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Predictions for 2023? Annus Horribilis with Some Surprising Upsides

The Cradle's writers offer up their predictions for 2023. The common theme is massive global shifts, some good, some bad.

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Theme: History

Global Research, March 10, 2023
The Cradle 9 January 2023

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Predictions are a notoriously painful exercise. In the world of geopolitics, especially during a time of seismic global transformation, they are nigh near impossible to make.

In West Asia, a depressed and neglected region that acts as a punching bag for Great Power competition elsewhere, much relies on the settlement of major power battles in the realms of economy, politics, and (proxy) war.

Rather than outright predictions, it might be more useful to characterize the *trends* likely to develop further in 2023. I've asked some of my fellow writers at *The Cradle* to weigh in with their own takes. But let's first jump in with a few of my own observations for the year ahead:

The Ukraine war was the defining event of 2022, and if the conflict hadn't unfolded there, it would have done so elsewhere. It is essentially a war to stop a multipolar future from fully unseating the unipolar past. It could have unfolded in Taiwan, Iran, the Koreas, or even Venezuela, for that matter.

In 2023, we will see clear signs of disruption in the Atlantic alliance. As things stand, Europe can no longer afford to take instruction from Washington when their fortunes and fates are so clearly at odds. Ukraine made this clear, but Europe does have a choice that its Atlanticists have frantically buried for years.

The fact is that Europe's extreme wealth and privilege has been historically derived from Asian resources, and that will become manifestly clear in 2023. Germany wasn't wrong to launch its Nordstream pipelines with Russia – Berlin was merely securing its future until the Americans sabotaged it.

2023 will remind Europe that its desire to remain prosperous – and continue to grow economically – is intricately linked with the east and the promise of "Eurasia." Asia and Europe are connected by land, after all, as opposed to the vast Atlantic Ocean that separates current allies.

So expect this year to reveal the splits between various European stakeholders, and prepare for the battle of Eurasianism versus Atlanticism to play across the continent's power corridors. You will find, at its core, that the world of commerce will be at odds with government for the first time in decades.

In and around West Asia, I have my eye on two developments that could have major repercussions on both regional and international affairs.

First is the rapidly-evolving India-Russia relationship that sprung out of nowhere last year. This new dynamic has single-handedly revitalized the BRICS and inserted itself onto the global chessboard. In Moscow, New Delhi now has a reliable and useful partner to resolve disputes with Beijing, which makes things infinitely smoother for Asian integration projects.

It also left Washington in the dust, something the US experienced in a variety of theaters in 2022, including with regional heavyweight Saudi Arabia. But India is a big catch, and this lining up of Indo-Russian interests in multiples theaters cannot be sitting well with Atlanticists anywhere.

Second, the re-emergence of Turkiye as a critical player in West and Central Asia. After nearly a decade of relative isolation stemming from myriad differences with Europe and Arab states – coupled with a collapsing economy – Turkiye is now on the rise. Russia recently offered Ankara its long-coveted ambition of becoming a major oil and gas hub to Europe, and China seeks to build a key section of its New Silk Road through Turkiye.

Facing his toughest elections to date in June 2023, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan looked like a sure loser until the Ukraine war flipped his fortunes. Overnight, the NATO state became a desired intermediary for both sides, and Erdogan didn't miss a beat.

He is playing the game of his life right now, positioning Turkiye as a key Eurasian fuel hub for Europe, and trying to milk this regionally in Syria, Iraq, Azerbaijan, and other Turkic states of the South Caucasus. While offering resolution of conflict on one hand, Erdogan is also dangerously fueling conflict on the other.

Nowhere is this more noticeable that on the Armenia-Azerbaijani-Iran borders, where the Turkish president is aggressively advancing Ankara's ambitions to steer Central Asia's new transportation routes and reshape its borders.

Turkiye and Syria

Turkiye featured heavily in 2023 predictions by *The Cradle* writers. Yeghia Tashjian goes so far as to predict a new major war in the South Caucasus this year:

> "The Azerbaijani land blockade on Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh has entered its 30th day. Russian peacekeepers are unable to lift the blockade out of concern about the Turkish reaction. Meanwhile, Baku is forcing Armenia to provide a corridor connecting Azerbaijan to Turkiye and thus cutting the Armenia-Iran border."

While Turkiye fuels conflict in one region, it also appears to be winding down strife elsewhere. A number of writers predict a resolution of the Syria-Turkish conflict in 2023, with different degrees of confidence.

Ceyda Karan believes Erdogan to be opportunistic in his Syria plans: “It all depends on the Turkish elections,” she says, reflecting the view of several *Cradle* authors who also believe that all may not be smooth in the run-up to the polls.

Erdogan is working every angle to win the elections, says Mohammad Salami:

> “In the international arena, he mediated between Ukraine and Russia, with no result. In the energy scene, he plans to turn Turkiye into an energy hub, but it won’t be easy. Erdogan then attempted to rebuild relations with the UAE, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Israel, and now, in a last ditch effort, has announced his retirement after the upcoming election.”

On a more positive note, Washington-based Ziad Hafez believes that rapprochement between Syria and Turkiye will move much faster than people expect.

> “Erdogan has to provide a major political success before the elections. Whether the Syrians will give him that is hard to know. But it will be beneficial for both, and at the same time completely isolate the US position in Syria. I don’t think either NATO or regional states are in a position to derail the talks. What the Russians and Iranians have offered Turkiye cannot be matched by either the US or Europe,” Hafez writes promisingly.

But Lebanese journalist Hasan Illaik offers a reality check on the hazards of rapprochement talks, where many regional and international stakeholders have vested interests.

He predicts “the US will make every effort to prevent any improvement in Turkish-Syrian relations, even going so far as to forge ties between Turkiye and the US-backed Kurds.”

> “The Syrian economic situation will worsen in 2023 because neither Russia and China are helping, Iran has already done its maximum, and the US is still occupying the resource rich areas in Syria’s northeast and slapping more sanctions on the state.”

On the highly-anticipated meeting between Erdogan and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Illaik warns that even this poses serious difficulties: “Turkiye needs to pay a price for this meeting because it has done a lot of damage to Syria and occupies its lands, but Russia is pushing for a meeting ‘for free’ – to suit its own strategic goals with Ankara.”

Palestine, the Levant, and the Persian Gulf

Regionwide, Illaik predicts that 2023 will not see much change, because “the whole Levant will be subject to continuing US hostility – sanctions, military occupation of Syria, threats, blackmail, and pressure in Lebanon and Iraq.”

Other Arab states will rush in to secure their own interests primarily. The UAE, for instance, has offered to participate in Turkish-Syrian talks “to gain some influence in post-war Syria and balance Iran’s influence there.”

Ceyda Karan weighs in on how the global power stand-off is affecting regional behaviors:

“Gulf states, even the Saudis, are sensing US weakness, so they are now establishing direct beneficial relations with China, Russia. I don’t see them continuing to remain staunch partners of the US in the region, and we will see more signs of this in 2023.”

A fairly unanimous view is that this year will see the ratcheting up of tensions in Palestine.

“Netanyahu’s rightwing government has placed Israel in a precarious position,” argues Ziad Hafez. “It can’t launch a major military offensive inside Palestine, or against Lebanon, Syria, and Iran, nor is it in a position to undertake any political settlement, domestically as well as regionally. Tensions are rapidly rising in the West Bank, US Jews are no longer providing unconditional support, and the balance of power on the ground is not to Israel’s advantage.”

Hafez warns that “the far-right racism of cabinet members like (National Security Minister) Itamar Ben Gvir, will make it impossible for Israel to claim self-defense over anything. Some of these elements will try to force a major confrontation or conflict, but this will be Israel’s undoing.”

They’re ‘damned if they do and damned if they don’t’ is Israel’s predicament in a nutshell.”

Illaik says the Israelis can’t afford to look beyond their borders, as in the past:

> “Inside Palestine, the atmosphere is readying for a Third Intifada, in the WestBank and Jerusalem – and perhaps even inside 1948 lands, as we witnessed in May 2021. The reason for this is that Israelis have and are continuing to weaken the Palestinian Authority (PA), are slapping on more arbitrary measures and punishments on the Palestinian people, and are trying to alter the status quo of Jerusalem’s Al Aqsa.”

He also believes that Israel will intensify its targeting of Iran, but that Hezbollah will remain its biggest actual security threat. Illaik predicts stronger Resistance Axis deterrence measures in 2023: “Iran may retaliate for Israeli sabotage and assassination operations – inside Israel – while Hezbollah will continue its project of securing more precision-guided missiles, UAVs, and maybe even Cruise missiles.”

Journalist Zafar Mehdi predicts that the current stalemate in Iran nuclear talks with world powers will continue in 2023, following a slew of fresh recent sanctions by western states linked to Iranian riots in the country and accusations of drone shipments to Russia – all basically designed to gain leverage in Vienna talks.

> “Despite Iran’s readiness to restore the deal, it’s clear other parties are not interested, which will obviously prompt Tehran to further ramp up its uranium enrichment this year. Brace for more baseless claims against Iran in the coming months, and expect the UN nuclear watchdog to increase its pressure campaign against Tehran at the behest of

Americans, Europeans and Israelis," writes Mehdi.

He also expects Saudi Arabia to "come out in the open about its dalliance with Israel" this year, "especially with Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman's friend (Netanyahu) back in power in Tel Aviv." But Mehdi warns that this "won't help Riyadh in Yemen, as Ansarallah continue to pummel the Saudi-led coalition forces and the US is now batting for truce between the warring sides."

The often stalled Iran-Saudi talks, "are now reportedly set to advance to the political and diplomatic level, which may provide the breakthrough needed to wind down the Yemeni war in 2023," particularly in the context of Riyadh's closer ties to Moscow and Beijing, both keen to restore and maintain Persian Gulf security, but within a new *regional* paradigm.

The Ukraine war and multipolarism

If one solely considers outlooks on the Ukraine war, *Cradle* writers appear to be immune to the western narrative. For them, a Russian victory is inevitable for various reasons, but at what cost?

Ziad Hafez predicts an end to the devastating conflict by the end of Spring, largely because Ukraine's fighting forces have been severely depleted and its western allies do not have the means to provide uninterrupted qualitative and quantitative military support. "The US industrial base is simply not equipped and ready to meet that demand," he states blankly. That, and "Russian pressure on Putin to wrap it up and not this to become a war of attrition."

One alternative for NATO, of course, noted by several writers, is to expand the conflict once Ukraine is clearly losing: "Drag in the Poles and the former Warsaw Pact armies."

Karin Kneissl, Austria's foreign minister until 2019, has her eye firmly on the energy ramifications of this war and how Europe's institutions will be impacted:

"In the EU, further tests of strength are to be expected, which go beyond freezing of funds for (Hungarian Prime Minister) Viktor Orban. Corruption is widespread inside the EU and its institutions."

"A massive weakening of the common currency, the euro, is to be expected. This will make the already scarce energy imports even more expensive, especially as they are still settled in US dollars. The burdens on societies will lead not only to a loss of purchasing power and recession but also to social unrest that will go beyond strikes for higher salaries and climate protests throughout Europe," Kneissl warns.

As the global recession weighs on commodity markets and drives prices down, she believes "producers, such as those 23 producing countries of the OPEC+ format, will further reduce their production." But because of "the lack of investment in fossil energies, now intensified in the face of recession fears, prices could also swing upwards at any time." Which basically translates into increased volatility in the energy markets in 2023.

In the end though, Kneissl believes "we will see new banks, new lending, new currency baskets, and, no doubt, new insurance companies" emerge in the place of existing ones.

Note: This is essentially what the end of *world wars* looks like: the rejigging of the old order, and the creation of new global institutions and networks – with new rules and helmsmen.

The Cradle columnist Pepe Escobar, who has long forseen the global handover to multipolarism, may see every item on his predictions list ticked off in 2023. He keeps it short and sweet:

> "The expansion of BRICS to BRICS+, with Algeria, Iran and Argentina in the first wave, and dozens following. They will prioritize trade in their own currencies leading to an alternative currency, that will be shared by BRICS+, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)."

Escobar further predicts the corrosion of key European institutions, including the transatlantic military alliance: "Mirroring the internal polarization taking place in the west today, both the EU and NATO will be getting closer and closer to completely breaking up."

The Ukraine war, he says, is a major trigger for this collapse because of the "complete humiliation of NATO," and anticipates that "if the war continues – which it will, in hybrid war terms," we will likely see "terror attacks against the Russian Federation."

The problem with 2023

This isn't going to be an easy year, anywhere. The constellation of events in the recent past – wars in Syria, Yemen, Libya; the targeting of Iran, China, Russia; the global pandemic and the securitization that ensued; the re-emergence of Salafi terrorism; widespread economic recession; failure of globalization; replacement of international law with the self-serving 'rules-based order' – these have all contributed to a collapse of existing systems.

Yet, if *efficient actors* with *design* are present within times of chaos, collapse needn't be a frightening thing. It is clear the old ways were not working; here is a chance then to fix things from the ground up. But the journey will be painful.

The BRICS, SCO, BRI, EAEU are forging ahead with their programs. Relationships are strengthening (Russia-China, India-Russia, Iran-China, Saudi Arabia-China, Russia-Iran, etc). Atlanticism is being replaced not only because Atlanticists have failed, but because they've been treading water for decades while others have been taking quantum leaps forward.

In West Asia, the balls for 2023 are still up in the air. Turkiye, Iran, Russia, China, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, India, Israel, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Brazil, Venezuela, and many other states, institutions, and decision-makers will all take significant action this year. Many moves will be made, some succeeding, others failing. Everything is hard to predict other than nothing will remain the same as we enter 2024.

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