Will 2023 Be the Year of Great Convergence?

An AI image created by the stability.ai website, depicting a chess match between Putin and Biden with Xi as an observer.

Will 2023 be the year of great convergence? A year in which seemingly unrelated regional conflicts become interconnected as a single event that resembles or begins to resemble a global war? This article will attempt to examine the developments in the geopolitical arena and draw from them the future possibilities.

The "Russian bear" in Ukraine

On February 24, 2022, Russia declared war on Ukraine and began its invasion of Ukrainian territory. For those who follow one of the greatest geopolitical strategists of our time, Peter Zeihan, this war did not come as a surprise. As far back as 2014, he had precisely forecast the way, means, and year in which Putin would invade his neighbors, and Ukraine would be the beginning.

The Russian operation, after (almost) a year of war, uses the doctrine of warfare that was tried in Syria. The basic idea is that if the surrounding area is "cleared" of inhabitants "who have nothing to look for there" (in other words, becoming refugees), they will move away, and anyone who remains will be destroyed. In order to accelerate the war, the Russians are trying to cut off the supply lines in two dramatic dimensions. The first is the expulsion of Ukraine from its role as the world's grain barn, and the second is the depletion (mainly in Europe) of energy. As early as April 2022, I wrote an article published in *International Affairs Forum (IAF)* called "On the collapse of supply chains and their impact on food security and the energy sector," in which I presented the implications of cutting off the supply to the global market, in conjunction with China's export of fertilizers behavior (which will be expanded on later) as a dramatic decrease in global stability. I also wrote an article called "Europe is Preparing for a Cold Winter and the Rise of Israel as a Regional Energy Power," in which I dealt with the implications of the liberalization of energy prices in Europe and the resulting effect on the fight in the Ukrainian arena, in addition to the issue of energy security in Europe.

Russia is acting to establish protective borders (from Putin's perspective) in light of the demographic disruption that it understands and estimates, and is trying to bring about the era of post-globalization with a strengthened standing. However, programs and reality are different things, as the Russians reveal the decline in the quality of their fighters, the collapse of logistical chains, and the significant lengthening of attack programs, which have at least partly turned into a mess in some of the battleground. At the same time, both the Americans and NATO countries are transferring logistical support equipment and arms to the Ukrainian government, totaling over 115 million euros (as of December 2022 according to the German Kiel Institute). The Ukrainian battlefield has therefore become a place where the West is facing off with Russia through technology and funding to the Ukrainian army.

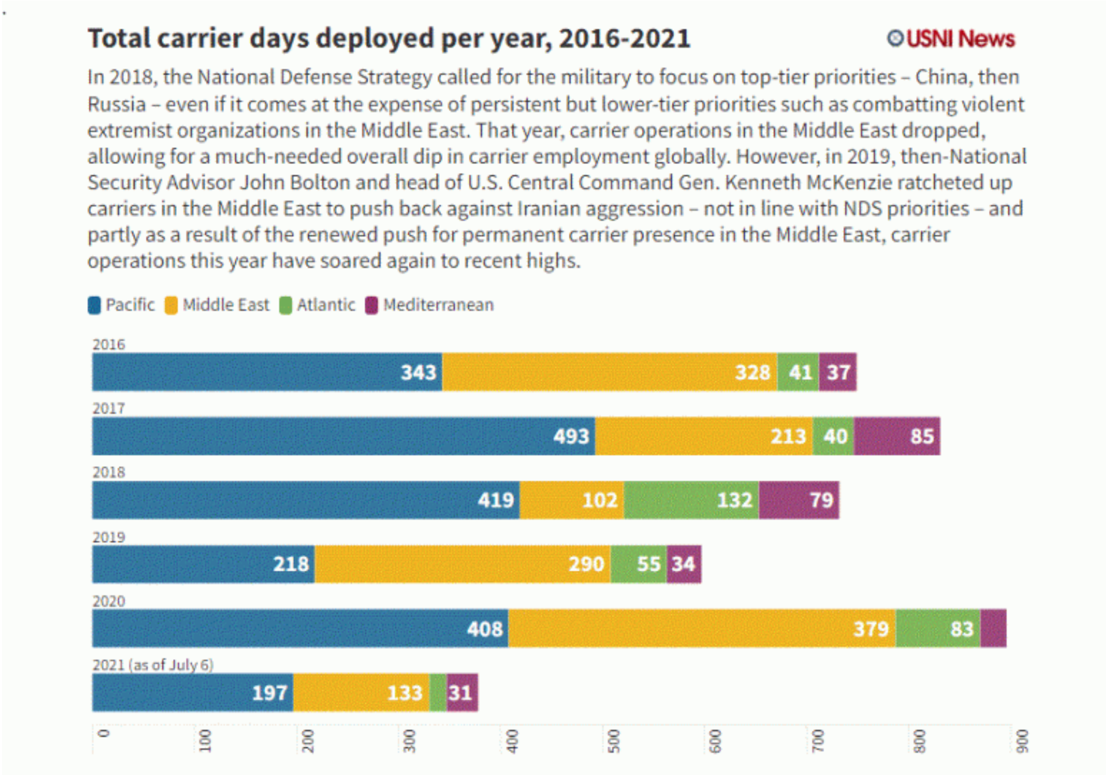
The setbacks of Putin's programs led him to try and find a new partner who would serve a dual-value role. The first setback, after the West had imposed a strict embargo, led Russia to take extreme steps, such as producing chips from household devices like vacuum cleaners and washing machines for military use, along with mobile and moving stockpiles of arms. In an effort to find a partner who would be helpful in transferring offensive weapons, Putin found a friend in Iran. In November 2022, the world was first exposed to the blatant use of Iranian drones that carried out suicide attacks on residential buildings, hospitals, educational institutions, infrastructure, and government buildings.

However, the more significant part is Iranian involvement and the spread of the conflict across the region involving a state (Iran), terrorist organizations (Houthis, Hamas, Hezbollah, etc.), and protectorates (Syria and Iraq) on one side, against the forming and evolving alliance of Gulf states and Israel (the Abraham Accords), and the possibility of a "bundle deal" along with the Saudi-led coalition.

The Middle East arena

The Trump administration was the first to join the regional alliance, but the Biden administration is more sophisticated and nuanced. In this context, perhaps the most significant move from a strategic perspective was in January 2021, when Israel was shifted to United States Central Command (CENTCOM) and the model of covert joint operations was expanded to the public, such as the "Blue Flag" exercise, which simulated an attack by alliance forces on Russian defense systems in Iran led by Israel, attended by the commander of the United Arab Emirates air force, General Ibrahim al-Alawi. The arena of the Gulf region becomes dramatic in particular, especially in light of the decision made by President Trump and continued by President Biden to relinquish the traditional role of the US as "global policeman," as I elaborated in an article for *Foreign Policy News* titled "**America's resignation from its role as global police.**"

The below graph shows this decision as it translates into practice in the number of days of US aircraft carrier deployments, as detailed on the *USNI News* website.



If so, the countries in the region, engulfed in costly direct attacks by Shia Houthis on an airport field and on Aramco facilities and various civilian and military targets in Saudi Arabia, are creating a new order that may unfold in this region. It is true that Moscow has good relations with the Saudis (although primarily deterring the Saudis, as I wrote in an article with my colleague Dr. Moran Zaga titled "The Personal Dimension in Saudi-U.S. Relations") and has even helped them tackle the midterm election efforts of Biden and the Democratic Party, but it seems that the purpose of the renewed and loose alliance with the Iranians is rooted in the desire to take control of the regional arena as part of the overall war.

The Americans (in what can be seen as a waver) have recently renewed their commitment to the Saudis as an important part of the regional alliance, through a legal pardon that absolved the son of the crown prince from direct responsibility for the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. These efforts have contributed to the creation of a regional alliance that could help them reduce focus on the region and redirect it back home. In this context, there have been recent reports of a secret memorandum managed by the incoming Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, and MBS, in a deal that was supposed to renew the Saudis as "staunch allies" in the Saudi request for F35 fighter jets, with Israel as their advocate (and to think that only 40 years ago, the sale of AIWACS planes was at the heart of the dispute between Reagan and Begun). This is a circular deal, as recently reported in the news.

However, leaders like MBS and MBZ will not put all their eggs in one basket. In fact, beyond maintaining relations with the Americans, Russians, and Israelis, there is a third player in the system. The fear of regional instability and its impact on the possibilities of crude oil supply from the Gulf to China, a country that relies heavily on oil imports and stability in the Gulf, has only recently brought President Xi on a well-connected visit to Saudi Arabia. The differences between the visits and the way the leaders were received are shown in an article by *The National News*.

The Chinese giant

In recent years, the social tone of the US and a large part of the Western world towards China has changed from suspicion to hostility, which has come in the form of a possible hot war.

On April 7, 2020, at the peak of the coronavirus pandemic, I wrote (in Hebrew) an article called "Where is America Going?", where I stated that "the American giant will accelerate its process of disengaging from the world, as previous arrangements that included global supervision will diminish (in case Trump is replaced) or dramatically break (if re-elected). The world will suffer through a difficult, convoy-led, air-lifting, 'all-dollars-count' hike in exports (insurance, defense expenses, etc.), forcing countries to try to secure shorter and safer supply lines. The US, which already today stands with the new agreements it has sought for itself, will focus on reviving the American economy and bringing home factories in general and China in particular." China's situation has only worsened since then. The US-led trade war declared on the Chinese included a targeted attack on high-tech companies on the black list. In addition, the Chinese economy, which has been suffering for several months due to the trade war, has recently adopted a liberal policy that has led, according to Western estimates, to 250 million people being infected with the coronavirus in one season, as the Chinese have no natural defense against the virus and their vaccine is not effective. In recent months, the Chinese government has been exploiting some of the loopholes, with the latest focusing on threatening American citizens with loss of their American citizenship (!!!) and a ban on the export of high-end quality (for smartphones) and medium-quality (for car and space industries) chips. This collapse has already led to the transfer of production lines for companies such as Apple outside of China and attempts to develop in neighboring countries such as India, Thailand, Vietnam, and Malaysia. What does a country do when there is a single leader who holds all the power and sends security to Former Chinese president Hu Jintao to unexpectedly lead him out of party congress?

The situation in China is a dictatorship that is required to steer public sentiments to wherever it wants. A very logical way of managing anger could come to fruition as Chinese involvement in a Taiwan invasion, a move that US Admiral Michael Gilday estimates could potentially escalate into a high-level scenario.

The risk of a major escalation

If so, the world that is on the verge of a material explosion, with several regional conflicts, some of them very hot (the war in Ukraine), some at a high level of intensity (the wars of the Gulf), and some as a threat on the table (the Chinese invasion of Taiwan), could be the spark that ignites a Third World War. Just as the Second World War began as a war of influence in Europe, a war in Africa, and then a major escalation with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on the morning of Sunday, December 7, 1941, the possibility of such a scenario in 2023 is intensifying. Every day, more news emerges of decisions by countries that have "sat on the fence" for years, hastening to arm themselves and break the line of pacifism they have held since 1945. For example, Germany's army is so under-equipped that it used broomsticks instead of machine guns and decided to go on a shopping spree worth over a hundred billion euros, which triggered a shopping frenzy for Arrow Israeli missiles. Even the Japanese are seeking to purchase Tomahawk missiles from the Americans. We are able to understand that in front of us is a new (and dangerous) world that is just waiting for the opportunity for great infiltration.

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