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Top Five Global Security Risks to Watch in 2023

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The year 2022 was, without a doubt, a tumultuous year for the world. Though the COVID-19 pandemic was gradually receding, it continued to inflict economic harm and health risks. Meanwhile, the Russia-Ukraine war has ushered in a new era of international relations fraught with uncertainties and risks, where the basic principle of national sovereignty is seriously undermined.

For the trajectory of US-China relations, it continued to take a sharp turn for the worse following the 20th National People's Congress in China, where President Xi Jinping secured an unprecedented third term in office, and the US midterm election, which brought back a divided congress of two political parties vying to out-tough each other on China. Though the Xi-Biden summit in Bali indicated mutual concerns about the fragile relations and a desire to establish some 'guardrails', the two powers continued to disagree fiercely on Taiwan, which may lead to a direct armed conflict between them. They also contested strategically in the tech, cyber, military, and geopolitical domains.

The successful hosting of back-to-back summits by Cambodia, Indonesia, and Thailand indicated ASEAN's resilience, centrality, and significant contributions to the region and the world in facilitating dialogues and coordinating efforts to address pressing issues requiring global actions.

Although 2022 is in the rearview mirror, 2023 promises to be as turbulent as last year, if not more, with forces of regional and internal armed conflicts, great power competition, de-globalisation, climate change, and food insecurity concocted to create even greater instabilities. This article analyses the top five security risks we should watch closely in 2023.

1. Ukraine

After nearly a year, the Russia-Ukraine war sees no end in sight, as both sides still appear indifferent to the possibility of peace negotiation. Since the start of the war, Ukraine has suffered enormous devastation to its economy and civilian infrastructures, with hospitals, schools, and public transportation reduced to rubble by Russian forces. On its part, Russia has also suffered an enormous loss to its military and economy. According to one [estimate](#), the Russian GDP is projected to drop by 7–8% in 2022–2023 due to crippling Western economic sanctions. With limited access to finance, shrinking exports and imports of tech components, and growing diplomatic isolation, the road ahead for this nuclear power appears grim as its economy would take years to return to the status quo ante, assuming the war in Ukraine were

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to be settled. A similarly difficult path towards post-war reconstruction also awaits Ukraine and its people.

The war in Ukraine constitutes a ‘polycrisis’, which refers to the outbreaks of interconnected and simultaneous crises, mainly because it leads to a global spike in energy and food prices. On the one hand, the blockage of shipments of Ukrainian grains affects the global supplies of key grains such as corn, wheat, and sunflower. This blockage has hit hungry parts of Africa the hardest. On the other hand, the war has significantly increased the prices of natural gas and other energy types sold to Europe by Russia. Internationally speaking, the war casts serious doubt on the foundation of the modern state system, sovereignty, upon which small states like Cambodia rely for their existence.

Even though the 1648 Westphalian state system and the United Nations have enabled states to somehow co-exist and maintain some degree of self-determination after two devastating world wars, the chances that smaller states could be subjugated with brute force by their bigger, more powerful peers remain a constant possibility. The fact that a permanent member of the UNSC has used forces against another sovereign state with little to no regard for the UN Charter and international law should be a sombre reminder that life in the anarchic international system is, as Thomas Hobbes puts it, “nasty, brutish, and short”.

Although Ukraine and Russia seem unable to achieve complete victory over each other, the chance of a peaceful settlement remains slim. At this point, the political and strategic cost of backing down is too high for Russia, Ukraine, and, to a further extent, NATO. As a result, 2023 will see a stalemated war in Ukraine with no end in sight. One could only hope that the war will not escalate beyond the conventional threshold or lead to military incidents between NATO and Russia.

2. Taiwan

The US-China contention over Taiwan is relatively the biggest flashpoint that could draw the two powers into a direct armed conflict. On the one hand, President Xi and the people of China view Taiwan as a natural part of China and believe that the reunification of Taiwan cannot be passed down from generation to generation if China is to realise its national rejuvenation. On the other hand, for the US, Taiwan is not only home to the world’s most advanced manufacturer of semiconductors, TSMC, upon which American tech and military industries rely for their leading edge over peer competitors, particularly China, but American leaders and electorates increasingly view Taiwan through the Democracy vs. Autocracy lens, an ideological rhetoric consistently promoted by President Joe Biden.

Recent developments indicate that 2023 will remain a dangerous year for cross-strait stability. The visit to Taiwan by former Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi in August last year invited harsh reactions from China, which conducted military drills near the Island. Moreover, the recent adoption of the Taiwan Enhanced Resilience Act of 2022 (TERA) as part of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) 2023 by the US Congress pushes US-Taiwan military relations to a new level. For example, TERA earmarks up to US\$10 billion of security assistance to Taiwan over five years and makes it an official policy of the US to promote Taiwan’s participation in international organisations. TERA and future visits by US congressional delegates, especially House Republicans, to Taiwan in 2023 would exacerbate greater tension between Washington and Beijing.

3. US-China Relations

US-China relations continue to look grim going into 2023 for three fundamental reasons. First, the new Republican-controlled House of Representatives will likely push the Biden administration to take an even tougher stance on China, especially Taiwan and export control of critical technologies like semiconductors. In addition, House Republican Leader Kevin McCarthy, the new Speaker of the House, appointed Congressman Mike Gallagher last December to head the newly established House Select Committee on China. This new committee, according to Gallagher, would bring closer public scrutiny of China's activities in the South and East China Seas and its tech development, human rights records, and security competition with the US. In addition, the committee would look into pushing for long-term investments necessary to ensure the US will win the "[new Cold War](#)" with China. Second, additional US military assistance to Taiwan authorised under TERA will further antagonise Beijing, which views this new security assistance as a provocation and interference in China's internal affairs. Third, known for their hawkish stance towards China, Speaker McCarthy and other House Republicans have expressed their intention to visit Taiwan in 2023, risking more confrontation with Beijing. These early signs indicate that US-China ties may deteriorate further this year.

4. Iran

Another security risk involves Iran, which has been grappling with massive anti-government protests at home and has got itself involved in another confrontation with the US by providing drones to Russia, which has used them in Ukraine. Iran's material support for Russia's war effort adds another layer of contention with the US and its European allies. Worse still, the effort to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) pushed last year by Biden is essentially dead due partly to the growing anti-Iran mood in the US and Europe caused by Tehran's support for Russia and its handling of domestic protests. On its part, Iran has little appetite for compromise on the nuclear issue. Instead of appearing compromising on JCPOA, Tehran may use it to trump up nationalistic sentiment among Iranians and divert attention away from local protests.

Without the prospect of a revived JCPOA, Iran will continue processing highly enriched uranium (HEU) and other deliverable warheads virtually unabated, increasing the chance of pre-emptive military actions by the US against its nuclear plants. In the meantime, the return of Benjamin Netanyahu as Israeli prime minister with a far-right government and a Republican-controlled House in the US Congress make the situation even more fragile and unpredictable. With a professed intention to disrupt Iran's nuclear programme, Netanyahu may resort to increasing covert cyberattacks or call for aerial strikes against Iranian facilities. If this possibility were to manifest, the world's most unstable region would spiral into further chaos, putting the global energy supply in greater jeopardy. Though the chance of such an attack by Israel against Iran's nuclear facilities is low now, it cannot and should not be completely dismissed.

5. Food Insecurity

The last major security risk for 2023 is food insecurity. Due to rising energy prices and supply chain crunch caused by the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, the World Food Programme (WFP) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) have warned of an "acute food insecurity" affecting at least 205 million people in 45 countries worldwide, with

additional 49 million more people facing famine. Between 2019 and 2022 alone, the number of people facing acute food insecurity jumped from 135 million to 345 million.

Though food insecurity is not military in nature, its implications can lead to military conflicts caused by cross-border mass migration, violent anti-government demonstrations, and internal strife induced by resource scarcity. With the war in Ukraine continuing without a viable peace settlement and climate shock continuing to cause severe drought and extreme weather, food insecurity will continue to hit conflict-torn Africa the hardest as the rest of the world is still slowly reeling from the pandemic.

In conclusion, 2023 will be another uncertain and turbulent year for the global economy and stability. Although these five security risks are not an exhaustive list of pressing issues facing the international community, each presents multidimensional challenges. If not addressed effectively and promptly, their consequences will be felt worldwide.

The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Asian Vision Institute.