

Geo Strategy 2024: Hard to Imagine the World Will Live as One

In spite of its incredible creativity, the human imagination often fails when turned to the future. Perhaps craving for familiar leads there remains shortcomings while looking ahead. The past includes many moments of severe instability, crisis, even major upheavals such as partition which happened decades ago and resulted in a vast majority being literally swept out of place. Tumultuous events do and can happen but humans cannot believe they might happen tomorrow.

07 Oct 2023 can clearly be termed as a defining moment in the geo-strategic domain, when Hamas acted far outside the normal bounds of human behavior and reenforced the belief of failure of imagination. Gaza's coveted geography has resulted in it being a crucial battleground since antiquity and now its back at centre stage.^[1]

Coupled with the ongoing Ukrainian War, following close on heels of the Chinese standoff in Galwan and overshadowed by the worldwide Covid pandemic there is no doubt that the last three years have been difficult to put it mildly. Can the humans afford to take false comfort from previous experiences with the belief that if they've lived through it once, they will survive and maybe the danger is less than feared?

Unfortunately, as we step into the New Year none of these events have been given a finality as far as closure is concerned though the fixation of the world has changed from Covid to Ukraine and is now firmly focused in Gaza. Israel's latitude to pursue its stated war objectives has not been constrained in spite of a growing public outcry as a result of United States' support and backing due to its sympathy for Israel's existing predicament. Secretary of Defense, Lloyd Austin, had said on 02 December that "Protecting Palestinian civilians in Gaza is both a moral duty and a strategic imperative".^[2] But such comments have not diluted the overall impact of a US policy that upholds "Israel's bedrock right to defend itself". There is no doubt that the New Year will not see any decrease in the uncontestable US attachment to Israel. The conflict has driven the Middle East into the vortex of violence and instability with ripples spreading across the globe.

The battleground in Ukraine as it nears its third year can be summed up as a stalemate with the Ukrainian counter-offensive having failed to make any significant headway in spite of the induction of western equipment. Russia seems to have weathered the storm as far as the sanctions are concerned and have built up their military – industrial base. There has been a fatigue that has set in regarding funding of the conflict by US and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and as a result of the Hamas attack on 07 October, President Putin seems politically and militarily stronger and the prospects for ending the war look bleak. Ukraine needs western military support and finance to put pressure on Russia and liberate its territories but it needs to build up favourable conditions to execute a major offensive against a defensive line which has been strengthened. Hence, the next year is unlikely to see a favourable outcome on the terms of both protagonists and the consolidation will continue.

Iran with its nuclear programme and its proxies in the form of the three H's namely Hamas, Hezbollah and Houthi's has played a significant role in undermining regional security. With the Houthi's even expanding the conflict into the Red Sea and attacking merchant ships by drones in the Bab El Mandeb Strait and disrupting shipping in one of the world's most important trade waterways. The Houthis have said the attacks will continue until Israel allows full supplies of

humanitarian aid into Gaza. This is a pointer that the geopolitics of the oceans will feature more prominently in the global matrix.[\[3\]](#)

Strained ties and communications characterised US-China ties for much 2023, particularly after the appearance of a suspected Chinese spy balloon over the US though there has been a recent thaw post the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting, all eyes are now on the Taiwanese Presidential election in January. The most significant strategic dynamic will be relations between the US and China.

As far as India is concerned the standoff on the icy heights of the LAC continue with the deployments turning into a permanent posture. China seems unlikely to de-escalate and to revert to a 'status quo ante'. The rise of China coupled with its aggression and expansionism has continued unabated and the collusive threat along with Pakistan persists.

Smaller countries and non-state actors have also seized on opportunities to redraw boundaries or otherwise shape their corner of the geopolitical multiverse. This has been demonstrated by Azerbaijan's seizing the Nagorno-Karabakh Enclave from Armenia and the stand-off in South America between Venezuela and Guyana.

Africa continues to struggle with a steady rise in violent extremism and an increase of attacks on civilians and ethnic cleansing. The security issues are numerous, complex and regional in nature with each requiring a unique approach aimed at maintaining peace and stability. The environment is challenging with many different facets and has manifested itself in the unending conflicts.

Sudan where the war between rival generals has uprooted more than five million people, in what the UN says is world's largest human displacement crisis, Libya, Ethiopia and Congo continue to dominate the front pages.[\[4\]](#) While countries in the Sahel (which stretches from the Atlantic Ocean in West of Africa to Red Sea in East) are suffering from rising temperatures and extreme weather, including drought and flooding. This is destroying livelihoods, disrupting food security and driving displacement. Adding to these military coups continued; in Niger, a former French colony that's a key uranium exporter, the country's democratically elected President was toppled in July. A month later, troops similarly staged a coup in Gabon overthrowing its long-term President.

Our immediate neighbourhood has had a spillover effect. Myanmar has targeted its ethnic minorities for decades. The army justifies its power by the need to break the rebellions, but its brutality has always had the opposite effect. But violence has escalated and the Myanmar military junta is increasingly relying on air and artillery strikes on villages and other populated areas to fight perceived opponents.[\[5\]](#) Afghanistan has remained in the firm grip of the Taliban for the past two years and their repressive policies have continued. There are also militant attacks from an offshoot of the Islamic State and, as per reports, one in three children in Afghanistan will be the victim of crisis-level hunger this winter.

Pakistan continues to face multiple sources of internal and external conflict. Extremism, intolerance of diversity, undermining of state institutions and dissent have grown. There have been increasing attacks by terror groups based in Afghanistan while at the same time they have continued with their state policy of nurturing terrorists. Elections are due but there is unlikely to be any change in the control of levers by the Army. Nawaz Sharif has summed up the state of affairs on 19 December by stating; "We shot ourselves in our own foot".[\[6\]](#)

The rapidly fragmenting landscape in the world due to the wars in Gaza and Ukraine and the US-China confrontation is nurturing hostilities and creating widening schisms. The UN is increasingly being viewed as an institution which is 'past its due date' as it has failed to carry-out necessary reforms and is being held hostage by the power of the veto which was supposed to strengthen it. "Conflicts have become more complex, deadly and harder to resolve. ... Concerns about the possibility of nuclear war have re-emerged. New potential domains of conflict and weapons of war are creating new ways in which humanity can annihilate itself," is what United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said in July.

The international landscape has been fragmented. It is unlikely that things will change as far as termination of the conflicts are concerned, while the risks of escalation will remain, however a new direction can be expected in case there is a change of government in the US and Taiwan. In addition, India and two of its important neighbours Pakistan and Bangladesh also face the peoples mandate though in the case of Pakistan the outcome is unlikely to have any bearing on the control by the Army. However, there is a possibility for a thaw in relations to a degree in case Nawaz Sharif comes to power.

The world today is a complex mix of alliances and rivalries, with overlapping bilateral, regional and other types of institutional groupings. These dynamics, coupled with more countries heading to the polls in 2024 than in any year in recent history, elevate the likelihood of geopolitical surprises in 2024 which could head in either direction.

Thucydides, in his 'History of the Peloponnesian War' (431-404 BCE) wrote about a conflict that has cast its shadow on wars waged through the ages across both the continental and maritime dimensions, offering enduring lessons which still remain relevant. The years of fighting depleted manpower and financial resources of both Athens and Sparta. Wars of attrition rarely yield spectacular victories, rather, exhaustion and a blurring of lines between victor and vanquished.

If there is one major takeaway from Israel which can be termed as the decisive event of 2023, it is that national security needs to be prioritised over politics. The key drivers for improving our economic and social conditions remain peace, security, stability and prosperity. We, therefore, need to continuously strengthen our defence capabilities and readiness and invest in developing our technological and industrial base. History also reinforces the truth that the future rarely moves in the linear, predictable manner we expect.

It's difficult to 'imagine' the words of John Lennon "That the world will live as one"

Endnotes

[1] Jean-Pierre Filiu, Why Gaza Matters, Foreign Affairs, January 1, 2024 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/why-gaza-matters>

[2] Scott Neuman et al. U.S. defense secretary presses Israeli officials on protecting civilian lives in Gaza, NPR, 18 December 2023 <https://www.npr.org/2023/12/18/1219955657/israel-war-gaza-lloyd-austin#:~:text=Live Sessions-,U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin arrives in Israel to discuss,duty and a strategic imperative>

[3] Courtney Bonnell And David Mchugh, How attacks on ships in the Red Sea by Yemen's Houthi rebels are crimping global trade, Associated Press, <https://apnews.com/article/red-sea-yemen-houthis-attack-ships-f67d941c260528ac40315ecab4c34ca3>

[4] Five things to know about the crisis in Sudan, UNHCR, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/five-things-know-about-crisis-sudan>

[5] Emily Fishbein and Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, Myanmar minorities fear renewed violence after military coup , Al Jazeera <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/5/myanmar-minorities-fear-renewed-violence-after-military-coup>

[6] Neither India, nor US but 'we shot ourselves in our own foot', says Nawaz Sharif as he blames army for Pak's woes, PTI, <https://old.ptinews.com/news/international/neither-india-nor-us-but-we-shot-ourselves-in-our-own-foot-says-nawaz-sharif-as-he-blames-army-for-paks-woes/710011.html>

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