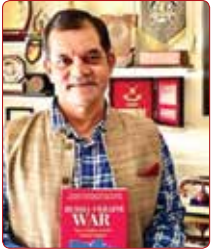


2022- THE YEAR IN CONFLICT



Ajay Singh

Conflicts have taken place throughout the course of human history. It is an unfortunate reality that has to be accepted. However, it is incumbent on nations that have a say in the global scheme of things to play a key role in conflict prevention and resolution



The year began with war clouds on the horizon. Russian troops had amassed on the Ukrainian border and negotiations were failing. But in the early days of the year, no one really thought that a Russian invasion of Ukraine would actually take place. And even if it did, it would be done and dusted in a fortnight or so. This was proved wrong at 5 in the morning on 24 February when Russian tanks rolled across the Ukrainian frontier. A year down the line, the war still rages. In fact, it threatens to continue throughout this year as well, with no immediate end in sight.

The headlines have been dominated by the Russia-Ukraine war. But other conflicts have also raged across the globe. China threatened Taiwan with the most blatant display of military aggression. Indian and Chinese troops clashed in the Yangtze region of

Arunachal Pradesh; a two-day war between Armenian and Azerbaijani soldiers in September, in the disputed region of Nagorno – Karabakh saw over 300 deaths and massive destruction of equipment. In the midst of it all, the long-standing civil wars in Yemen, Syria and Ethiopia, and Islamist militancy in Africa continued taking a massive toll of lives. And the rising tensions between the Koreas, Iran with its revived nuclear program, and internal instability in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Myanmar and even Sri Lanka threaten to spiral out of control at any time.

According to the Global Conflict Tracker 27 conflicts – big and small – have occurred between nations this year. If we add internal conflicts to the mix, the figure rises to 114. Over half a million conflict related deaths have taken place (including those by hunger and starvation that conflicts bring in their wake) and

an astounding 8 million people have been displaced. The nuclear threat too has come closer. The Doomsday Clock – the symbolic clock that shows how close mankind is to a nuclear holocaust – has come down to 90 seconds, the closest it has been in its history. It has been a turbulent year all right, and all indicators point towards greater escalation this year.

War in Europe

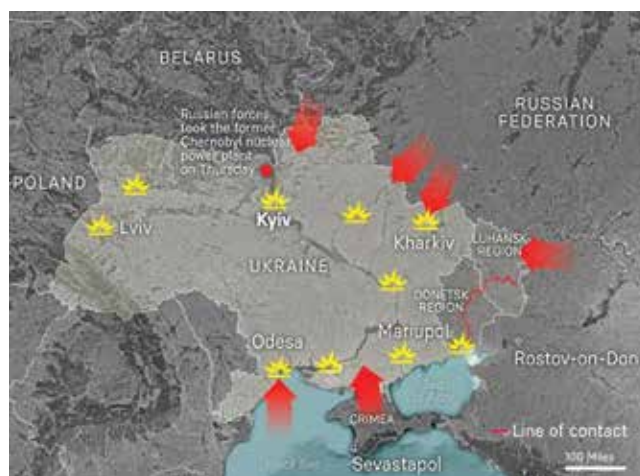
The war that everyone knew was coming, but still hoped would somehow never take place, began on 24 February when Russia invaded Ukraine in three broad prongs – one from the north towards Kyiv, another from the Northeast and Southeast towards Kharkiv and Donbas, and a thrust from the South towards the coastal areas along the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. Like their earlier campaign in Georgia, Russia expected an easy victory – their tanks even carried ceremonial uniforms for an expected victory parade in Kyiv. But the Ukrainians proved skillful, determined defenders. The Russians also made a series of tactical and operational gaffes that stalled the offensive, and also enabled the Ukrainians to launch their own counter-offensives in November.

In the initial days of Feb-March, it seemed Kyiv would fall – a situation so likely, that the US offered Zelensky a helicopter to fly him to safety. When the Russian blitzkrieg towards Kyiv failed, the war settled to a long slow grind. Through April to September, the Russians clawed their way, mile by mile, village by village, as they took vast swathes of land along the Southern coast and in Donbas. Their gains were considerable, and they captured almost 20 percent of Ukrainian territory – its richest areas. They then held a ‘referendum’ in the regions of Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Luhansk and Donetsk and amalgamated the captured areas as their own. Yet, the difficulties of holding on to occupied territory became startlingly clear as the Ukrainians – boosted with long range artillery and sophisticated weaponry, and most importantly, US intelligence – launched two counter offensives in September-October. In the northeast, they managed to regain 6000 square kilometers in just a fortnight, area which had taken the Russians months to capture. In the south, they retook the vital town of Kherson and pushed the Russian line behind the Dnieper River.

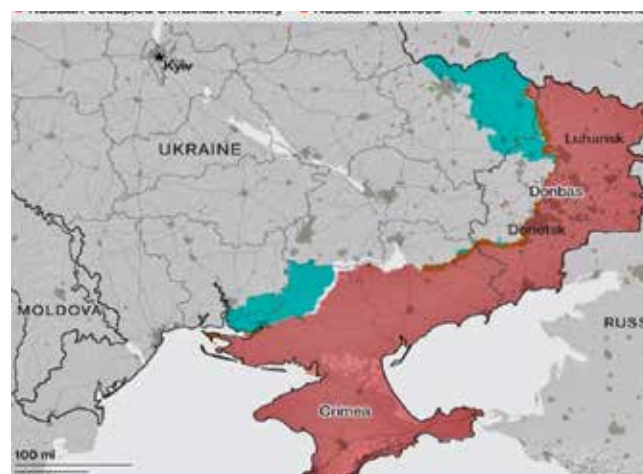
By the end of the year, the frozen frontlines have consolidated along river lines and natural obstacles in the South and East. Russia has retrieved the situation somewhat with the recapture of Soledar in the Bakhmut area of the Donbas. But it is on the back foot

now – militarily and politically. It is internationally isolated, the military is under increasing pressure, and Putin too is facing the flak for his ill-considered war. He is now looking for some kind of face-saving exit, while Ukraine have vowed to press on “till the last Russian is evicted from the last inch of Ukrainian soil.”

And yet, history has shown that when Russia is on the backfoot, they tend to come back harder, as they did so often in World War II. A fresh offensive is on the cards – perhaps directed again at Kyiv. Offensive action is also likely by Ukraine to reclaim lost areas. And with an infusion of newly trained recruits and lavish Western equipment - including a recent consignment of Leopard, Challenger II and Abrams tanks - they are well poised to do so. The West has held together, in spite of minor dissensions between NATO partners, and the feeling is that Putin must be defeated to prevent further aggression. This will ensure that the war goes on, and will continue to dominate the headlines for much of this year as well.



The Initial Invasion



Situation as in Jan 23



A protestor on the streets in crisis torn Haiti

China - the Dragon in the Background

Amidst the raging war in Europe, attention was momentarily distracted from the main threat of China. With Xi Jinping back in an unprecedented third term in power, the fears of Chinese hyper-nationalism and expansionism will only increase.

China has been through its own throes, with Covid claiming an estimated 9000 lives every day, and leading to a national shutdown that disrupted the economy and brought citizens out in the streets in a rare display of protest. But neither its slowing economy or its Covid outbreak have diluted China's stance towards its 'core issues.'

China recently set up military bases in three disputed islands of the South China Sea near Spratly Islands, Subi Reef and Mischief Reef. These bases have been equipped with anti-ship and anti-aircraft missiles, radars and communication systems and also have runways for fighters to operate. This assertion of claims, in blatant disregard to its neighbors, will well be the start of repeated use of force to takeover other disputed islands and make a slow creep further into the China Seas.

Simultaneously, their actions against Taiwan have also increased. Tensions hit a new high following the visit of the US Speaker, Nancy Pelosi, to Taiwan in August. The visit prompted a series of Chinese military exercises along the Taiwan Straits, a thinly disguised dress rehearsal for a future invasion. It saw an unprecedented number of air and naval incursions, with 71 jets and 7 ships crossing the Straits in a single day in December. Many feel that China is preparing the grounds for a military invasion of Taiwan - which could happen as early as 2024. The US has increased

military and security cooperation and promised to help Taiwan in case of an invasion. Coupled with their economic and ideological wars, the issue of Taiwan could set the two global powers on a confrontation course.

In a way, Chinese actions will be determined by what happens in Ukraine. The war has drawn China and Russia together with a shared sense of being 'wronged' by the US and the West. Should western solidarity towards Ukraine remain strong, and if Putin is defeated, it will actually be a deterrence for China to follow a similar aggressive path. But it may be tempted to test the waters in other locations - as its actions along the LAC reveal.

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Chinese military exercises along the Taiwan Straits may be a dress rehearsal for a future invasion

India-China - The Stand-off Continues

The Army Chief General Manoj Pande has described the situation on the LAC as “stable, but unpredictable.” The unpredictability of the LAC was demonstrated on 09 December in the Yangste sub-sector of Tawang, when around 2-300 Chinese soldiers, armed with wire encased clubs and sticks crossed over to the Indian side and tried to dislodge a post held by around 50 Indian soldiers. A rapid move of reinforcements helped send the Chinese packing. Both sides suffered injuries, but fortunately there were no fatalities. The very scale of the intrusion indicated a well-planned action to change the alignment of the LAC – something that would have emanated from the very top.

The Yangste clash was the first major clash between Indian and Chinese troops since the Galwan clash of 2020 in which 20 Indian and an estimated 40 Chinese soldiers lost their lives. The Galwan clash led to 16 rounds of talks where troops from both sides withdrew from Galwan, Pangong Tso, Gogra and Hot Springs with the creation of a buffer zone between them. But two friction points – Depsang and Demchok remain unresolved. The continual build of Chinese forces and the development of infrastructure - including two bridges across the Pangong Tso - show that this will be a long haul.

China is escalating the confrontation from Ladakh to Arunachal and can activate any area of the LAC to keep the Indian army guessing. Any of these actions could go out of hand and lead to a repeat of the Galwan clash or even worse. The LAC will keep simmering and this year could see further tensions along its 3744-kilometer-long length.

The Turmoil in the Neighborhood

But the LAC is not the only area in turmoil in the neighborhood. The entire region has seen a period of upheaval. In Afghanistan, the Taliban have gone back to their old ways, banning women education, persecuting minorities, and imposing their rabid brand of Islam across the ravaged country. It continues to be the epicenter of terrorism, holding a potpourri of terrorist groups like the Al Qaeda, Islamic State and others. Terrorist attacks keep targeting foreigners, minorities and rival groups – as recent attacks on the Pakistani embassy and on Chinese nationals have shown. But a major change has been in the manner in which Afghan- Pakistan relations have unraveled.

Firing across the Durand Line from both Afghan and Pakistani forces is now a regular feature. In the latest stand-off at the Chaman Spin - Boldak border outpost, machine guns, mortars and artillery were used. Army and police posts in the restive border areas have also been repeatedly attacked and security personnel taken hostage by the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan - an affiliate of the Taliban. They follow the same hardline agenda of converting Pakistan into an Islamic State. The support that the Taliban provides its comrades in the TTP – including sanctuaries in Afghanistan and even covering fire and fighters for its actions - has broken down relations between the Taliban and Pakistan and re-raised the specter of Islamic fundamentalism across the country.

Pakistan’s internal problems now seem insurmountable. The Biblical floods that ravaged it in October put one fifth of the country under water; its economy is in tatters; and a political divide has cleaved the nation. The ceasefire with the TTP has

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The conflict between the Yemeni government and the Houthi rebels has been going on for eight years

broken down and they have begun striking at will – not just in the border areas but also in the interior of the country. With elections due in August this year, the divided nation is unlikely to get its act together and the instability of an imploding Pakistan poses the greatest problems to the region.

Further to the South, similar internal conflict wreaked Sri Lanka as people arose in Aragalaya – a popular protest against the corrupt practices of the Rajapaksha brothers that led the nation to bankruptcy. The President's house was occupied and President Gotabaya Rajapaksa forced out of office as riots erupted across the nation. The new government of Ranil Wickremesinghe has brought some measure of stability, but the economic travails continue. Similar economic and political unrest also roiled Bangladesh which saw nationwide protests against the iron-handed policies of Sheikh Hasina. But it is Myanmar's ongoing civil war that threatens the stability of the region the most.

When the military junta under General Min Aung Hlaing took over the country in the coup of February 21, they did not anticipate the scale of resistance they would encounter. A violent Myanmar Spring Revolution erupted with militant groups and pro-democracy forces coming together under the loose banner of National Unity Government. The groups have waged a two-year long war against the Army that has taken an estimated 30000 lives and led to over a million refugees pouring into Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland along with Bangladesh and Thailand. Cross-border attacks, and even air strikes have spilled

over to neighboring countries as the instability of Myanmar threatens the peace of the region. India has good equations with the Generals and perhaps they could persuade them to bring back some modicum of democracy and stability to the hermit kingdom.

The Uncivil Wars and Emerging Flashpoints

The Ukraine war has virtually pushed other bloodier and longer lasting wars off the table. Yet, as far off as Yemen, Ethiopia, Syria and vast swathes of North Africa, civil wars and armed insurgencies have raged with no end in sight.

The eight year long conflict between the Saudi backed Yemeni government and the Iran supported Houthi rebels has sucked in virtually all the other Arab states and drawn in Islamic groups like Al Shabab and Al Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula in its sway. The conflict has displaced over 4 million people and killed over 200000, many of them civilians, who have succumbed not only to air strikes and crossfire, but to starvation and disease. There was a brief, month-long respite with a ceasefire in September, but otherwise, the guns and air raid sirens continue unabated.

Two other civil wars have also taken their toll. In Ethiopia, fighting between government forces and the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front – which seeks autonomy for the region – has witnessed unprecedented cruelty on both sides. A government-imposed blockade of the region has led to an estimated 5 lakh deaths – most of them innocent civilians. And in Syria too, the war between President Bashar al Assad's

government forces and a hotchpotch of separatist groups (many of them fighting each other) has led to civilians being the main targets. This ten year long war has seen an estimated 6,50,000 deaths with over 10 million displaced persons, and is classified as ‘the deadliest conflict of the 21st Century.’ With Russia involved in Ukraine, their ally Assad is likely to come under greater pressure and the war could intensify in the coming year.

In the midst of it all, the world has taken its eyes of Islamic militancy, but groups like Boko Haram, Al Shabab, The Islamic State al Qaeda and others have virtually taken over large parts of Nigeria, Somalia, Burkino Faso, Mali, Congo, Algeria and Morocco. Their foothold there, could well see a resurgence of Islamic terrorism beyond the dark continent towards Europe and Asia.

Other conflicts lie latent beneath the surface. The perennial Israel–Palestine issue has been dormant for most of the year - barring the occasional cross-border raid and missile attacks. But the coming of a right-wing hardline government in Tel Aviv could fray the delicate peace of the Middle East. Already there are rumblings in Iran – which has successfully brought time through negotiations and is now at a stage where, according to the IAEA, it has enough enriched uranium to make 4-5 atomic bombs in just a month or two. This time will reduce even further and by mid 2023, Iran would be able to produce a nuclear device. That could bring Israel and the USA back in the mix to halt its program which is not a good boding for the volatile Middle East.

And of course, North Korea has its own nuclear sword to brandish. North Korea fired 87 missiles this year, including a Hwasong 17 ICBM with the range to reach mainland USA. With 40-50 nuclear weapons under its belt, and an array of missiles to deliver them, their nuclear threats - especially when USA and South Korea conduct military exercises – are only increasing. There may come a time when the threat could become a reality.

So, what does 2023 Portend?

According to a United Nations report, the year 2022 was the bloodiest year of the 21st Century. Global peace is at its greatest threat since World War II, and unfortunately, 2023 seems headed the same way.

For starters, the war in Ukraine shows no signs of letting up. Both sides are poised for a Spring Offensive, whose outcome will determine the future course of the war. Although Putin and Zelensky have spoken of peace, there is little common ground – since

the Ukrainians demand (rightly) the vacation of all occupied territory; while the Russians insist, they will not give it up. Yet, war-weariness and battle fatigue could get both sides to the table. India may be able to play a major role in that.

Chinese intransigence is also unlikely to reduce. It may not carry out its long-threatened invasion of Taiwan, but actions to test and weaken the Taiwanese government will continue. So will its actions in the China Seas – which could bring it on collision course with the USA.

And of course, we should prepare for an intensification of Chinese activities all along the LAC. There will be pin pricks and testing of our resolve, and their actions to change the alignment of the LAC will continue. Any of these actions could lead to a dangerous escalation.

With Pakistan, the ceasefire still holds along the LOC. But their pronouncements of having “learnt the lessons of three wars with India” and seeking peace, should be taken with a bagful of salt. It is engaged along its eastern borders, where skirmishes with Afghan troops and Taliban fighters occur with increasing frequency. The TTP too, is intensifying its activities all across Pakistan. Its instability, sinking economy and climate induced disasters, could send waves of refugees into India. The internal turmoil of this nuclear armed neighbor is cause for concern.

In the midst of it all, the world is still grappling with COVID and global warming. The resurgence in China has shown how rapidly the virus can strike again – and we should not let our guard down for it. And although talks to reduce global warming to an ‘acceptable’ figure of 1.5 Centigrade continue, there has been precious little done on ground to actually reduce emissions. In fact, the wars have only increased the consumption of fossil fuels. It is the war against global warming that the world needs to close ranks against, and which should worry it most.

As the world becomes a hotter place, the wars and conflicts continue. As the Ukraine War has shown, largescale wars are very much on the agenda, now and in the future. At the same time, insurgencies and low-level conflict will continue. It is an unfortunate reality that has to be accepted. And the only way to keep them at bay – if only temporarily – is by enhancing our own preparedness and deterrence capabilities.

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