

Are we in for (another) nasty year? Conflicts and threats to democracy galore.

by Alexander Christiani



Life comes at you fast. Whether it's the upsurge in armed conflict, the redrawing of the global energy-resources map or rapid progress in artificial intelligence – the world is changing at mind-boggling speed. From the situation in the Middle East to adoption of electric vehicles – things look very different from the way they did just a couple of years ago.

America's global choice: voters and the courts will give their verdict on Donald Trump, who has a chance of regaining the presidency. The result may come down to a few tens of thousands of voters in a handful of swing states. But the consequences will be global, affecting everything from climate policy to military support for Ukraine. America's poisonous and polarizing election will cast a pall over global politics. Donald Trump's very candidacy undermines American democracy. A second Trump term would transform America into a loose cannon with isolationist tendencies at a time of grave geopolitical peril. Anyway, a divisive unpopularity contest looms between Joe Biden and Donald Trump. For America, the overstretched superpower, it will also be a test whether it can adapt to a more complex and threatening world.

As 2023 is drawing to a close, wars are raging in Africa, Israel and Gaza, and Ukraine. These crises are explosive in their own right. Combine them with a presidential race in America, 2024 promises to be a make-or-brake year for the world order. I see primarily three threats loom in 2024:

- *First*, there is a growing zone of impunity where neither global powers nor global institutions can do much about it. Azerbaijan has just fought a war against Armenia involving ethnic cleansing, without much blowback. Iran's proxies thrive in failing states across the Middle East. In 2024, this zone of impunity could expand further across Africa and Russian flanks.

- *Second*: a trio of trouble is emerging featuring China, Iran and Russia. Their interests intersect: all want to undermine Western legitimacy and to evade actual or potential sanctions. China buys Russian and Iranian oil. None has condemned Hamas or the invasion of Ukraine. China and Russia collaborate on nuclear-warning systems and patrols in the Pacific and the story goes on and on... In 2024 the world will learn how far this nascent club will go.
- *The third threat* is the fragility of the Western coalition. At first, America and Europe were united, public opinion was supportive and the principles of the 1945 order were defended. Now, with a military stalemate in Ukraine, cracks are showing.

As the saying goes: diplomats should always be optimists. It's in their genes. Perhaps the new year will play out in a different way. However, I doubt it..

The ABS is looking forward to receiving your views and comments!

About the author



Former Ambassador Dr Alexander Christiani is the Vice-President of the Austro-British Society and leads the ABS Expert Group which releases high-quality Policy Papers with first-hand background information on current political developments. Dr Christiani is a member of the board of the Austrian Society for Foreign Politics and the United Nations. His professional career led him to the hotspots of political developments all over the world (e.g. to the Middle East, South Africa, New York and many others) where he contributed reasonably to Austria's excellent diplomatic reputation in the world.

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