

## Taking Stock of 2023 and Looking Ahead to 2024: How to Combine Realism with Hope?

January 2024

The final months of 2023 were extraordinarily grim. The world had already weathered four years of repeated crises. The horrific attack on Israel carried out by Hamas on October 7 has resulted in a response by Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) that has ignored all norms of international humanitarian and human rights law. This has resulted in [an estimated 20,000+ deaths to date](#).

In Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Hamas's brutal attack on Israel, and the appalling suffering caused by Israel's attempt to wipe out Hamas in Gaza, it is evident that double standards have been applied in matters concerning human rights and that, despite the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, societies still struggle to recognize the common humanity of their adversaries.

At the same time, crises in other regions and long-term challenges, such as debt and socioeconomic pressures, struggle to garner any attention. This has spurred visceral political responses in many countries, turning inward and perhaps "[sleepwalking](#)" toward greater global catastrophe, as we have seen in the past in less interconnected times.

Economic inequalities, exacerbated by the repercussions of COVID-19, continue to widen. There has been movement in addressing climate change and regulating technology for the common good, but in both domains, it risks being too little too late. Furthermore, North-South tensions have surged to levels not witnessed in many decades.

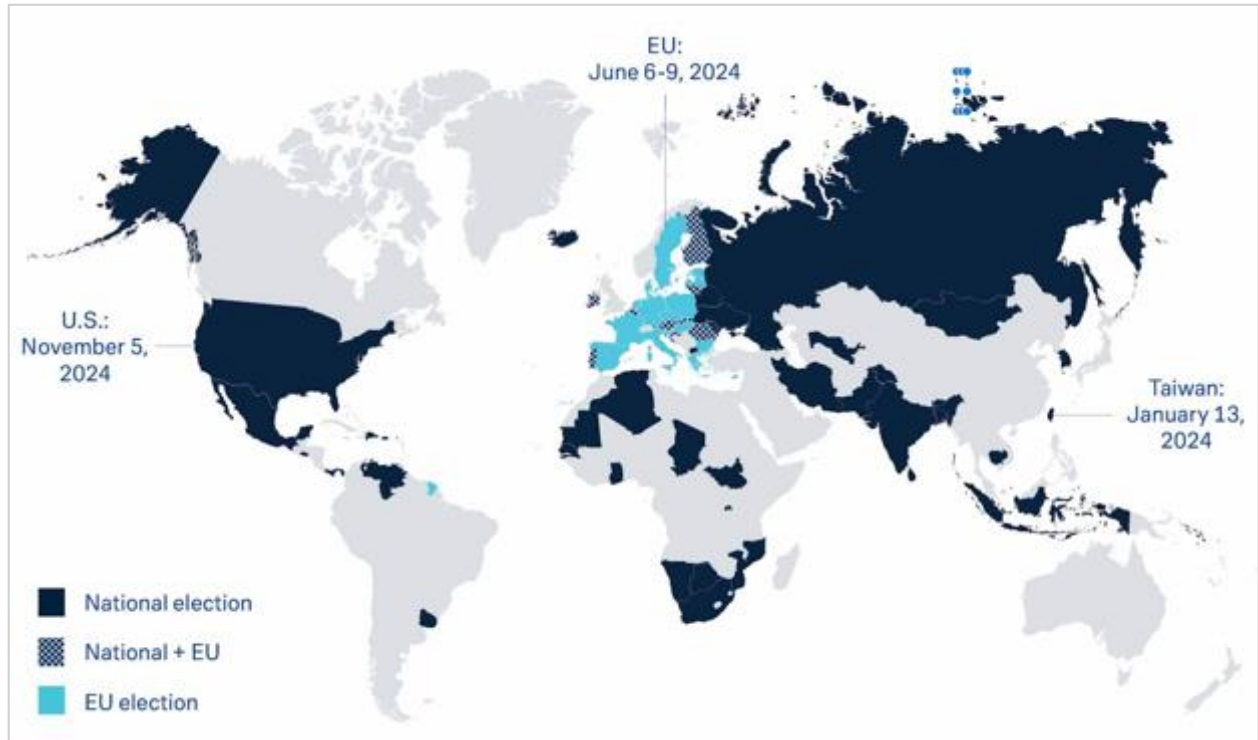
**The challenges continue to mount with each passing year. In this context, what are the solutions at hand?**

Looking ahead, it is difficult to find optimism and pathways forward in a realistic assessment of current crises and divisions. Yet the lessons drawn from 2023, a bad year by any account, are threefold. First, change takes root both from the bottom and the top, at grassroots levels and the highest echelons of society, from the collective voice of popular protests and organizations and from governments—as illustrated in section 9 below, “Emerging peace amid turmoil: some ‘forgotten’ conflicts show promise.” Second, traditional diplomacy has become more needed than ever. Nations need to revisit the best, not the worst, of their Cold War-era diplomacy and remember that success hinges on forging global alliances. These alliances, in turn, depend on economic and development cooperation as well as military might. Third, diplomacy needs to evolve further to see how national interests and the preservation of global common goods align. Only through this logic may a virtuous circle be recovered from the vicious circle of our current challenges.

## 2024: Ten Trends to Look for

### 1. The 2024 election wave: a world in flux

In 2024, a [record-breaking 40-plus national elections](#) are set to take place across the globe, marking the largest election year ever recorded in history. Voters in countries accounting for over 40 percent of the world's population and an equivalent share of its gross domestic product (GDP) will choose new governments, potentially ushering in significant domestic and geopolitical shifts.



Global elections in 2024, the biggest election year in history. *Source: Bloomberg, as of November 27, 2023.*

This electoral spectrum spans a diverse range of nations, encompassing the most affluent countries like the United States and the United Kingdom, upper-middle-income countries such as India and Indonesia, and those grappling with direct conflicts and other vulnerabilities, like South Sudan and Ukraine.

Polls in many of these countries lean toward parties that prioritize national rather than global interests. Of the upcoming votes, that of most preoccupation for multilateralism is of course the US, the host country for the UN headquarters. Yet it is not only the US that faces electoral volatility: pre-election debates in many countries are tense and characterized by polarization, reflecting ongoing culture wars (as illustrated in section 8 below, “Culture and values: key battlegrounds in 2024”). Recent unexpected election results in countries like Argentina and the Netherlands have underscored this trend. Amid ongoing conflict, economic hardships, and rising climate threats, elections in 2024 are positioned to leave an indelible mark on the global stage, carrying far-reaching consequences for our interconnected world.

## 2. Overhauling multilateralism: prospects and opportunities in 2024

2024 is also a year of change—or at least the prospects of change—in the multilateral system. The World Bank is already navigating through its “Evolution Roadmap,” embarking on a new mission and exploring ways to measure the effectiveness of its endeavors while enhancing its operational and financial instruments. Whether this results in President Ajay Banga’s vision of a “bigger and better” Bank, equipped to address today’s national development and global challenges, remains uncertain. “Bigger” without “better” may fall short of achieving the desired outcomes. Conversely, “better” without “bigger,” if the necessary financial backing for reforms is not on the table, could lead to unmet expectations and do little to bridge the North-South divide.

Moreover, the United Nations (UN) will host the “Summit of the Future” in September 2024, offering an opportunity to assess the future needs of the multilateral system in the years and decades ahead. While immediate UN reform might be unlikely, given the timing of UN Secretary-General António Guterres’s final two years in office and the backdrop of the US election and ongoing conflicts, the Summit presents a chance to exert political pressure for urgent action by member states on critical global issues such as conflict resolution, rising inequalities, and climate change. It will also serve as a platform to set the course for future changes within the UN.

## 3. Amid horrendous suffering, risks of deepening and horizontal escalation of violence in the OPT

On December 12, 2023, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution to demand an “[immediate humanitarian ceasefire](#)” in Gaza. A total of 153 countries voted in favor of it, 10 countries voted against, including the US and Israel, while 23 abstained. Subsequently, on December 22, the UN Security Council adopted a [resolution to facilitate greater humanitarian aid access in Gaza](#). With 13 votes in favor and US and Russia abstentions, the resolution called for “conditions for a sustainable cessation of hostilities” but did not mandate a cease-fire.



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Since then, the violence has continued unabated and ongoing hostilities have [completely disrupted the delivery of essential aid to civilians in Gaza](#). At present, the prospects for an end to violence remain uncertain.

In the Arab world, the impact of the conflict has been deeply felt, with a strong display of [solidarity toward Palestine](#). While a minority believes that Hamas' military operation on October 7 was driven by foreign agendas, the [majority attributes it to the ongoing Israeli occupation](#). Furthermore, the majority disapproves of US policies in the Gaza conflict and maintains [skepticism](#) about US support for the two-state solution.

There are significant risks of both deepening and broadening of the conflict. Regional commentary has focused on the possibility of [forced displacement/“evacuation”](#) of Palestinians from Gaza, and [a case brought by South Africa to the International Court of Justice](#) accuses Israel of committing genocide in contravention of the 1948 genocide convention. Pressure on Israel is growing from governments, widespread protests, and [legal challenges](#) around the world.

[Horizontal escalation of the conflict](#) is also a clear and present risk involving Israel, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, the US, and the broader region. At the same time, the rising alarm about [Houthi attacks targeting shipping in the Red Sea](#) presents another flashpoint for regional confrontation.

Nonetheless, as we look ahead to 2024, practical considerations and changing dynamics may create windows of opportunity toward a potential political settlement. One possible pathway would be to end hostilities with a simultaneous declaration of intent for a fast political transition toward full statehood in Palestine. This might allow combined regional/Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and UN involvement to stabilize and rebuild Gaza [in collaboration with a Palestinian authority](#) acceptable to Palestinians, with the understanding that such a presence is not acting as “Israel’s occupiers” but heralding a rapid movement toward statehood. It is also entirely possible that 2024 ends with the enduring influence of Hamas in the OPT, the rejection by both Palestinians and Israelis of a two-state solution, and the occupation persisting along a brutal and ultimately unsustainable path. The Biden administration has a critical and unavoidable role in communicating with the protagonists, Israel in particular, on which road to take.

#### **4. Ukraine: stalemate and accusations of double standards**

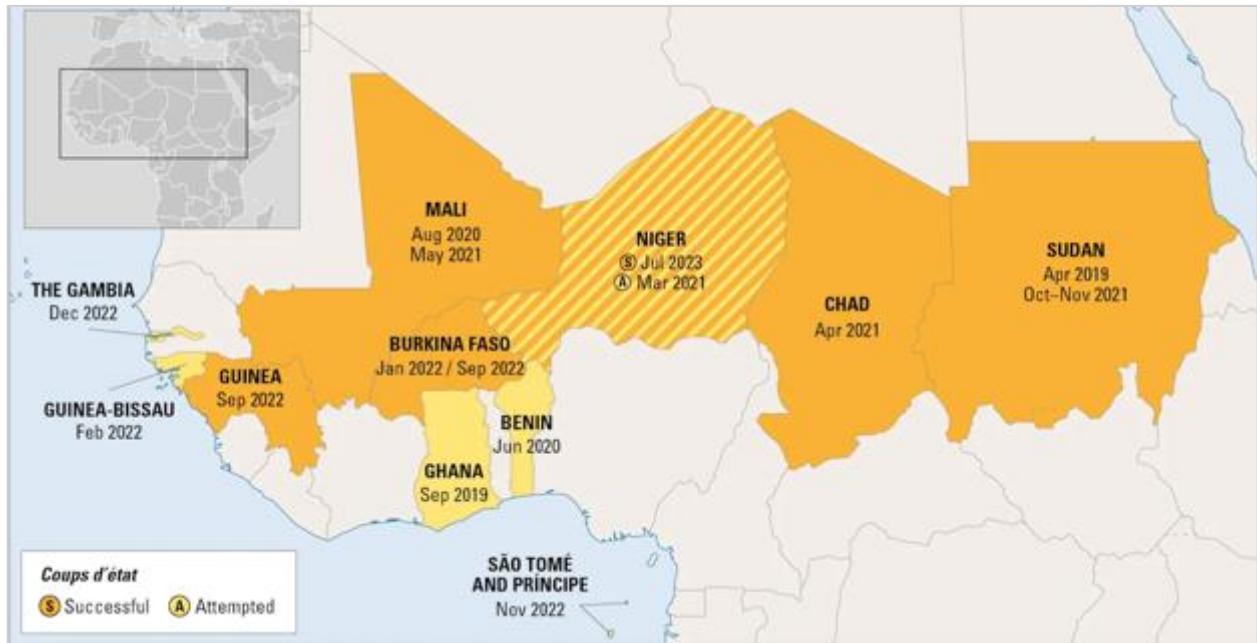
The Russia-Ukraine conflict appears set to endure through 2024, with heavy bombardments from Russia, growing apprehensions about the dependability of Western financial and military support for Ukraine, and [shortages in recruits, arms, and ammunition](#). Despite the substantial losses on the battlefield, Putin is expected to cruise through the March election in Russia while the US and several European nations brace for political volatility.

Amid this backdrop, the prospect for a positive settlement that does not reward territorial aggression is bleak. Having gone this far, maintaining support for Ukraine—along with addressing the legitimate concerns regarding potential double standards in their human rights approaches, particularly in comparing their policies toward Ukraine and Gaza—is essential for upholding the credibility of Ukraine’s Western allies.



## 5. Challenges in the shadows: spotlight on “forgotten conflicts”

The effects of the Ukraine invasion and now the conflict in the Middle East have distracted international attention away from other conflicts. The string of coups d'états from the Sahel to East Africa (refer to the map below) has been largely ignored in 2023. There is a significant prospect that this will flare up in an individual country or sub-region in 2024. Should this occur, the world is ill-prepared to address the challenge, inevitably leading to a [surge in humanitarian suffering and a higher death toll](#) within the region.



Coup incidents within the “Coup Belt” region, 2019-present. *Source:* International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS).

Efforts by the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the UN have faltered to establish a practical dialogue for restoring constitutional order in these countries. Geopolitical tensions are rising, resurrecting the specter of Cold War-style proxy wars. Borders across the coup belt are permeable, with the inevitability of arms proliferation and illegal trafficking networks spilling across the region.

At the same time, [instability relating to organized crime and gang activities](#) has raised its head in a stark form yet again in Latin America, with recent events in Ecuador. While based on very different dynamics, this presents another example of threats to both domestic and international peace and security that can occur at a time of limited global focus and bandwidth, along with weak multilateral action on prevention.

## 6. A shifting reality: the normalization of interstate conflicts and proxy wars

The shift from intra to interstate conflict continued in 2023. This transformation manifested in various incidents, including Azerbaijan’s use of military force to reclaim Nagorno-Karabakh. Another crucial trend to watch in 2024 is the possible emergence of proxy wars, particularly in African countries where [the influence of Russia, China, Western powers, and regional bodies is contested](#). The likelihood of increased economic and security action by China against Taiwan, [although still an outlier in terms of direct military action, will remain significant in 2024](#): the prospect of inward preoccupation and

potentially domestic unrest during the US election campaign and the formation of a new government may lead to heightened aggression.

## 7. Southern-driven development efforts: elevating climate resilience

The G20, now at the [midpoint of four presidencies led by middle-income countries, three of them BRICS members](#), will continue to offer approaches to Southern-driven development models. These approaches aim to incorporate climate change impacts rather than exclude them. That the achievements so far have fallen short of the required ambition is not the fault of the G20 presidencies, all of which have put a strong focus on climate issues.

Climate is, in some respects, a bright spot in an otherwise bleak landscape. Both public opinion polls and protests have demonstrated the increasing pressure citizens are exerting on their governments to address climate change.

COP28, the 2023 UN Climate Change Conference, has yielded some tangible results, albeit not at the scale required to tackle the speed of climate impacts. The focus on [climate security](#) is set to intensify as conflict continues to disrupt energy and food supplies. The conference also highlighted the growing significance of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the fight against climate change. AI has indeed become instrumental in weather forecasting, optimizing renewable energy, and improving agriculture, among others. However, there is still work to be done to fulfill the UN Secretary-General's call for AI to "[supercharge climate action](#)." Equitable technology access, appropriate regulation of AI-related risks, and AI's potential for transformative climate action in developing nations were part of the discussions at the conference, pointing to significant trends for 2024.

## 8. International financing prospects: rising beyond political turbulence

Financing for both crisis prevention and development will remain a major point of contention among nations in 2024. The US election adds a layer of complexity, with the Biden administration likely to be cautious about making too many new international financing commitments, given the potential for such promises to become political ammunition during the campaign. Meanwhile, the global community remains on alert for the possibility of a Trump 2.0 administration. There is, therefore, little prospect for ambitious progress other than keeping the door open in 2024.

However, 2025 might hold greater promise if—and it is a big if—developed economies realize that the [absence of international financing](#) to address climate crises, conflict containment, and refugee flows actively undermines their own national interests. Even a Trump administration, although likely to try to kill off certain proposals like an international tax convention or increased grant financing for multilateral development banks (MDBs), would still offer possibilities in international financing matters such as big business investments in climate adaptation and pressure on the Federal Reserve to lower rates and potentially support Special Drawing Rights (SDR) issuance.

## 9. Culture and values: key battlegrounds in 2024

A clash over culture and values will continue to be an issue in 2024, spurred on by the ever-expanding influence of social media during the unprecedented number of upcoming election campaigns. Notably, social movements championing conservative family values are likely to exert their influence in elections worldwide.

Internationally, [conservative family values](#) will be a major part of Russia’s endeavors to forge alliances in Africa. The issue of refugees and migrants will be a growing cause of contention, spurring greater attempts to impose stricter regulations on legal and orderly migration and to [agree on new mechanisms](#) for facilitating so-called “safe third country” returns.

Simultaneously, gender backlash will loom large in 2024, manifesting as a pivotal concern both in national elections and within the UN. Difficult battles are on the horizon over what is meant by gender equality, encompassing relations between men and boys, women and girls, and the safeguarding of LGBTQI+ rights.

## 10. Emerging peace amid turmoil: some “forgotten” conflicts make progress

Despite all the above, we would like to conclude on a more uplifting and unexpected note. The aftermath of Sri Lanka’s war, constitutional upheaval, and economic crisis have been seen as something of an irreversible descent into isolation and stagnation. However, December brought a twist as [the government welcomed a declaration for peace and reconciliation](#) negotiated by a delegation of the country’s most senior Buddhist monks and the Global Tamil Forum. While still a work in progress—and attracting little international commentary—this is a sign that the unexpected can be positive as well as negative. It also demonstrates yet again the positive potential for governments and non-state movements to jointly play a key role in conflict resolution.

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## Annex: 2023 Predictions Revisited—A Year-End Review

At the end of 2022, CIC presented [nine forecasts about major global trends](#) that we anticipated would influence the course of 2023. Below, we revisit each of these predictions against the events and outcomes of 2023.

### 1. “The war on Ukraine will remain a major threat to international peace and security but is unlikely to be paralleled in 2023 by aggression in East Asia.”

→ This assessment holds true as there is no end in sight and no decisive military advances on either side in Ukraine. Likewise, there have been no aggressive actions from China directed at Taiwan or other major East Asia targets, although tensions persist in the South China Sea.

### 2. “Conflict risks will continue to shift in nature, away from national civil wars to the more local and the more global.”

→ This has indeed [materialized](#), with a notable increase in internationalized conflicts, including the ongoing Russian aggression in Ukraine, the horizontal escalation of the Israel-Palestine conflict, and the evolving patterns of international involvement in the Sahel and Yemen. Communal conflicts also increased, many being [exacerbated by the effects of climate change](#). The only new full-scale civil war in recent times has erupted in Sudan. This shift marks a departure from the preceding three decades, during which our primary concern was centered on civil wars. The balance has indeed shifted.

### 3. “Coup d’états and unconstitutional forms of government will become a rising concern.”

→ There has been no significant progress in any of the 2021 and 2022 coups in restoring constitutional rule, be it in Africa, Myanmar, or Afghanistan. Both Niger and Gabon have joined the growing list of African countries, spanning from west to east, [currently subjected to unconstitutional military regimes](#). Even Sierra Leone, known for its successful recovery from a history of conflict, suffered an attempted coup in October 2023. The UN and Western countries have yet to devise an effective approach to these recent coups, and even regional organizations like the AU and ECOWAS are facing difficulties. However, beyond the directly affected regions, international attention to these situations has waned, raising questions about the level of global concern surrounding these events.

### 4. “Politics and economics will continue to affect each other closely.”

→ Indeed, 2023 marked a year when “politics are economic, and economics are political.” Fierce battles over finance unfolded at the UN, international financial institutions (IFIs), and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Tensions simmered around the financing paragraphs in the SDG Summit political declaration and the tax resolution at the UN, although the World Bank’s evolution roadmap made progress. The Group of 77 (G77) has focused on taxation, debt, liquidity and SDRs, issues that still find limited resonance in developed economies. The vote on the tax framework convention revealed a clear North-South divide. From the Western European and Other Groups (WEOG), only Norway and Iceland voted to abstain rather than oppose. Several other WEOG countries speculated that a more extended and adaptable process might have led to a different stance.

### 5. “Effective overseas development aid will decline but some new money will be brought to the table.”

→ Effective overseas development aid did indeed decline due to a significant increase in the allocation of Official Development Assistance (ODA) to [cover expenses related to in-country refugees](#), effectively keeping these resources within the donor countries. The World Bank’s hybrid model, designed to subsidize action on climate, pandemics, and conflict in middle-income countries, received modest pledges, with the US contributing USD 500 million and Germany chipping in with USD 300 million (although these pledges appear quite large, it is worth noting that New York University’s annual budget alone amounts to USD 17 billion).

COP28 saw greater new funding commitments. The operationalization of the Loss and Damage Fund was adopted by State Parties, but the [initial pledge of USD 700 million](#) from developed countries fell short of the required funding. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) introduced their climate fund, [ALTÉRRRA](#), with an initial commitment of USD 30 billion, aiming to increase it to USD 250 billion by 2030 through private and public financing. ALTÉRRRA will focus on clean energy and climate projects, particularly supporting infrastructure development in developing nations.

Additionally, COP28 saw a renewed commitment to reallocating SDRs. The UAE contributed an additional [USD 200 million](#) to the International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) Resilience and Sustainability Trust, bringing the total SDR reallocation to [USD 87.1 billion](#), below the 2021 pledge of USD 100 billion. Noteworthy support came from the United Kingdom, France, Spain, Japan, and the IMF for redirecting SDRs through the hybrid capital instruments proposed by the African Development Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank, signaling progress in ongoing SDR discussions.



## 6. “Rise of more assertive Southern models for development”

→ The intensification of competition over global development models, which started in 2021 and 2022, continued in 2023. The BRICS expanded their membership, and [Southern-driven development models](#) (along with compromise on Ukraine) took center stage at the G20. The UN witnessed the emergence of a vibrant and highly contested debate surrounding the overarching development model, including the significance of industrial policy, sustainable consumption and production, as well as the approach to gender, inclusion, and human rights.

## 7. “Pressure and openings for change in global governance”

→ We missed the mark on several fronts. Most importantly, we did not analyze the unsustainable nature of the situation in the OPT. While we did predict pressure and openings for change in global governance, progress was minimal. G77 countries generally used their increasing leverage to advocate for substantial issues like taxation and climate finance rather than governance reform, a prudent choice given the concerns of their populations.

## 8. “Mental health and psycho-social support will become a global political, economic, and developmental issue.”

→ Mental health and psycho-social support attracted many private-sector initiatives but received little attention within the multilateral system. This should be rectified, especially considering the trauma in Palestine and Ukraine, alongside forgotten crises in other parts of the world.

## 9. “While we may be done with COVID-19, it is not clear that pandemics are done with us.”

→ Pandemics did not threaten international stability, although COVID-19 resurged in milder forms worldwide.

In some predictions, we missed the mark. Most notably, we failed to thoroughly assess the inherent unsustainability of the situation in the OPT, and we overlooked the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) as a significant issue in 2023.

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