Israeli soldiers, leading their and other hostages’ families to intensify protests in Tel Aviv.

In reality, little thus far suggests Israel can erase Hamas. Even destroying its brigades will be a tall order; and whatever happens, the wider political and social movement will survive and armed resistance will continue in some form while the occupation persists. Israeli forces claim to have dismantled militant infrastructure, including many of Gaza’s underground tunnels, and killed perhaps 8,000 Hamas fighters and arrested thousands more. If accurate, that represents less than half the group’s armed wing. In Gaza City, now supposedly under Israeli control, ambushes by militants continue, suggesting Hamas is still operational. Washington seems to hope that exhorting Israel to improve civilian protection will yield a more precise campaign. But Gaza is

too small and Hamas too intermingled among civilians. There is no credible case that the atrocities Israelis suffered on 7 October justify the destruction wrought upon the strip and its society, much less for an end that appears ever more evidently unachievable.

Instead, Washington should press more urgently for another truce, leading to the release of all the Hamas-held captives in exchange for Palestinian prisoners. Interim arrangements for Gaza, which would be harder still to negotiate, might perhaps see Israeli troops withdraw, the blockade ease and outside powers guarantee an extended ceasefire. Hamas would give up any role in government to some form of temporary Palestinian authority. Some Arab officials float the idea of Hamas’s military leaders or even fighters departing Gaza. Ideally, interim provisions for the strip would pave the way for renewed efforts to resuscitate some wider political track between Israelis and Palestinians, though obstacles are formidable. More Israelis now share Netanyahu’s long-held rejection of Palestinian statehood or at least think today is not the time to put that question back on the table. PA leaders are reviled by Palestinians as feckless and corrupt. Negotiations would require world leaders to make far greater investments than they have in recent years.

As things stand, though, more probable are major operations lasting weeks (perhaps months) more, followed by a rolling, less intense campaign during which Gaza will remain in limbo. An extended military occupation seems likely, even if Netanyahu denies that is his intention. Israeli forces will hold swathes of the strip, continuing raids, while Palestinians crowd into smaller and smaller so-called safe zones or camps, kept alive to the extent possible by humanitarian agencies.

It could get worse. Despite Egypt’s determination to keep Palestinians on the Gaza side of the border, it is not a stretch to imagine refugees crossing over – particularly if the campaign drags on and Israel’s assault extends to ground operations and heavier bombardment



of the border town of Rafah. Palestinians and much of the Arab world would view that as a repeat of the 1948 Nakba, when hundreds of thousands of Palestinians fled or were expelled from their homes in what is now Israel – many of them ending up in Gaza or neighbouring countries.

Overall, the war's continuation seems more likely to spell not the beginning of efforts to revive a peace process, as some Western leaders claim, but the end of any recognisable political track. Never in the conflict's bleak history has peace seemed further off.

## Wider Middle East War

Neither Iran and its non-state allies nor the United States and Israel want a regional confrontation, but there are plenty of ways that the Israel-Hamas war could trigger one.

In some ways, the war plays into Iran's hands. It has frozen, for now, a U.S.-brokered deal that Iran disliked, which would have seen Saudi Arabia normalise relations with Israel, Tehran's sworn foe. It has also revealed the reach of the so-called axis of resistance, a collection of Iran-backed armed groups – Hizbollah in Lebanon, various militias in Iraq and Syria, the Houthis in Yemen, plus Palestinian militant groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad – over which Tehran exercises varying degrees of control. These groups have turned the temperature up (when Israeli ground troops entered Gaza) and down (during the weeklong truce in Gaza when hostage-prisoner exchanges were conducted) in a manner that shows they can act in concert. Tehran welcomes the swell of rage directed at Israel and the United States across the Middle East.

But the war comes at a bad time for Tehran. Its relations with Washington had calmed after a patch of Western fury at the regime's crushing of protests in late 2022 and weapons deliveries to Russia. In August, the United States and Iran exchanged detainees, in parallel to a tacit understanding that entailed Tehran dissuading

Iraqi and Syrian militias from targeting U.S. forces, slowing nuclear development and cooperating better with inspectors, reportedly in return for the U.S. government easing enforcement of sanctions to help Iran's battered economy. That arrangement is now in tatters.

The war in Gaza also puts Iran in a bind. Tehran does not want Gaza to jeopardise Hizbollah, an ally it sees as central to what it calls its "forward defence" – deterrence against an attack on the Islamic Republic itself by Israel or the United States. Yet, having claimed for years to back the Palestinian cause, Iran and its allies feel pressure to act. Tehran is reportedly irritated that Hamas, which it funds and arms, launched the 7 October attack when it did. Hamas, in turn, appears frustrated that Iran is not helping more.

As for the United States, the last thing that Biden wants is a bigger Middle East war when he is trying to support Ukraine, contain China and campaign for re-election. Washington's tacit understanding with Tehran to lessen friction last summer aimed to defer a nuclear or other regional crisis, but without giving Iran formal sanctions relief and appearing soft ahead of the 2024 U.S. election. Washington has tried to stop the war from widening, deploying two aircraft carrier groups to the Mediterranean and spending enormous diplomatic capital,

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though Biden has so far rejected the one step – pushing for a ceasefire – that would lower risks fastest.

The most perilous flashpoint is the Israel-Lebanon border. Since 7 October, Hizbollah and Israel have traded missile fire at a steadily increasing clip, with Hizbollah seeking to tie down Israel's military below the threshold of the all-out war that the two sides briefly fought in 2006.

That tension could take on a life of its own. Hawkish Israeli leaders suggest that after the 7 October attack, Israel cannot risk leaving a hostile militant force – especially one that is much more potent than Hamas, with an estimated stockpile of 150,000 rockets – so close to its northern border. There is public pressure, too, to tackle Hizbollah; more than 100,000 residents of northern Israel have been forced to evacuate indefinitely.

Elsewhere, Iran-backed groups have traded fire with U.S. forces. In Syria and Iraq, militias have repeatedly struck U.S. bases and diplomatic facilities, prompting U.S. counterstrikes that have killed militiamen.

Then there are the Houthis, more expendable for Iran than Hizbollah and a bit of a wild card. The Yemeni militants have launched missiles and drones at Israel and struck commercial vessels in the Red Sea, citing Israel's assault on Gaza as their motive. In mid-December, strikes on two ships near the Bab al-Mandab, a strait that connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden, prompted shipping giant Maersk and other companies to halt their vessels' transit. The U.S. and other Western governments' formation of a naval force to protect maritime traffic appeared, by late December, to have partly

reopened the route. At some point, Israel, the United States or its allies might lose patience, striking not only Houthi but also Iranian targets – an Iranian spy boat assumed to be passing on intelligence would be an obvious one – which would also take things up a notch.

At the same time, Iran is inching closer to the ability to build nuclear weapons. It can already enrich enough uranium to produce an arsenal of four warheads within a month. (Though it would still need a few more to make an actual weapon.) It has curtailed the UN watchdog's oversight. Returning to an agreement like the 2015 nuclear deal would be hard, given Iran's nuclear advances since then, yet no one gives much thought as to what could replace it.

While neither side wants war, much could go wrong, especially while Israel's Gaza campaign grinds on. Any attack – whether on the Lebanese border, in Iraq or Syria, or the Red Sea or Persian Gulf – that kills large numbers of civilians or U.S. personnel would risk setting off a spiral of tit-for-tat strikes.

If Israel does move against Hizbollah, a war like that of 2006 would almost certainly trigger a wider confrontation given Iran's buildup in the region, and it could end up sucking in the United States across the region.

With U.S. officials mostly seeing diplomacy with Tehran as toxic, Iran edging toward the nuclear threshold would present Washington with only unsavoury choices: accept a bitter adversary with a nuclear capability that successive administrations have sought to prevent or try setting it back through force, which would almost certainly trigger the regional confrontation that most of Washington wants to avoid.

## Sudan

In April, friction between two Sudanese military factions – the army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) – erupted into all-out war. Their fighting since then has left thousands of people dead, displaced millions more and

brought Sudan to the brink of collapse. As the spectre of genocide again haunts the western region of Darfur, RSF forces, which are responsible for much of the killing, may be poised to seize the country.

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The war is rooted in struggles inside the military following strongman Omar al-Bashir’s ouster during a popular uprising in 2019. Bashir had empowered the RSF as an unofficial praetorian guard, trying to insulate himself from coup threats. The RSF’s leader, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, also known as Hemedti, first attained notoriety as the commander of the Janjaweed militias that viciously put down rebellions on Bashir’s behalf in Darfur in the mid-2000s.

As thousands of Sudanese took to the streets in 2019, Hemedti and Sudanese Armed Forces Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan joined forces to oust Bashir and then agreed to share power with a civilian government. In October 2021, they shoved the civilians aside. Under pressure to restore civilian rule, the alliance between the RSF and army grew testier, leading to fraught negotiations over how and when Hemedti would integrate his fighters under Burhan’s command.

As talks came to a head in mid-April, fighting broke out in the capital city of Khartoum and then spread. Who fired the first shot is unclear.

Early battles destroyed much of the city. RSF fighters – mostly from Sudan’s west – overran neighbourhoods, often looting for spoils. The army, outmatched on the ground, bombed from the air. In Darfur, the war spilled into ethnic killing, with the RSF massacring civilians in West Darfur in particular. Front lines appeared to settle over the summer.

Then, in October and November, the RSF took Darfur’s major cities, and fresh stories emerged describing brutality against the Masalit, a non-Arab community that militias have harassed for years. As Hemedti’s unruly forces captured most of the west, as well as much of Khartoum and its surroundings, the

army moved its command centre to Port Sudan on the Red Sea. In December, the RSF staged a lightning offensive east of the capital into Sudan’s breadbasket state of El Gezira. The city of Wad Madani – El Gezira’s capital, to which about half a million Sudanese, mostly from Khartoum, had fled – fell almost without a fight, dealing a blow to the Sudanese army’s morale.

The war has unleashed deeper resentment. Despite its egregious track record, many Sudanese from the country’s peripheries relate to the RSF’s rhetoric denouncing the country’s ruling elites, even if some also despise the paramilitaries’ predation. For their part, those of Sudan’s riverine peoples who have historically run the state hold the RSF in contempt.

There is outside involvement, too. Reports suggest that the RSF gets weapons from the United Arab Emirates – Hemedti’s forces fought with the Emiratis in Yemen – while the army is backed primarily by Egypt. As the RSF march eastward, African, Arab and Western diplomats have expressed fear that the UAE’s desire for Red Sea access may play a role. Whether the army can regroup sufficiently to halt the RSF’s momentum is far from clear.

While the generals – and allied Bashir-era Islamists who the army has leaned on for support and who feel they have most to lose from a deal – have long resisted peace talks, there are signs that they are growing desperate for a way out. But the weaker the army grows, the less Hemedti will offer.

As for peacemaking efforts, the parties’ representatives have gathered on and off in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, but neither have negotiated in good faith. Riyadh and Washington, which convened the talks, have left out others, including Abu Dhabi and Cairo, that are crucial to reining in the belligerents (although they did



recently invite an emissary from the Horn of Africa's regional bloc, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development).

In December, Washington shifted its support to a push by African heads of state to bring Burhan and Hemedti together to forge a ceasefire. The two leaders expressed willingness to meet, but whether they are ready to do so is unclear and talks planned for 28 December fell through. Another challenge is that for months, U.S. diplomats were wary of forging a bargain between Hemedti and Burhan for fear of

angering Sudanese who want to see the backs of leaders who have driven the country to ruin.

Yet such a pact is likely a necessary first step. While any ceasefire will have to be widened to incorporate others and get back to civilian rule, the RSF and army won't stop fighting without a say in what comes next.

Far more urgent diplomacy is needed. Sudan's collapse could reverberate for decades throughout the Sahel, the Horn and Red Sea regions. The window to avoid that outcome is closing.

## Ukraine

The Russia-Ukraine war has become a political football in Washington, but what happens on the battlefield will define Europe's future security.

The 600-mile front is barely moving. Ukraine's counteroffensive has tapered off, with its army having gained little ground, let alone breaching Russian defences in the south, as Kyiv aspired to do. Ukrainian generals fear a Russian attack in the east or north, though Russia's attempt in late 2023 to take the eastern city of Avdiivka met fierce resistance, suggesting that any Russian advance will be a slog, provided Ukraine has enough arms.

The Kremlin calculates that time is on its side. Russia is on a war footing, expanding its military and spending massively on weaponry. Despite Western sanctions, Moscow has exported enough, thanks to windfall energy profits, to keep the war chest full while importing enough to keep arms factories running around the clock. President Vladimir Putin has bound the Russian elite's fate to his own. He has consolidated power within the military after the failed mutiny in June by Wagner Group leader Yevgeny Prigozhin. Fresh spending has rewarded a new class of loyalists. The war is core to a new Russian narrative, rooted in so-called traditional values, that celebrates fighting as a manly pursuit.

The country's mood could well change, given that more than a third of the state budget goes to defence and as many as several thousand Russians are perishing monthly in Ukraine. For now, though, Putin has a spring in his step.

Ukraine faces a bleak winter. Russian missile strikes will aim to cut off heat and empty cities. Kyiv's top general recently alluded to a "stalemate", earning a rebuke from Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Ammunition is running low, as are reserves of personnel. Discord between Ukrainian and Western officials is more visible. High expectations for the counteroffensive mean that Kyiv has put off preparing the Ukrainian public for what looks set to be a long grind.

Most troubling for Kyiv is wavering support in the West. Since Russia's full-scale assault began in early 2022, U.S. weapons have been pivotal to Ukraine's defense. Despite bipartisan support in the U.S. Congress, a caucus of Republican legislators are blocking a big aid package aimed at tiding Kyiv over until the 2024 U.S. presidential election. Former U.S. President Donald Trump, the presumptive Republican nominee, has been critical of aid to Ukraine.

The Biden administration may yet strike a deal with Republicans, and even if not, it has options to get arms to Ukraine without

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Congress. But doing so will get harder as the vote looms. Europe, for all its rhetorical support, has been slow in ramping up supply, especially of ammunition. Politics is a problem there, too. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban opposes aid to Kyiv, a vote on which will take place in early February 2024, though in early December he did allow – by exiting the room rather than voting – the European Union to begin accession talks for Ukraine, in what was, in effect, a powerful signal of support from Brussels.

At the same time, there is little indication that negotiations with the Kremlin offer a way out. Leaving aside the gloomy precedent of Moscow gaining land through conquest, neither side is ready to compromise. While Russian officials say they will talk, back channels to Moscow and the Kremlin’s public statements suggest that its aims remain the same as when

it launched its all-out war. It wants not just territory, but also Ukraine’s surrender and demilitarisation under a submissive government. As for Ukrainian leaders, they are set on fighting with or without U.S. support. Any deal with Russia – indeed, perhaps even sitting down to talk in these conditions – could cost Zelenskyy his job. Besides, the Kremlin has every incentive to wait and see if Trump triumphs and better opportunities arise. As things stand, Putin seems unlikely to settle for what he has now.

Keeping channels open to Moscow still makes sense, given the war’s costs and trajectory. After all, Kyiv and its Western allies do not need to accept a bargain unless it gives Ukraine a viable future and locks Russia into security arrangements that deter further adventurism.

But it still seems a long shot. Though some Americans chafe at the cost of aid, helping Ukraine at least hold the line is worth doing. For its part, Europe, many of whose leaders see the war as existential, must shoulder more of the load, whatever happens in Washington.

If Moscow does conquer more of Ukraine, it’s not a stretch to imagine parts of other former Soviet republics being next on Putin’s list.

## Myanmar

A rebel offensive that routed the army from tracts of Myanmar’s north east and fighting elsewhere pose the biggest threat yet to the junta that seized power nearly three years ago.

Over the course of 2023, a grim pattern had set in. Resistance forces – disparate militias that grew out of post-coup protests crushed by the junta – launched ambushes across a swathe of the country. The Myanmar military used airstrikes, artillery and mobile units to put down the uprising and punish civilians. For the first time in decades, violence engulfed Myanmar’s lowlands. The army targeted people from the Bamar majority, using the same savage tactics it has long deployed against ethnic armed groups in the highlands.

For their part, the ethnic armed groups

had reacted in different ways to the coup.

Some trained resistance cells, supplied them with weapons and sheltered their leaders. A few forged closer alliances with the National Unity Government (NUG), an opposition body composed mostly of ousted legislators, including many from the party of deposed civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi, whom the military has imprisoned. Others stayed on the sidelines or stuck to ceasefires with the military.

The north-eastern offensive has shaken things up. A preexisting coalition of three ethnic armed groups, the Three Brotherhood Alliance, together with some resistance forces, seized several towns, overran scores of military positions, captured tanks and heavy weapons, and severed key trade routes to China. Sensing the

army's disarray, ethnic rebels elsewhere, often joining forces with or even under the banner of resistance groups, went on the attack, taking towns, part of a state capital and border posts in diverse areas of the country. Outside the north east, the military has put up a stiffer fight, though it still appears stretched.

China is part of the story. Beijing wants to crack down on online scam centres, run by transnational criminals, that have proliferated around the Mekong region. It was aggrieved that the junta and an allied paramilitary force did not close centres in a border zone they controlled. Beijing thus stood by as a Brotherhood Alliance army captured the area, pledging to shut down scam centres. The zone's proximity to China makes it harder for Myanmar's air force to bomb it.

More broadly, Chinese President Xi Jinping still chafes at the military's 2021 power grab. The ensuing chaos has put a stop to China's planned megaprojects in Myanmar. Xi liked Aung San Suu Kyi, who established good working ties with Beijing. He distrusts the Myanmar military, especially coup leader Min Aung Hlaing, who harbours particularly strong

anti-China sentiment, given Beijing's support for ethnic armed groups in Myanmar's north east. Beijing will certainly not throw its weight behind a rebellion – it sees the NUG as a Western stooge – and might well hold its nose and provide the regime greater backing if it looked to be faltering. But it has tolerated rebel gains in the north east. It helped broker a temporary ceasefire between the military and a rebel army in December, which will probably consolidate the latter's hold on territory it has taken.

For now, the junta appears likely to hang on. While many Bamar show new sympathy for Myanmar's minorities, having now tasted the military's brutality themselves, the country's many ethnic armed groups and post-coup resistance forces are unlikely to coalesce. The regime does, however, face determined foes on several fronts. The coup set the country back decades: health and education systems have crumbled, poverty rates skyrocketed and the currency crashed. More than 2.5 million people are internally displaced (in addition to the hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas the military expelled in 2017). It is hard to see the crisis ending anytime soon.

## Ethiopia

Ethiopia started 2023 with good news but ends it with plenty to fear. At the beginning of the year, a brutal war centred on its northernmost Tigray region was winding down. Fighting that pitted Tigrayan rebels against federal forces – together with militias from the Amhara region, which borders Tigray, and Eritrean troops – had killed hundreds of thousands of people, according to some estimates, and cut off countless more from food and services. Tigrayan forces had nearly marched on the capital of Addis Ababa before beating a hasty retreat. Federal forces then gradually hemmed the Tigrayans in, and Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed struck a deal with the region's leaders to cement his win. A November 2022 agreement

brought relief to Tigray. But it set the stage for fighting elsewhere.

In August, Amhara rebels briefly seized parts of towns in that region before being beaten back. Enscorced in the countryside, they make sorties to attack federal forces. Tensions had long been mounting between Abiy and Amharas, who backed him when he assumed power in 2018 before fighting alongside federal forces in Tigray. Amharas resent Abiy's entente with Tigray, worrying that he will hand back long-disputed territory – known as Welkait-Tsegede to Amharas and Western Tigray to Tigrayans – that Amhara militias seized during the war. They also accuse Abiy's government of turning a blind eye to the killing of Amhara civilians

by ethno-nationalists in Abiy's native Oromia region, Ethiopia's most populous, and generally of siding with Oromo interests against Amharas. Large chunks of Amhara are essentially ungoverned, given popular rejection of the Abiy-aligned ruling-party cadres who run the region.

Amhara is not Abiy's only headache. He faces an entrenched insurgency from Oromo nationalist rebels in his home state. Talks in Tanzania have made progress, but the sides have failed to close a deal. More broadly, local elites fear surrendering autonomy to a traditionally overbearing centre, which partly explains the revolts in Ethiopia's three most powerful regions – Amhara, Oromia and Tigray. Abiy must not only end the Amhara and Oromia wars while keeping the peace in Tigray but also build consensus regarding the wider settlement Ethiopia needs while inter-ethnic relations fray. Compounding the challenges, Ethiopia's economy is in distress. More alienated youngsters could fuel further instability.

Souring relations between Abiy and Eritrean

President Isaias Afwerki pose another danger. Isaias, too, was irked by Abiy's Tigray deal. He had deployed troops hoping to deal his old foes – Eritrea fought a twenty-year border war with Ethiopia while the Tigrayans were in charge in Addis Ababa – a mortal blow. Eritrean soldiers remain on Ethiopian soil, in contravention of the peace deal, and Isaias has links to forces in Amhara, including in the disputed territories.

Tensions heightened in October, when Abiy asserted Ethiopia's "right" to sea access, stressing its historical claims to the Red Sea coast. Regional leaders saw his remarks, which Abiy had long voiced in private, as an implicit threat to seize part of Eritrea, whose 1991 secession from Ethiopia left the latter landlocked. Abiy has since publicly promised not to invade, although without easing tensions. Ethiopia may not be plotting imminent military action. But with mistrust high and both sides mobilising forces and amassing weaponry, accidental clashes run the risk of triggering a confrontation with staggering costs.

## The Sahel

In 2023, Niger's military toppled Mohamed Bazoum, a reformist president friendly with the West, cementing army rule across the Sahel region – after coups in Mali and Burkina Faso. The officers in power have promised to curb the violence tearing apart the countryside, but beyond switching foreign partners and buying new weapons, they have offered few fresh ideas, instead doubling down on offensives that have been failing for years.

The wave of coups heralds a new chapter in a crisis dating back to at least 2012. Back then, semi-nomadic Tuareg rebels, together with al-Qaeda-linked jihadists, seized northern Mali. The jihadists then cast aside their erstwhile partners, holding the north for the better part of a year before themselves being pushed back by a French-led force. In 2015, several armed

groups from northern Mali, including both rebels and pro-government elements, signed a peace agreement with Bamako. That agreement foresaw devolving power, developing the north and bringing some of the armed groups into the military.

Since then, foot dragging by Bamako and disputes among the signatories have stalled efforts to put the agreement into practice. Meanwhile, jihadists, who did not sign the deal, overran large tracts of central Mali and much of Burkina Faso, even extending their reach into northern corners of coastal West Africa. Sahelian armies, French counter-insurgent forces and UN peacekeepers could not stem their advance. Local militias, in some cases armed by regional governments, proliferated, fighting jihadists and fuelling skyrocketing violence.

Popular exasperation about insecurity partly drove the coups and support for the junta leaders. In 2020 and 2021, a group of colonels led by Assimi Goïta staged successive coups in Mali, consolidating power. Putsches followed in Burkina Faso, triggered by anger about jihadist massacres of soldiers, and then Niger.

Army rule has dramatically changed the region's foreign relations. The three countries' ties to some other West African capitals are strained. Paris pulled out its soldiers amid rising anti-French sentiment. Mali's junta has drawn closer to Russia, particularly the mercenary Wagner Group, and expelled UN forces. In Burkina Faso, the Russians' footprint is smaller but looks set to grow and may entail personal protection of military leaders. The juntas have formed their own alliance, hoping to deter foreign intervention. (The regional bloc, ECOWAS, threatened to deploy troops to Niger to restore Bazoum, though the effort did not come to fruition and would almost certainly have backfired.) They do not appear inclined to make way for civilians. In Mali, Goïta himself may run for office; the Burkinabé authorities hedge on when polls will take place; Niger's junta has laid out

line. All sides have blood on their hands. Wagner forces are implicated in particularly cruel abuses in Mali. The Burkinabé junta has ramped up its arming or organising of irregular forces, and they, the army and jihadists have reportedly all perpetrated mass killings. Plus, if battling Islamists wasn't enough, Mali's leaders have picked another fight with some of the 2015 peace agreement signatories. In late 2023, the army moved into Kidal, the Tuareg rebel headquarters (though many Tuaregs have also joined pro-government and jihadist as well as separatist groups), fighting rebels on the march in and occupying newly vacated UN bases.

What comes next is uncertain. Army chiefs believe that their advance on Kidal has been an important symbolic win – recapturing territory that for years has been off limits – and brought more than years of talks. They think new equipment, including drones from Turkey, gives them an edge. Rebels have retreated but, with extensive guerrilla experience, seem unlikely to give up quietly. Some rebels have family ties to the local al-Qaeda leader, Iyad ag-Ghali, a former Tuareg separatist-turned-jihadist, who is now presenting himself as a champion against

*“The new authorities are resorting to a military-first approach, which is, in many respects, similar to what came before.”*

only vague transition plans, though that might also reflect internal discord.

Among young people in cities and towns, army leaders remain popular – thanks less to their public service delivery than to their rhetoric about sovereignty, which plays on lingering resentment of France. Nor have the worst-case scenarios some European officials thought their forces' withdrawal could presage – state collapse culminating in jihadist marches on Bamako or Ouagadougou – come to pass.

But the new authorities are resorting to a military-first approach, which is, in many respects, similar to what came before. Now, though, even more civilians are in the firing

the army and Wagner. A local Islamic State branch, which battles both the military and al-Qaeda, has extended its reach into northern Mali. The junta's foray up north could thus end up replenishing jihadists' ranks.

In the end, whoever holds power in the Sahel is going to have to do more than fight. Bamako should use its gains in Kidal to forge a new deal with rebels. Even with jihadists, notwithstanding their determination to impose strict Islamic law, local ceasefires have calmed violence in the past, and negotiations are worth trying. Offensives might bring short-term gains, but peace over time depends on dialogue and deal-making.



## Haiti

Haitians hope that foreign forces set to arrive early in 2024 will tackle the hyperviolent gangs that over the past few years have torn the country apart. But the Kenyan police set to lead the planned mission have their work cut out against heavily armed groups in dense shantytowns, particularly given the disarray in Haitian politics.

Since the killing of President Jovenel Moïse in July 2021, gang violence in Haiti has mushroomed. Criminals control much of the capital, Port-au-Prince, as well as areas to the north, particularly the Artibonite Valley. Brutal turf wars – gangs fight each other and torment civilians – have driven tens of thousands from their homes, some seeking refuge in makeshift displacement camps where they may face dangers similar to those they fled, including sexual violence. Nearly half of Haiti’s population, some 5.2 million people, needs life-saving aid. Gangs’ predation has bred more violence: vigilante groups known as Bwa Kale, formed in response to gang violence, have lynched hundreds of suspected gang members without much diminishing gang activity. Polls suggest Haitians are in such despair that they back foreign forces arriving, despite the dismal record of previous international missions.

The Kenya-led force faces stiff challenges. Haiti’s acting prime minister, Ariel Henry, had requested outside help in October 2022, Nairobi agreed to spearhead the effort in July 2023 and deploy at least 1,000 officers, and the UN greenlit the plan in October. The mission now awaits approval from Kenyan courts after

opposition politicians mounted a challenge, arguing that the constitution bars police officers from deploying abroad.

The mission’s mandate, which is one year to begin with, is to help the Haitian police “counter gangs and improve security conditions” – thus paving the way for elections. Aggressive operations against gangs, which a Kenyan police delegation assessed was necessary after visiting Haiti, will work only if countries sending personnel to work with the Kenyans are ready for urban combat and grasp the terrain. The mission must also avoid hurting civilians and strengthen intelligence gathering by local police. The Haitian police force will need to plug its own leaks via gang informants embedded in its ranks. If not, fighting could result in heavy losses for police and civilians alike, endangering support for the mission.

Haitian politics are another hindrance. A camp of influential political parties and civil society groups say Henry – who assumed power after Moïse’s killing and has since sought to entrench himself – has no mandate to hold office, even until another vote, and want a more inclusive transitional administration. Talks have yielded no agreement on a way forward. Without cross-party consensus on the Haitian government’s composition or the Kenya-led force’s role, the mission risks getting embroiled in a political dogfight. In this scenario, the widely disliked Henry could tighten his grip, putting the unity government that is likely essential for any credible election further out of reach.

## Armenia-Azerbaijan

Last year, Azerbaijan’s lightning offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh prompted the exodus of almost all of those living there – more than 100,000 people. The question this year is whether Azerbaijan will go further or whether, with talks in late 2023 seeming to yield some

progress, it and Armenia finally find a way to peace.

Azerbaijan’s Nagorno-Karabakh operation appears to bring to a close, at least for now, a decades-long conflict over the contested enclave. In the 1990s, the area’s ethnic

Armenian majority, backed by Armenia, declared their own republic, and in the ensuing war ousted Azerbaijanis from Nagorno-Karabakh and adjacent areas. For years, talks between Baku and Yerevan went nowhere. Azerbaijan, meanwhile, built up its military and, in 2020, with Turkey's backing, took back districts surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh and part of the enclave itself. After six weeks of brutal fighting, Russia stepped in to mediate a truce, which it sent peacekeepers to police.

But with Moscow bogged down in Ukraine, Baku appears to have sensed that it could finish the job. Over the course of 2022, it seized several strategic areas, including along front lines. Then, for over nine months, it blockaded the Lachin corridor, which provided Nagorno-Karabakh access to Armenia and the outside world. In September, its troops swept into the

happening already through existing transit points.). Already in September 2022, Azerbaijani troops advanced into Armenia, with some staying deep inside. Several new Azerbaijani positions overlook a gorge through which a road passes to the exclave.

Talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan do have a chance. A December agreement, negotiated without third parties present, yielded a prisoner of war exchange, pledged to normalise relations and included Armenian backing for Azerbaijan's bid to host the world climate summit, COP29, in 2024. Baku and Yerevan say they will continue talks and expect a deal soon, though the thorny border and corridor questions remain.

If negotiations do not bear fruit, Baku may lose patience, as it did over Nagorno-Karabakh. Most likely is that it seeks to pres-

*“Talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan do have a chance.”*

enclave, taking it back in a single day as ethnic Armenians abandoned their homes.

If Nagorno-Karabakh was the most painful bone of contention between Armenia and Azerbaijan, it is not the only one. The two countries dispute their as-yet-not-demarcated border, where their militaries face off, often only metres away from each other. Between the 2020 war's end and Azerbaijan's September offensive, border clashes were deadlier than those related to Karabakh itself.

More importantly, Azerbaijan wants a land corridor to Nakhchivan, an Azerbaijani exclave in Armenia's south west that borders Turkey and Iran. Baku believes the Moscow-brokered deal that ended the 2020 fighting committed Yerevan to grant it passage through the corridor. That route would facilitate trade with Turkey but would bypass Iran – hence Tehran's opposition (It might also help Russia evade sanctions, though that is almost certainly

sure Yerevan; more incursions in border areas are not unthinkable. A land grab – seizing the transit route, for example, which would cut off hundreds of thousands of people in Armenia's southern tip from the rest of the country – would incur fury from Western states, Iran and Russia. It would be a far more brazen step than ousting people from Nagorno-Karabakh, which the world already recognised as Azerbaijani – notwithstanding the trauma inflicted on the Armenians expelled. It is especially hard to imagine that happening in a year when Baku could host the global climate summit. Indeed, Azerbaijani officials insist they harbour no designs on Armenian land and have even proposed an alternative transit route through Iran.

But however bad an idea an attack would be, in an environment where Baku, like many capitals, senses global checks on the use of force fraying, Armenian and Western officials have not entirely ruled out the possibility.

## U.S.-China

A November meeting between U.S. President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping sought to reset what had been a sharp slide in the two countries' relations. But their core interests still collide in the Asia Pacific region – and Taiwanese elections and South China Sea tensions could test the thaw.

Beijing and Washington have been angling for some time to ratchet down tensions. Xi wants to focus on the ailing Chinese economy and forestall further U.S. trade restrictions. (Washington has recently tightened limits on the sale to China of high-end technology, adding to an array of other tariffs and restrictions.) The Biden administration wants some calm ahead of the 2024 U.S. vote and to reassure other capitals worried about hostility between the two giants that it can responsibly manage competition.

In early 2023, diplomatic efforts stalled when a Chinese spy balloon drifted over the U.S. mainland and caused a media frenzy before the U.S. shot it down. Months later, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who cancelled a trip after “balloongate”, visited Beijing, setting the stage for the Biden-Xi summit.

That meeting went well. Biden got promises that the two countries would work together on curbing fentanyl coming into the U.S. and, the day before the summit, the two countries pledged to work together to tackle climate change. Importantly, Beijing also agreed to reopen military communication channels to help manage risks of unintended clashes as the two militaries jostle in the seas and skies around China. Xi got a win at home by showing he had a handle on Beijing's most important bilateral relationship.

Overall, though, the rivalry's fundamentals show no sign of abating. Hawks in both capitals see competition as zero-sum. Loose talk of war normalises the idea. In the Asia Pacific, Beijing's pursuit of what it sees as the greater clout it deserves as the region's preeminent power runs directly into Washington's determination to maintain its own military dominance. Several Asian capitals, spooked by Beijing's growing assertiveness and seeing in Russia's aggression in Ukraine a precedent, have leaned into security ties with Washington, even as they value trade with China.

The South China Sea, where Chinese maritime claims overlap with those of other littoral states, among them the Philippines, a U.S. ally, looks increasingly precarious. Manila points with frustration to Chinese coast guard and maritime militia boats patrolling waters that, in 2016, a special tribunal ruled are Philippine. Chinese ships are using more aggressive tactics, including water cannons and acoustic devices. They shadow Philippine vessels in ways that court incident, prompting boats from the two countries to collide in October and December. U.S. security guarantees to the Philippines and increased military presence in contested areas in principle deter Beijing but also bring risks. For China, maneuvers at sea signal to the region determination to defend what it sees as its national sovereignty. Chinese vessels or planes might even start shadowing their U.S. counterparts.

Taiwan, too, is a flashpoint. Beijing believes the island should be reunified with the Chinese mainland, ideally peacefully, though it does not rule out force. Washington's “one China” policy aims for a peaceful resolution of Taiwan's status

*“The South China Sea, where Chinese maritime claims overlap with those of other littoral states, among them the Philippines, a U.S. ally, looks increasingly precarious.”*

without prejudging the outcome; its longstanding “strategic ambiguity” leaves vague whether it would come to Taiwan’s defence. But louder voices in Washington suggest offering Taiwan stronger backing. Though China is unlikely to invade any time soon – indeed, breaching the island’s defences would be tough – the more that Xi senses the “one China” policy eroding and the window for unification closing, the more the calculus could lean toward war.

Taiwanese elections in January may see the current vice president, William Lai, whom China brands a separatist, assume power. Beijing might turn up the pressure on Taipei – upping the already large numbers of Chinese warships and aircraft around the island or reimposing barriers to Taiwanese goods, for example – in an effort to push the new government toward greater deference to Beijing. Taipei has weathered such antics before, and Lai has signalled his intent to pursue the current president’s cautious cross-strait policy. But should he misspeak under pressure – a statement he made last July suggested he might seek formal diplomatic ties with the United States, for example – or strike what Beijing perceives as an overly antagonistic tone in his

May inauguration speech, China could take things up another notch. The Biden administration, particularly in an election year, may make statements that irritate Beijing; anti-China U.S. legislators may table draft bills contradicting the “one China” policy.

For now, probably the biggest danger is that Chinese and U.S. planes or ships collide. According to the Pentagon, the number of risky encounters over the last two years exceed those in the preceding two decades. Warmer atmospherics after the Biden-Xi meeting – and hopefully the military-to-military channel – provide a buffer but would only go so far in the event of a mishap, especially one that involves casualties. The last such incident, when two planes hit each other in 2001, killing a Chinese airman and forcing a U.S. plane to crash land on China’s Hainan island, took delicate talks to find a solution that let both sides save face. It’s hard to see space for that kind of diplomacy today. ●