



## President's Take: Europe Has a Difficult Hand to Play in 2024

*The new year brings the uncertainty of several key elections, including for the EU Parliament, to an already fraught global conflict landscape. In her introduction to the Watch List 2024, Crisis Group President & CEO Comfort Ero outlines some of the challenges the new EU leadership will face.*

One month into 2024, it is hard to look at the global landscape without some foreboding. The headline conflicts of 2023 rage on in Ukraine, Gaza and Sudan; the Middle East is inching ever closer toward regional conflagration; and little suggests that long-running conflicts from the Sahel to Myanmar are anywhere near abating. The coming year also promises change and uncertainty, with national elections in 64 countries, some of which could have enormous geopolitical consequence. Perhaps foremost among these is the election in the United States, where former President Donald Trump – whose transactional “America First” mindset threatens NATO and other longstanding U.S. alliances – is likely to be the Republican nominee taking on Democratic incumbent Joe Biden.

Europeans will also go to the polls to elect members of the European Parliament and, in some cases, national governments, too. Foreign policy rarely drives European elections, which tend to be determined by economic and other domestic issues. But an uptick in conflict and instability is affecting European core interests and the global economy, including key maritime routes. Even if not foremost on voters' minds, these flashpoints are increasingly dominating headlines in Europe and may well play an outsized role in 2024 polls. As described in the Watch List entries below – as always, a non-exhaustive list of challenges facing the EU and member states – Europe's next crop of leaders will have a difficult hand to play amid more fraught world affairs.

### Surging Conflict amid a Peacemaking Crisis

Nowhere are the challenges clearer than on the EU's own eastern flank. Two years after its all-out invasion of Ukraine, Moscow still appears bent on the same goals that prompted its aggression, seeking not just swathes of Ukrainian territory but its neighbour's vassalisation. After Ukraine's much-anticipated

counteroffensive failed to drive Russian troops back over the course of 2023, the parties have hunkered down behind lines that, at least for now, seem frozen, while Russia tries to hobble Ukraine's infrastructure and break its will through aerial attacks.

Despite the setbacks, Kyiv is determined to

fight. The good news is that Ukraine's Western partners have helped it build up an air defence that so far appears to be holding. The bad news is that U.S. support, which has been crucial in helping Kyiv hold the line against Moscow for nearly two years, could well peter out. In the U.S., Trump is actively working from the campaign trail to undercut congressional support for a new aid package. He has intimated that he would scale back assistance if elected and force a deal between Kyiv and Moscow.

To Europe's south is the war in Gaza and the growing danger of a wider Middle East confrontation. Following Hamas's brutal 7 October attacks, Israel has launched a devastating military campaign in the strip, seeking to eradicate the group and in the process rendering much of the territory uninhabitable. The human toll has been staggering, and each day brings a graver risk that the Gaza conflict sparks a full-fledged regional war. Houthi rebels are using Palestinian suffering as a pretext to attack global shipping in the waters surrounding Yemen, disrupting global trade, and sending prices of many goods soaring in Europe. Many capitals around the world question why Western powers, so outspoken about Russian abuses in Ukraine, mute their criticism of the catastrophe in Gaza, undermining the EU's advocacy for human rights and civilian protection elsewhere.

Meanwhile, new and resurgent conflicts from the Sahel to the Horn of Africa call into question the impact of years of European

stabilisation efforts, and highlight what Crisis Group has elsewhere identified as a wider crisis in peacemaking. War is on the rise, with more leaders seeing they can get away with pursuing their ends militarily. Rarely are today's conflicts ending through negotiated peace deals. Indeed, some – from the civil war in Ethiopia's Tigray region to the conflict in Afghanistan – wind down only when one party has had its way. Partly this trend owes to geopolitics. Greater friction between the U.S. and China, as well as the breakdown of Russia-West relations, have left multilateral diplomacy on life support. More regional powers have themselves got involved in local wars, often making them harder to resolve.

This new reality is perhaps most vividly illustrated in the civil war tearing apart Sudan. (Although not addressed in depth here, that conflict is the subject of a recent Crisis Group statement.) There, regional powers like Egypt and the United Arab Emirates line up behind the warring parties. Disagreements and wavering focus from the two most powerful mediators, the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, was largely to blame for a long suspension of talks. Meanwhile, largely unchecked by international pressure, the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces are threatening to overwhelm the country's east – a situation that could lead Sudan to fragment in the same way that Somalia did in the early 1990s.

## The Elections Landscape

Alongside the menacing conflict landscape, major elections across the globe could jeopardise parts of the global security architecture. In 2024, for the first time, national elections will take place in countries inhabited by half the planet's population.

These polls will be spread throughout the year. One potentially consequential vote has already occurred. In Taiwan, the early January victory of Democratic Progressive Party's

Lai Ching-te – who Beijing sees as a separatist – could exacerbate cross-strait tensions and U.S.-China relations. Fortunately, both Washington and Taipei have taken prudent steps to reassure Beijing of their intent to maintain the status quo. As covered in Watch List entries below, in Venezuela, the presidential election due in 2024 offers a chance (if a long shot) at forging a route out of the country's protracted crisis, while in Somalia, in contrast, state-level

and local council elections – due in November – could reignite political and clan tensions amid a delicate security transition. EU policymakers will no doubt also be keeping a keen eye on elections in key regional powers, including Pakistan (8 February), Indonesia (14 February), India (between April and May) and South Africa (between May and August).

Closer to home, European Parliament elections in June will set the bloc's broad direction for the next five years, offer insight into the EU's evolving political landscape, and establish who influences nominations for top EU jobs that will shape the bloc's future foreign and security policy. Though the centre right is likely to remain the largest bloc, the elections could further manifest a rightward shift of European politics. Current opinion polls predict that the far right could become the third-largest group in the European Parliament with big wins for populist parties such as those led by Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Marine Le Pen in France. Such parties, which could (depending on their showing) have a bigger hand in selecting EU leadership, are diverse, but tend to be Eurosceptic and oppose stronger EU integration, including in foreign, security and defence policy and enlargement. Many are sceptical about aid to Ukraine.

Presidential and parliamentary elections in nine EU member states, including Finland, Portugal, Slovakia, Lithuania, Belgium, Croatia and Austria, should also serve as an indicator of where Europe is headed. Here, too, there is a growing prospect that the far right makes gains and emerges emboldened, particularly in Austria and Portugal.

Looming over all these contests, however, is the U.S. presidential vote, which looks likely to involve a rematch between President Biden and his predecessor Trump. As the effective Republican party leader and its presumptive nominee, Trump already shapes Republican foreign policy debates including over legislation that would impose new immigration restrictions and appropriate funds to assist Ukraine. He

also calls into question U.S. support for NATO, willingness to defend Taiwan and commitment to treaty allies in the Asia-Pacific.

The threat Trump poses to the decades-old transatlantic partnership is double-barrelled. First, in the area of peace and security, Trump's transactional approach, coupled with his view of U.S. allies as free riders, could well augur a series of tense negotiations in which Washington seeks financial and political concessions in return for protection. Some demands may be more than what U.S. allies are prepared to stomach. Even where deals are reached, adversaries may question how committed the U.S. is to standing behind its allies, sensing that its loyalty is for sale. Secondly, in the area of values, Trump's disdain for democratic norms – he still denies that Biden won the 2020 election, shows open contempt for the judicial processes in which he is ensnared and professes admiration for strongmen like Russian President Vladimir Putin – would pose a perhaps insurmountable obstacle to imperfect but important cooperation in the service of civil and political rights around the world.

European policymakers for now seem likely to hold their breath and hope for a Biden victory. Opinion polls suggest the candidates are closely matched, and Trump, who carries significant legal and political baggage and lost his last contest with Biden, could well lose again. Still, the more prudent course today would entail some forward planning. For example, given that many European leaders see Russian aggression in Ukraine as an existential threat, they should prepare to help Kyiv hold the line, and deter Moscow for the long term, with or without U.S. backing. That implies stepped up defence production and probably also larger militaries. While NATO members have made commitments to this effect, actual investments have lagged.

While the path forward on other issues may be less clear-cut, surging crises and conflict around the world present Europeans a sober reality. The multilateral institutions that for

decades have contributed to international peace and security are barely muddling through, while the trans-Atlantic partnership on which Europe security depends does not provide a sufficiently reliable breakwall. Over the coming year, the continent's leaders will have to consider how

to compensate – tailoring their goals to what they can achieve and making investments in their own defence and in conflict resolution and peacemaking that will continue to serve European interests in an ever more dangerous world. ■

